



The Black Flame

Lynn Abbey , Steve Fabian (Illustrator)

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Priestess, healer, warrior, witch, Rifkind rode out of the Asheeran desert alone but for the Goddess of the Bright Moon, to whom she owed her allegiance. Alone she faced the strange new world of "civilization"; alone she drove herself beyond all endurance to wrest the secret of her destiny from the all-powerful enemy who had that secret to teach. And she survived.

Now new challenges beckon Rifkind from the comfort of life at Castle Chatelgard with the man she had thought she would love: to the untracked swamps of the Felmargue, said to be under a curse too powerful for even the gods to lift. In the center of that land of harsh magic, on a plateau no visitor has lived to describe, the Well of Knowledge survives; source of the Lost Gods' power, and of the Black Flame itself. In battle to the death with the powers of the Felmargue, Rifkind will be driven to the brink of mistrusting her own Goddess - and she will meet a man who for the first time makes her mistrust herself.

The Black Flame Details

Date : Published July 1st 1985 by Ace (first published May 1st 1980)

ISBN : 9780441065875

Author : Lynn Abbey , Steve Fabian (Illustrator)

Format : Paperback 384 pages

Genre : Fantasy, Science Fiction Fantasy, High Fantasy

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From Reader Review The Black Flame for online ebook

Steven says

Not without its flaws, but more mature and possessing characters with greater depth than much fantasy published today.

Douglas Milewski says

I first read "The Black Flame" (1980) by Lynn Abbey back in high school. It was one of those books that I was never sure about, especially with a female protagonist, but I gave it a shot and found that I like it. On re-reading it so many years later, I found that Lynn Abbey had a solidity to her writing while also having a bit of squirrelness to her surprise inventiveness, meaning that her novelist skills are overall very respectable but not irreproachable.

Despite its thickness, nearly 400 pages, the novel falls in the sword and sorcery category for its general disdain for history, its hand-waving treatment of the world, its narrow world stage, its personal stakes, and its enthusiastic use of magic. Like so many sword swingers of the day, our hero Rifkin, a female barbarian, has a magic unencumbered by complicated rules. At the end of the last book, she'd lost one of her powerful magical aids, so she goes on a trip to find the Black Flame in the center of a swamp. In addition to healing magic, she's got a psychically connected warhorse, a special relationship with the Moon Goddess (along with significant divine intervention), and a spirit form. She doesn't lack for any specialness. All that specialness did feeling a bit much, but none of it exists as an "I win" button and all of her abilities played out interestingly.

The sheer number of weapons that Rifkin carried veered into the absurd.

Despite its thickness, the tale never strayed too far from action, rarely wound up navel gazing, and generally gave us likable characters that I wanted to root for. By the end, she was in Moorecock territory, where events got pretty over-the-top. The gods are very sword and sorcery, having almost no purpose other than to summon up and hurl against your foes. If you're looking for a deep religious exploration, this tale isn't it.

Jenny is Rifkin's everywoman assistant who isn't terribly adventurous, but don't confuse that with incompetent. Jenny knows her limits, acting both inventively and shrewdly to protect herself and to aid Rifkin.

Some twists and turns are natural to the genre, but some twists feel like Lynne pulled them straight out of her behind, making them up on the spot in a mid-novel retcon. "What? Huh? Where did that come from?" By modern standards, she plays a bit too fast and loose with her own world where we reader insist that everything be overly well organized. As I said, this is a sword and sorcery book, and in that genre in the 70's, fast and loose was the name of the game. By those standards, she writes a tame and measured tale. (If you want to argue, you'd better know that era better than I do, then I'll buy you your favorite drink and you can tell me how wrong I am.)

The book exists as a feminist take on fantasy, so do expect explicit feminism. The opinions offered are not subtle.

The book pleasingly lacks unnecessary technical vocabulary or strange names. It's an easy read, and you can

pretty much work out everything as you go, even if you don't remember what something is. That in and of itself makes this tale an excellent popcorn book. (That's not an insult. Ever had good popcorn? Yeah, you get me.)

Could we call Rifkin a Mary Sue? I suppose, but if you were to take away all her specialness, she'd still be a formidable and clever opponent, and in her world, she's opposed by other Mary Sues, so we'll call that MAMS (mutually assured mary-sueness), which means that it all cancels out in the end.

I enjoyed the book on reread and hope that you give this book some of your time, too.

Caroline Berg says

I'm going to be honest, I didn't like this book as much as the first one. Mainly, I didn't like Rifkind's new love interest. The parts with surviving the swamp were exciting, and learning more about the gods and magic of her world were very intriguing; this book does a lot of myth and world building compared to the last book. But none of the new characters Rifkind encounters were really interesting. The one really great thing about this book is that even Rifkind can make mistakes - making her human despite all her amazing skills. Again - if you can, get the book with illustrations! So worth it!

Pam Baddeley says

In my opinion, Abbey makes some questionable choices in this novel - at the end of the first book, war has broken out and Rifkind is going back with the hero, a potential romantic interest, to his mountain stronghold to help defend the mountain country against, among others, the hero's nasty and ambitious father. But when book two starts, there is amnesty and the army is being disbanded. We're told that the veterans respect and like Rifkind though others still regard her healing powers as witchery, and there are various statements throughout the book, for example, saying she trained a lot of the fighters, but we aren't given the chance to see how they all coped in the war, how she adapted to their different fighting style, how she coped with the suspicion about her being a desert tribeswoman and having uncanny powers, etc. Instead, she decides to go off on a quest into a swamp because the moon goddess she is vowed to does not give her a sign that it is OK to marry the hero although she has feelings for him, and faced with her refusal he arranges to marry someone brought in from elsewhere, to fulfill his dynastic duty. Just seems to cut out what could have been an interesting story with maybe her deciding to leave at the end because most of his people would not accept her as their ruler's wife and she would also find domesticity and child rearing too difficult to reconcile with her life as warrior and healer sworn to her goddess.

As it is, we instead have another quest which lacks the motivation of the first book where she was in conflict with a powerful worshipper of the negative dark moon, who was manipulating politics in the country she ended up in after her desert tribe was wiped out by the other tribes. The swamp environment and the culture of the raft people in the current volume is well evoked and the descriptions of how Rifkind and her companion Jenny cope with it, and there is a tie-in to the first book when she discovers that an enemy is after the same thing as her but for evil purposes.

However I couldn't believe in Rifkind's sudden over-riding passion for the callow and non warrior rather weedy man she finds living in the place she has been seeking. Also fans of Turin, the horned horse, will be disappointed as he has far less to do in this book.

As with the first volume, this suffers from a convoluted and turgid writing style which deadens what would otherwise be action packed or suspenseful scenes.

I recently found out that Abbey finally published a third volume in 2006, about 25 years after The Black Flame, but on the basis of this volume and an extract she published on the internet, don't intend to read the final volume.

Michelle says

This didn't captivate or inspire me as the first one did but to return to Rifkind's world was still a delight.
