

By the Sword Short Guide

By the Sword by Mercedes Lackey

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Characters

By the Sword is something of an oddity, because it is a character-driven novel without real depth of characterization. Kerowyn is easy to identify with and like, even for readers who may have no innate interest in a mercenary soldier's life in any world. But she is largely so because in a sense she represents Everywoman, or at any rate the new Everywoman who wants to determine her own life but is subject to doubts and regrets. Her endurance and skills are exceptional, but they are the result of training and determination.

She has the gift of mindspeech, but for various reasons does not use it much.

Despite the wealth of detail on her life as Skybolt member and captain, somehow she does not seem like a typical mercenary. This is not because of gender as much as personality and heritage; in a sense, she was chosen for such a life by heritage and the sword Need. Nevertheless, her fluidity as a character is a bonus for the reader who seeks vicarious experience in fiction.

Kerowyn's responses to events, and the vividly textured accounts of ordinary as well as extraordinary days, make reading *By the Sword* a treat.

Kerowyn's grandmother Kethry and Kethry's partner Tarma play significant roles as Kerowyn's mentors in the first book of the novel. They are the heroines of the Vows and Honor series (*The Oathbound*, 1988; *Oathbrakers*, 1989). In this book they are much older, but still going about their respective pursuits of sorcery and arms training with grace and expertise. It gives some summary of what has happened after they gave up wandering and founded their school. The glimpses given here round out the picture for those who know the pair from the previous duology. However, these are very popular characters in their own right, who deserve a third book of their own, covering the intervening years.

Kerowyn has two love interests in the story: Daren, her co-trainee under Tarma and a prince of Rethwellan, and Eldan, a Valdemar herald with whom she shares a perilous flight back to safety in their respective homelands.

Both are brave, honest, and gallant men. But beyond this, and some specific beliefs and ambitions in which they differ from Kerowyn, they are not developed extensively. A few of Kerowyn's fellow Skybolts also are distinct individuals, but they are at best two dimensional.

Two nonhuman characters also affect the story in major ways. Tarma's giant "wolf-dog" Warrl, who has the gift of mindspeech and other unusual talents, tutors Kerowyn in its use. And Need itself undergoes a good bit of personality development here. In the Vows and Honor duology, Need was simply a sword which always responded to a woman in danger or need — hence its name. Kethry wielded it in skirmishes where her magic could not operate; its self-guiding prowess made up for her lack of fighting skill. In the

later Valdemar novels, it appears as a mysterious, full-fledged entity, with an ancient soul and unknown limits. In *By the Sword* these additional attributes are beginning to emerge; it "talks" to Kerowyn sometimes, throws a cloak of protection against magic over her, and shows other bizarre behavior upon occasion.



Social Concerns

The adolescent identity quest is a frequent motif of Lackey's novels.

A young person, misunderstood — and sometimes abused — at home, struggles to find a place and vocation where his or her unique talents can be realized. This novel starts out with such a situation. Kerowyn is the daughter of a minor landholder. She has managed the entire household since her mother's death, but her life is like Cinderella's was in her pre-prince days: dull, full of hard, unappreciated work, with her best prospects more of the same, even if her family manages to find a husband for her.

But this heroine — and the novel — defy all expectations. When hired raiders attack during her brother's wedding feast, Kerowyn is the only one to try to bring back his kidnapped and terrified young bride. After she pulls off a daring and almost miraculous rescue, her life changes forever. It turns out she is the heir of a famous sorceress and of her grandmother Kethry's magic sword Need as well. She trains long years to become a superior swordswoman and tactician, joins a mercenary company, and finally is elected their Captain. This career, and its associated dangers and adventures, take up most of the novel.

The rewriting of "Cinderella" does not stop with Kerowyn's ride. Rather than fall into an advantageous spot by chance or magical favor, she has to work to attain her place in the world.

While she is usually sure that a soldier's life is her true calling, she does have moments of doubt. Kerowyn actually has the chance to marry a prince, but she turns him down. Although she is fond of Prince Daren, and they remain friends, she knows that she would never be happy being dependent upon Daren's largess, with no chance to use her soldier's skills.

Nor does the story end, as many identity-quest novels do, once Kerowyn has found her place as an established mercenary. Adult life brings further testing, growth, and change, and even moments when her whole life's work seems lost.

Thus *By the Sword* deals directly (albeit within a fantasy setting) with many of the issues raised by the women's movement. The necessity for a woman to find and follow her own vocation and identity — the desire for a true partnership rather than a marriage based on status or assigned roles — the fact that women can perform heroic deeds and be rescuers and leaders, all in the normal course of their lives — each point is a major part of the novel's discourse. Even the swordswoman persona, which is fast becoming a new cliché of female-oriented fantasy, carries several levels of meaning. Besides putting the protagonist into a situation and role where exciting adventures are bound to happen, it represents women taking up nontraditional jobs. Wielding the sword also serves as a metaphor for power.



While many authors of speculative fiction have taken on gender issues more directly, writing novels about allfemale societies or oppressive patriarchal dystopias, Lackey has treated them here within the structure of a colorful tale of war and love, which ties into the history of her complex fantasy world. Most female readers will recognize, and even identify with, some of Kerowyn's dilemmas. It is entirely possible to read *By the Sword* as an exciting and richly textured adventure, however, with the feminist elements merely forming a part of Kerowyn's own personality and story.



Techniques

By the Sword is told almost entirely in Kerowyn's point of view and voice, a technique that strengthens the novel's intensity compared to most of the author's works. It is divided into three separate "books" within one volume.

The first, "Kerowyn's Ride," follows Kerowyn through her heroic ride and her arms training under Tarma, ending with her decision to seek entrance into the Skybolts, a bonded mercenary company. "Two Edged Blade" deals with her life as a member of this troop. "The Price of Command" picks up ten years later, after she has served as the Skybolts' captain for a decade, rebuilding the company after its near-destruction under a feckless former captain. The third book ends with a rush of new events. The Skybolts enter Valdemar, a land which previously disdained mercenaries, to help repel an invasion.

There is a big battle with a desperate last-minute charge; Kero's recognition by the famous queen Selenay, a reunion with Eldan, and the sudden Choosing in which a Companion horse bonds with Kerowyn.

This last sequence mars the novel's otherwise superb pacing and sense of suspense. It is not that any single happening is unlikely, but they rush together, without much space spent on the details or the meaning of any of them. As these are all major, lifechanging events, many readers may feel subtly cheated by this rushed ending. Had the novel been followed by a sequel focusing on Kerowyn's subsequent life in Valdemar, such an ending might be understandable as a set up for it. So far, such a novel has not appeared.

The novel is written in a smooth, graceful style that evokes vivid images of the action and of the fantasy world.

The only other notable feature is the inclusion of a fair amount of interior dialogue, both of Kerowyn's thoughts and of "mindspeech."

Themes

The book's major theme is the necessity of honoring one's own calling and talents. This is shown primarily through Kerowyn's life and decisions.

When, at the very end of the story, she is "chosen" for new tasks in the realm of Valdemar, the theme takes on another aspect. Only through her faithfulness to earlier commitments does this chance become possible. While it promises an end to the hardscrabble life of a mercenary and the loneliness of command, these responsibilities were necessary to fit her for the next step in her life.

Honor is important in this entire series; not the honor of the hothead or braggart who is quick to take insult, but the honor which means one keeps one's commitments and defends those under one's protection. For years Kerowyn and her faraway lover Eldan fail to understand each other's codes of honor. Herald Eldan's loyalty to a cause and nation seems abstract and cold to Kerowyn. Her willingness to fight for money baffles him. When, as Captain, she realizes her true loyalties are to the troops of her company and to her own ethical code, she finds she and Eldan are not so far apart after all.

Along with the major theme are a couple of more subtle ones. The warfare sequences implicitly compare the professional fighting force with conscript armies; the latter are generally inept. These passages do not seem to advocate militarism, but rather to emphasize the importance of both expertise and choice. As Kerowyn says repeatedly, as long as there is war it is important for good people to take up the profession of arms. The results of leaving it to the evil or the incompetent are disastrous.

The limits of choice are another theme. While it is important to pick one's own path, as Kerowyn did, more than mere human agency is usually at work at decisive moments. "Kerowyn's ride," which made her a legend while she was still young, could not have succeeded without the help of Need, the mystical sword. Likewise, the Companions who choose new Heralds are led by some instinct undetectable to human reason. These factors do not mean people are at the mercy of random factors; rather, the "seen and the unseen" work together in most events.

Adaptations

Several recordings featuring the author's songs about Valdemar are available on tape from Firebird Arts & Music, Inc. (P. O. Box 14785, Portland, OR 97214.)



Key Questions

Lackey is a very popular author, and the Valdemar books are her major body of work. A discussion of *By the Sword* or the entire series, is likely to draw young adults fascinated by the identity-quest theme and the girl- or boy-meets-horse premise and adult fantasy readers captivated by the adventure or the world-building aspects.

Ideology and thought experiment are not big features of this series. Sessions that stay focused on the stories and the world are more practicable than those of a more literary or philosophic bent.

However, *By the Sword's* social concerns and warrior heroine might lend themselves to a "women's options" discussion, either based on this book alone or in combination with other feminist science fiction and fantasy.

1. Kerowyn disdains the work of household management. Yet she was good at it, and the chatelaine of a large household had managerial responsibilities at least equal to those of a mercenary captain. Do you think Kerowyn resented the former because she was forced into it with little choice? Because her natural talents lay elsewhere? Or because it was traditional women's work?
2. Some readers have felt this treatment of "women's work" shows a contempt for traditional women's roles. Do you agree?
3. How much validity is there to Kerowyn's attitude that a professional fighting force is superior to a citizens' army?
4. Because of past historical events, magic does not work in Valdemar. Yet the Heralds and their Companions communicate by mindspeech, and various Heralds have other psychic gifts as well. Are these two entirely different types of "powers"?
5. Furthermore, something blocks people from even thinking or talking about magic in that country. Is this a metaphor for something else or just a story component?
6. Do you agree that *By the Sword's* ending is too rushed? If so, how could it be fixed?
7. Kerowyn turns down proposals from both Daren (whom she does not love) and Eldan (whom she does) because she does not think she could fit comfortably into their social worlds.

Was she right to do so? Did she have other options she did not consider?
8. Does the "Two Edged Blade" of the second book have anything to do with Need, which both aids Kerowyn and causes trouble? What else might it represent?
9. Kerowyn states that wars fueled by religious conviction are the worst kind. Do you agree?

10. What reasons might account for the enormous popularity of Lackey's books?

Literary Precedents

Lackey says the authors who influenced her the most have been Andre Norton, J. R. R. Tolkien, and C. J. Cherryh, who acted as her mentor during a crucial period. The first two writers are both known for multibook epics set in intricate fantasy worlds; it is easy to see how they may have influenced the creation of this one in a general way.

Norton's *Witch World* also interweaves gender role rules (and their violation) with magic. Tolkien's books have a variety of nonhuman characters, although they are only slightly reminiscent of the gryphons, Need, and other strange creatures that appear in Lackey's more recent *Valdemar* novels.

Women warriors appear in legend as far back as the Amazons of Greek mythology. More recent precursors of Kerowyn and the other fighting-heroines of this series might include C. L. Moore's *Jirel of Joiry*, M. Z. Bradley's *Lythande*, the anthology *Amazons* edited by Jessica Amanda Salmonson, and the *Sword and Sorceress* anthology series, also edited by Bradley. Phyllis Ann Karr's *Frostfire and Thorn* were a swordswoman-and-sorceress pair that predated *Kethry* and *Tarma*.

Human-animal psychic bonds appear in various fantasy and science fantasy worlds. The dragons and dragonriders of Anne McCaffrey's *Pern* are among the best known; they bear more than a passing resemblance to Lackey's *Companions* and *Heralds*.

Related Titles

By the Sword is a pivotal book in Lackey's major body of fantasy fiction, the Valdemar books. By Tarma and Kethry's presence it connects the Vows and Honor duology with the many novels set in Valdemar proper. In the series' time line, By the Sword takes place during and soon after the Arrows trilogy and before the Mage Winds trilogy. Kerowyn, who stays in Valdemar and becomes arms instructor to Elspeth, the heir to Valdemar's throne, appears in the latter trilogy, but as a secondary character. The Gryphon, Herald-Mage, and Storms trilogies are also set in this world during other eras.



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