



Flesh and Spirit

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The rebellious son of a long line of pureblood cartographers and diviners, Valen has spent most of his life trying to escape what society -- and his family -- have ordained for him. His own mother has predicted that he will meet his doom in water, blood, and ice. Her divination seems fulfilled when a comrade abandons Valen in a rainy wilderness half-dead, addicted to an enchantment that converts pain to pleasure, and possessing only a stolen book of maps.

Offered sanctuary in a nearby monastery, Valen discovers that his book -- rumored to lead men into the realm of angels -- gains him entry into a world of secret societies, doomsayers, monks, princes, and madmen, all seeking to unlock the mystery of a coming dark age. To his dismay, Valen must face what he fled so long ago, for the key to Navronne's doom is buried in half-forgotten myth and the secrets of his own past...

Flesh and Spirit Details

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Author : Carol Berg

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From Reader Review Flesh and Spirit for online ebook

Sarah says

So... On this one the audio seriously detracted from the quality of the story. The narrator did breath-stops way too often and he had a serious tendency to mispronounce a lot of little words. When you're narrating a fantasy story, words like "breeches" really need to be properly pronounced. Brooch, dais, bedraggled... I didn't think it was terrible at the halfway mark because I've heard worse, but it ended up really grating on me farther into the book.

Otherwise this is a gem of a story that takes multiple unexpected turns. I was kind of surprised that the beginning of the story and the end went together seamlessly. It just went from one thing to something else and then to something else again. Really an amazing story and I can't wait to read the sequel. Read. I will be reading because I'm not touching that narrator again.

Kathryn says

Valen is a renegade sorcerer who's spent his whole life ignoring his past and heritage. He was born into a pureblood family of mapmakers, and his relationships with the members of his family have been bitter and violent. Pureblood families have magical talents; there are pureblood "bents" (abilities) for just about every skill imaginable, healing, music, divination... Valen's family are not only skilled mapmakers, but are able to track anyone or anything, and can detect routes and trails that no one else could ever find. Purebloods hold a unique niche in society; they are above clerics, civil servants, and the nobility, but yet spend their lives as bound servants. Purebloods contract themselves out, selling their abilities to the highest bidder. Not only would Valen have been confined to a life of servitude, but in order to preserve his family's bent and prevent contaminating his lines, he would have no choice about who he married, how many children he had, or any other aspect of his life. The Pureblood Registry would have mapped his entire life out for him, and Valen wanted none of it.

One winter, after being abandoned by his partner after he was injured robbing a mansion, he's found and taken in by a group of monks. Interestingly, one of the things Valen took from the mansion was a book of maps; the very same one his grandfather gave him years ago. Valen pawned it when he ran away, and finds it extremely odd to have found it again. The monks recognize the value of the book, and Valen realizes that it could be his ticket for a warm and well fed winter. They offer him sanctuary, which he accepts, of course. The only problem is, sanctuary is only good for two weeks, after which Valen must leave or take vows. Valen decides to take vows, although during the ceremony he surreptitiously changes the wording so that come spring he can run off (with the book, of course, so he can pawn or sell it again) without actually breaking them.

At first, Valen chafes under monastic life, but things in the monastary become very interesting when he accidentally stumbles onto a conspiracy, headed by the abbot, that involves forbidden magic, the Royal succession, and Valen's book of maps.

The Review:

I don't know about anyone else, but I've gotten pretty tired of saintly heroes, and Valen is anything but. He

reminds me a bit of Seregil from Lynn Flewelling's *Nighrunners*, with his sardonic, irreverent attitude. But unlike Seregil, he doesn't serve some higher purpose, only his own ends. And, besides being a (likeable) rogue/theif/womanizer, Valen is also a drug addict. Ultimately, of course, his jaded, bitter nature starts to change, due to his eventual involvement in the conspiracy, but it's slow, believable change, not some about face, 180 degree turn from self serving to self sacrificing. And by the end of the book, I'd say the change still isn't really complete.

One final note: go ahead and get the sequel if you decide to get this. Believe me, I would have gone crazy if I couldn't have gone strait from book 1 to book 2--it has a cliff hanger ending.

YouKneeK says

I thought the first half of this book was four-star material. I was interested in it, I liked the characters, and I found myself thinking about the story when I wasn't reading it and speculating what might happen next. Somewhere around the halfway point, fortunately during the weekend, this turned into a five-star book and I couldn't put it down.

This fantasy story is told completely from the first-person perspective of Valen, a twenty-seven year old man who's on the run for a variety of reasons. When the book begins, Valen is gravely wounded and his traveling companion abandons him penniless on the road, incapable of walking. He's found by monks from a nearby abbey who take him in. The abbey seems like a convenient place to hide, but he soon finds that there are mysteries and dangers there as well. Meanwhile, the entire land is embroiled in a long-lasting war between the sons of their deceased king.

The story was interesting from the beginning, but it grew more intricate as it went and I really enjoyed that. The reader is given many questions, and at first I thought I could probably guess most of the answers, but some of my guesses were wrong and some of the questions turned out to be more complex than they originally seemed. There was a twist near the end that completely caught me by surprise, although in retrospect I think I should have seen it coming. There were plenty of hints.

The main character really grew on me as the story progressed. He often has a kind of sardonic way of describing things, and he has a kind of honor with certain lines he won't cross, but his main concerns are for his own safety and he can be pretty roguish. At first I found some of his decisions exasperating, but I understood him better as the story progressed and his character also grew quite a bit throughout the book.

I look forward to reading the sequel. I don't see people talk about Carol Berg's work very often, but I've been really impressed with what I've read from her so far. I read her Rai-Kirah trilogy (starting with *Transformation*) several years ago and I really enjoyed it. It helped me recover from the funk Robin Hobb's *Tawny Man* trilogy left me in. I've wanted to try more of her books, but this is the first time I've gotten around to doing so. I'll have to fit her books into my reading plans more frequently going forward.

On BookLikes I'm giving this 4.5 stars, but I'm rounding it up to 5 stars here on Goodreads.

Jason says

This was a difficult book to make it through for me. I kept looking around the corner expecting to find something that just was never there. That being said, I never did stop and I was glad that I saw it through. I found it tough to bond or identify with the protagonist Valen as he is such a broken fictional character. I found the prose to be beautiful, Melanie Rawn comes to my mind as I read through this first novel, only here the politics are that of the monks and pure bloods, not that of Kings and Queens. This is very much an adult oriented, dark, and gritty fantasy novel that will appeal to those that do not need flowers and roses at the end to satisfy them. On to the second novel.

Spider the Doof Warrior says

This book is sort of a 3.5 I think. The author keeps making up weird words every few pages, but once you get into it Valen's story is interesting, and I feel a lot of sympathy over his desire for freedom and the ability to control his own fate.

Valen starts out as a magical drug addict and a bit of an opportunist hedonist, but when you realize what he's been through, you can't blame him. I wanted to take him out of the book and bake him some cookies, I felt so bad for him.

Oh, good. I added another star ages ago. I'm reading this book again. I swear, it's probably the most enjoyable book I've read this year.

Read it again in December 2012. See, the second book is better because that's when things start to pick up. This book is setting up the chessboard, the second book is having the chess pieces come to life and start fighting each other. But it's not so bad. There's still the weird made up words, Valen is as lovable and imperfect as ever. It's nice how passionate he is about life even as it kicks him down and rubs his face in the mud. I hate all the torment he goes through with his relatives and such.

Rebecca says

This book was so good. It had lots of mysterious elements that kept me reading. The magic was really intriguing and I grew to like Valen as the book went on. I am definitely keen to read the second book in the duology.

Izlinda says

One of the hardest books to get through. At least the first half. It was incredibly slow, plodding... It's a narrative from a raconteur, a person who flees their pureblood lifestyle, which is a double crime to the King and God. So the reader's plonked down in this world where there is some magic, lots of political intrigue and a really complicated world to get used to.

It's kind of sad only halfway through the book the action picks up and there is more characters added instead of lots of descriptive writing. Then again, my personal preference is more action/dialogue than description. The book that comes after this is the concluding one for the series. *Flesh and Spirit* leaves on a really

wondrous cliff-hanger and it leaves me with mixed feelings. If I wasn't so stubborn to finish this book after 12 days of struggling through it, I wouldn't have gotten hooked up. I do want to know what happens to the characters and the new world/kingdom I'm introduced to, but I also wish the pace was more even throughout the book.

Ron says

You know, I hate books which do this: just stop in the middle of the story. No conclusion, no climax, certainly no resolution.

Carol Berg gets better and better. This is a really well-written book, perhaps her best yet.

The main character is both compelling and flawed. Valen is almost human. You are dropped crashing into his world as disoriented as Valen and you thrash around trying to make sense of what's happening, stumbling from one crisis to another. Who do you trust? Who do you follow? Who is what they seem? (Hint: almost no one.)

Alissa says

“The delight of power is not commanding an army of sycophants, but rather bending one resilient mind beyond its comfortable boundaries.”

wishforagiraffe says

This book never lets up. You get dropped in right as a character thinks he's going to die, and things just become more complicated. Valen is a very relatable character, particularly for teenagers (although this is definitely not YA) - he's rebelling against pretty much everything his family raised him to be.

The characters are all excellently done, but the plot should get just as much attention. It's mysterious and potentially world-shattering, and moves along swiftly.

I first read this book back when it had first come out, or maybe shortly thereafter, and read it again as part of a group read, and this book is just as gritty, complex, and well-written as anything being published new today.

I'd recommend this for folks looking for smaller-cast epic fantasy, characters with addiction issues, folks who want explorations of faith, and dysfunctional family dynamics.

Danielle says

I'm very disappointed with this book; the first time ever I've been disappointed with a Carol Berg book. *Flesh and Spirit* is filled with sexist references to women, and very, very few female characters. The female

characters involved are either 2-dimensional receptacles for male lust, or petty and vindictive. It's extremely hard to truly empathize with a male character who expresses himself in words such as "faster than a whore can raise her dress." I found myself feeling not just insulted on a regular basis, but depressed, as well.

Shannon (Giraffe Days) says

Valen is a *recondeur*, a spell-casting Pureblood with the bent for maps, paths, trails and directions who escaped his family and the Registry to live a free life. For twelve years he has done as he pleased, living precariously and not always honestly, a slave to the nivat seeds that ease the sickness in him. Now twenty-seven, Valen - a thief, drug addict, liar, womaniser, and untrustworthy coward even - literally can't read, and is unschooled in his magic because of his rebellious childhood. The harsh treatment of his father and siblings didn't help form his character.

Abandoned by his comrade Boreus and left previously wounded near an abbey, Valen takes the sanctuary the Abbot offers, as well as the food and dry clothes, and spins his lies to avoid detection. If found out, his own punishment will be dire, and anyone found guilty of aiding and abetting him would be executed.

He brings with him to the Abbey his grandfather's spelled book of maps, which the Abbot takes an unusual interest in. Caught in his web of lies, Valen is soon caught up in intrigue, politics and mystery but wants nothing to do with any of it. Still, he can't resist trying to unravel the secrets kept by the Cabal, and his first sighting of a Dane - one of the Danae, spirits of earth and trees, plants, rivers, lakes and mountains - affects him deeply. The monks of the abbey talk of the world's end, and as the dead King's three sons fight over the land, and the mad Harrowers burn fields and people alike, slowly Valen starts to believe in it himself.

The story is narrated in the first person by Valen, which is not usual in a fantasy book - I think because it's harder to introduce a reader to an unfamiliar world when the narrator has no reason to lay down exposition and explanations where necessary. Yet because of Valen's pondering nature, Berg manages to weave in exposition etc. smoothly. The first half of the book is a bit slow, but then it picks up and gets really interesting. The plot is quite complex, the details numerous and easy to miss, so it took me a while to read. Valen is a great character: flawed, at times cowardly, yet perhaps because he's the Black Sheep and we share his thoughts and understand his fears, he's charismatic and attractive to me.

One of the things I really enjoyed about this novel is its build-up to an apocalypse that mirrors (figuratively at least) what's happening in our own world today: the land is dying, ravaged, rotting, while people go about their worldly desires and ambitions with no concern for the impact of their actions. The Harrowers are mad, making no sense as they wilfully destroy in the name of purifying - this, too, is scarily familiar. Their attraction to the lower classes, while the rich people give priceless offerings to the temples in hopes of appeasing the gods, is totally understandable. I loved the focus on the land, on the pulse of the earth and the Danae who feel betrayed and now hate humans, and it was interesting to read a pre-apocalyptic fantasy novel that wasn't centred around some powerful, corrupt magic-wielder who must be stopped: it is not one man or woman, but *all* men and women, who are causing ruination.

What is less understandable, and what made me struggle through the first half more so than the second, are Valen's descriptions of places, scenery and even events. I was often confused, unable to clearly picture what was going on, and in the end had to stop trying. So I have a lot of vague, unformed pictures in my head when

I think on certain scenes.

It's hard to say more without giving things away, so I'll just say, for those who have read it, that the ending made me as angry and frustrated as Valen felt, and I felt sick at the thought of the precious book in the wrong hands, especially considering who Valen spelled it to reveal its secrets to.

Phee says

Just couldn't get into this one.

Sandra says

This is the first Carol Berg book I've read and I am now a fan. The book was a little hard for me to get into, but it may have been a personal thing as I had just finished reading a terrible book that was poorly written and I was hesitant to plunge in again and be disappointed. The other part of my hesitation had to do with the strange terminology used, and the unfamiliar world I found myself in. Berg, however, weaves her world building into the story in such a subtle way that before long you find yourself understanding. She also has information on her website that helps with pronunciation, etc. I liked that and found the reading easier when I knew how to shape the words in my own head.

The protagonist, a runaway member of the pureblood race, is at first a rather lovable scoundrel who puts himself down at every opportunity. It was about halfway through the book when I realized I was reading voraciously and that I had become concerned about this lovable scoundrel.

The plot twists and the layers are beautifully wrought, the writing strong and sometimes poetic. The characters are believable and gradually become people you care about. I'm glad I didn't read it before the second book was complete, as I find myself wanting to immediately bury myself in *Breath and Bone*, book 2 of the Lighthouse Duet.

Jon says

4 stars
