



A Matter of Profit

Hilari Bell

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The T'Chin may be plotting
an assassination -- and Ahvren

has to stop them Ahvren is fed up with war, but as a Vivitare soldier he must fight or risk dishonoring his family. His sister, Sabri, who dreams of freedom, is being forced to marry the emperor's loathsome son. The only chance either of them have to escape is if Ahvren can solve the mystery of the T'Chin in time. Why did forty planets of alien races surrender to the Vivitare without a fight? What is their strange preoccupation with matters of "profit"? And, most importantly, is there any truth to the rumors that the Vivitare emperor himself may soon be the target of an assassin?

A Matter of Profit Details

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From Reader Review A Matter of Profit for online ebook

Becca says

This book is excellent, but it is missing one thing: a sequel.

Beverly says

2001 Booklist Editor's Choice

A very interesting SF story full of different extraterrestrial creatures, a la a Star Wars cantina scene. In this case the son of the emperor's security head has to go on a quest, but not a quest for some mystical object, he is on a quest for information: who is plotting the assassination of the emperor? During his quest, he meets up with and engages the help of a bibliogoth, a purveyor of information, and a member of the native species of the planet, a T'chin, which is an insect/arachnid being. Ahvren, as a human, and a member of the "conquering" race, wonders why the many species who inhabit the planet T'Chin, did not fight back against the invaders. The bibliogoth tells him that the invasion did not matter, and challenges Ahvren to find out why it does not matter. Full of interesting characters, and recommended to anyone who likes teen science fiction.

Denaë Christine says

Reader thoughts: Although I liked the book, I had many small issues with it. Or, rather, I didn't like the book, but I found several, er, gems in it. I'm not sure which it is.

So, the problems first.

There were small plot holes.

1, There was a conversation in which it was determined that it made more sense to talk about how many generations ago something happened rather than how many years ago something happened. The two creatures (one "human" and the other an insect), decided that "years" wasn't as useful because everyone's generations are different. Some might live sixty years, and another six hundred. So, clearly, saying "three generations ago" in a conversation is better. What? How in the world does that make sense? Years is an accurate measure of time no matter the size of your generations. Bah!

2, Ahvren is around two months before trying to help his sister get out of the arranged marriage. Now her wedding is in seven days. Then he waits another 2 or 3 days before doing the one thing she asked him to do. She asked him to talk to the emperor's son and convince him to not marry her. Ahvren failed anyway . . . why not have him try sooner?

(Actually, I don't understand why there was a need for the 2 month delay between chapter 1--his arrival--and the rest of the book. It threw off the pacing and annoyed me. Why not just have it all happen in the same week?)

3, There were three days left until his sister's wedding. The next morning, Ahvren is worried because there are only three days left until his sister's wedding. ?

4, The technology didn't fit. They have truth drugs and spaceships, but they don't have handheld communicators. They have electronic credit as money, but they have a limited number of devices per city that can access the internet. Oh, and the internet is a vocal question/answer station. They had special gravity trains, but they didn't seem to have sensors and cameras (except the prison at the end).

I didn't care for the last fourth of the book. (view spoiler)

Besides, Ahvren should have seen the end coming. Especially since his sister *said* he was clever. (view spoiler)

I disliked the lie at the very end. (view spoiler)

Let's move to the aspects of the book I really liked.

Ahvren's inability to lie because of a strange sort of PTSD. Now, this compulsion to blurt out the truth could have been stronger (see the one guy in Extras), and it could have been more consistent, but I liked it. It made Ahvren an unusual character, and it added a light tension to all his conversations. He's practically unable to keep a secret. However, this problem of his didn't get him into trouble as much as I hoped/expected it to. So, that's a bit of a waste.

I loved the T'chin/T'Chin culture. I figured it out waaaay before Ahvren, but I think readers were supposed to. I liked how Ahvren slowly started to use T'Chin ways of thinking as the book progressed. He used "unprofitable" several times toward the end as a reason for not doing something. He started to use "unfit" in a different sense, and talk of some of his people's barbaric ideas with sarcasm.

The fit vs unfit society idea was neat. Yes, it's weird that that sterilize any male that doesn't pass a swordsmanship test by their 20th birthday, but it was a neat idea, unique. I can't decide if not making women pass a test was demeaning, forgiving, or both.

Writer thoughts: Actually, this might be better labeled as **Marketer's Thoughts**.

Anyway, the cover is awful. Seriously awful.

It has a guy with a sword in a desert. While, yes, Ahvren carries a sword, this speaks "fantasy," not "spaceships and sci-fi and detective investigation." The desert says "uncivilized wilderness" setting rather than "giant spaceport city that happens to have sandstorms" setting.

The blurb is also awful, the one on this book, anyway.

It uses "T'Chin confederacy" and "Vivitare" and "Ahvren" in the first twenty words. For me, this is a big turn off. If I'm confused by the second sentence in a blurb, I don't read further! Next, you can hardly tell it's a sci-fi book from the blurb. There are two mentions of "planet," but everything else is "assassinate the emperor" and all about how Ahvren doesn't trust the peace and stuff about "this wholly imaginative world." These words, especially combined with the cover, seem more "fantasy and political intrigue" than "sci-fi detective and culture story."

Basically, this book was mishandled.

Kat says

A typical Hilari Bell Twist

After having read many of Hilari Bell's books I've come to realize that she understands culture and how good and bad can be different in different cultures. Profit is a great way to show this idea.

D.L. Morrese says

The Vivitare have come to conquer, just as they have conquered other planets, and who themselves were once conquered. But one, a soldier by the name of Ahvren who has just returned from a military campaign, is coming to believe all this conquest stuff isn't such a good idea. This is his story, a wonderful science fiction hero's quest full of strange beings and insightful observations. I enjoyed it. Unfortunately, it's not the start of a series.

Janet says

A Matter of Profit may appeal to fans of militaristic culture SF/F (for example, fans of Alan Dean Foster may like it), but it was too simplistic for my taste. There is no hard SF in this novel - space is in the background, with the planet-bound story in a culture that's almost traditional medieval fantasy. The aliens of the T'Chin confederacy were supposedly a vast collection of species, but we see only a few stereotypical types (the bug species, the fast-with-claws cat-like alien, etc.). There is almost no world-building to support these aliens, only a brief mention of species-specific professions (really? whole species specialized to one type of trade?). Characters are also very one-note. While the novel is making the point that characters from the conquering Vivitare race have to learn another system of values besides their own, their stubbornness and inability to plan strains credulity. Ahvren's PTSD from war manifesting in a temporary inability to lie also seemed like a silly plot convenience (if it's a central plot in a Jim Carrey movie, it probably doesn't belong in a non-satirical SF/F novel). Overall, while I appreciated the gesture of challenging the supremacy of military/conqueror values in SF/F, I didn't invest in the world or the story.

Michele says

Hilari Bell is a good storyteller. The themes of her books revolve around a protagonist whose worldview is upset by a critical event. Eventually they discover that their society is not what they had at first supposed. As they discover truth, they also discover their true self or their true calling. Bell also places characters in non-traditional roles, girls as warriors, men as scholars and so forth. This book, like others she has written, deals with war and conflict.

Spoiler Alert:

What is interesting about this story is the Confederation of planets known as the T'chin, where 15 different sentient species interact. The conclusion is that war and conflict are unnecessary because as people assimilate, they enrich culture and the conqueror becomes one with the conquered. In a sense, this is true of the U.S. The numerous peoples who immigrate are looking for a better life. They join our economy, adopt our goals and enrich our culture. We are a melting pot. We have seen with post war Germany and Japan, that making people our friends is far more "profitable" than making them our downtrodden enemies.

Yet I think it is naive to think that nothing will change when we embrace all cultures with their accompanying ideologies. The underlying paradigms of our culture in the U.S. are shifting, have shifted, and I believe will continue to shift, unless there is a major change in our current trajectory. I do not know how long democracy can survive if our culture takes on radically different paradigms from the Judeo-Christian

foundation our Constitution rest on. It could be that our ideas of Freedom may even be affected.

So while I do believe that the best way to deal with conflict and difference is to get to know each other and enrich our world by adopting the best from each other, I also think that we should be wise about what we embrace.

Mandi Barber says

One Sentence Review: A fast-paced mystery set in a truly fascinating world.

Recommended for: Sci-fi fans (or fantasy fans, for that matter, who don't mind aliens and spaceships); people who like strong, diverse cultural worldbuilding

Okay, first of all, let me put this into context. Four days ago, I finished reading Words of Radiance. Since then, nothing has been able to hold my attention except other Sanderson novels. WoR just blew me away so much that it kept recapturing my imagination when I *should* have been in other worlds.

A Matter of Profit is the first book to draw me out of the Cosmere and into its own world. And what a world it is! I'll admit, I'm addicted to fantasy/alien cultures and how they interact, and the T'Chin confederation has more than satisfied my thirst for new peoples. There are so many species, with so many cultures, that it could easily turn into a confusing mess--but it doesn't. The species are all wonderfully and uniquely alien, while still being organic and endearing.

And that's not even mentioning the characters (who I love) or the plot (which had me on the edge of my seat by the end.) It's not a long book (though my perception might be a bit skewed, coming off a novel that was almost too long to be printed.) But I was totally swept up in the story, and the ending was every bit as satisfying as I could have wanted.

Aurora Dimitre says

I don't have very much time to write a real review, I'm between classes right now and I've got about five minutes before I need to head out the door, so I'm going to just jot down a few quick thoughts.

-I'm not a huge sci-fi person - most science fiction I actually really dislike, but Bell managed to pull me in like she always does, which I appreciated.

-While this is true, she didn't pull me in right away, which is the reason for the subtraction of a star - I was disengaged at the beginning, and during parts in the middle in which it dragged a little bit.

-Also, the culture in this book is extremely misogynistic. I do realize that Bell did this on purpose and that it was to make a point, so that didn't cause any stars to get knocked off or anything, it's just something I thought I should mention in case anyone is planning on picking this up.

Mary says

I just reread this, and liked it just as much the second time around. Ahvren, 18, has a problem. All his people are soldiers; from having been conquered slaves, they have become conquerors, with all the moral grey areas that entails. Ahvren is severely shell-shocked from his experiences helping to put down a rebellion, and he no longer wants to serve in the Vivitare army. His foster-sister, on the other hand, is a born warrior fated to marry the emperor's sadistic son. Both young people may win their freedom - and Ahvren may discover a new life path - if he can solve an apparently simple mystery. Who is plotting against the emperor's life? It seems impossible that it can be one of the T'chin, for they - a conglomerate of 40 species from as many different worlds - are all pacifists. But it's clear someone is. The rumors are everywhere. If Ahvren is to save his sister, himself, and the emperor, he has to discover the roots of the plot.

This is a strong story with a very intriguing alien in the T'Chin scholar who takes on Ahvren and becomes almost a second parent to him. I'm not going to say too much about the scholar, but he was just about my favorite character. This is a good, old-fashioned space opera that should appeal to Trek and Star Wars fans. A shame it's out of print!

Rach says

This is more of a 3.5, but I'm a positive sort of gal so we'll go up on the rating. A Matter of Profit is a pleasant little mystery that takes place on the recently conquered planet of T'Chin. The main character Ahvren is a young man who is a member of the conquering race. After fighting off planet, he finds himself with a compulsion that does not allow him to lie. This is rather problematic, since his primary role in the story is to uncover an assassination conspiracy.

This story is classic Hilari Bell. If you like her other works, then you'll enjoy this one as well. It has a rawer edge to it than some of her more recent works which I really appreciate. Her world is well imagined, and I enjoyed her various alien species, especially the scholar (though I wish she'd used his actual name more often because I can't remember it). Some of the plot twists left me covering my eyes in fear. Some were predictable, but none were so obvious to make them any less enjoyable.

The characters were all very interesting, but they were a little less polished than I would have preferred. Sabri, for example, had a bad case of "tell and not show". The way she was described and the way she acted through a majority of the book seemed disconnected. She was not given enough "page time" in the books to really make me care about her or understand her. Similarly, apart from the scholar, the other characters flit in and out of the storyline with little motivation. I wanted more of them. Ahvren was delightful, but he wasn't enough to carry the story on his own.

Fans of Hilari Bell, then you will enjoy this book and it's worth the price to nab a copy. However, it is far from her strongest work. If you haven't read any Hilari Bell yet then you need to rectify that immediately. But I would recommend starting with either her Farsala or Knight & Rogue series first.

Karen says

So, some good things and some bad things. I know this was one of her earlier books, so it is fun to see how she's improved with the other recent ones I've just read.

The story and the message that came from it were enjoyable. It was a very interesting idea and ideal, that if you don't fight change, eventually, it becomes a part of who you are and you can still be you, just with the

inclusion of new great things. The main character learns and grows. I'm not sure he was quite believable, the mixture of emotions were a little too contrived, but it was close.

She created a fascinating world, sort of mixture of technologies and eras, which was sort of the point of the whole book once you get to the end. And she went into some detail in describing the different species, which shows a lot of commitment on her part. I also think she did a good job of building up to an exciting ending. Getting into the new vocabulary was a bit difficult. It didn't flow as well, I got lost a few times. And the writing was, somehow, a big choppy. Somehow it just felt like I was reading someone's writing instead of just being there in the world. It made me think too much about the words. And the cover art, well, it's just horrible. I lost all respect for the characters looking at the cover art. So, I just tried not to! I enjoyed it, but I think I will look forward to her new books coming out and not go back to the previous series she has done.

Alyssa says

I though this book was phenomenal! And I spent 8 years looking for it to read it a second time!!!

Lauren says

Another excellent novel from Hilari Bell, although uncharacteristically this one is (fairly typical, even) science fiction, as opposed to YA fantasy. For that reason, it surprised me that this was one of her first novels to be published, but I still possess the opinion that it is her best.

This is one of those stories that has a lot of things going on in it, not just plot-wise but thematically. I do adore fantasy and sci-fi that not only entertains but encourages us to think deeply, and this book definitely did that for me, regardless of whether this was fully intended by the author.

The book can be roughly broken into two parts: a detective story and a heist story. I cannot fully explain the second without lots of spoilers, but both are very entertaining, and use the conventions of both genres to great effect but with a unique spin.

I think the story's greatest strength, however, lies in the cultural analysis present therein. At its core this is a book about social contracts, about the economics of ideas. Fundamentally, all economics are about ideas, and the book does a good job of understanding this abstraction.

The idea of how the T'Chin culture perpetuates despite conquest is not a unique one (I saw it addressed much more recently, briefly, and shallowly in an episode of Doctor Who, for instance), but it is nonetheless a fascinating one. The book catalyzes a new understanding of colonialism and cultural mixing that I think proves very useful, although admittedly it is not necessarily attempting to approach "realism" on that point.

Of course, I can't close out this review without mentioning the book's feminist ideas, as well. There's nothing particularly revolutionary there, but it's a nice addition that goes well with the reflective thoughtfulness of the rest of the book, if handled at times a bit ham-handedly.

If you like typical pulp sci-fi, if you love a good detective or heist story, or if you're a feminist interested in economics and colonialism, you'll like this book. Others may not, but that's ok. Not every book is for everybody. As for me, it has remained a favourite through years of changing tastes and multiple rereadings.

Aelvana says

It's about a young man named Ahvren just home from the latest war, dreading his participation in the next one. He's a good fighter, but he hates the concept of conquest. His father, in an attempt to make both of them happy, wagers to give his son his choice of a future if Ahvren can stop the rumored assassination of the Emperor. Ahvren agrees, but he doesn't have much time.

As with Wizard Test, Bell is at her best writing about morally complicated situations. Ahvren has grown up with certain biases, some of which he recognizes and some he doesn't, and his journey is as much about him wrestling with himself as it is him tracking down the assassination plot. A variety of other characters of various species populates the city, with a host of interesting quirks, and Ahvren runs into quite a few during his frenzied investigation.

The plot itself was somewhat weaker. I knew right away the major shape of the puzzle, though I had to wait for the details to emerge. The fact that every single one of the T'Chin hold the same philosophy was hard to swallow, particularly given that they have so many different species with conflicting beliefs. The book's major point assumes a lot about prejudice wearing away. Human history tends to make the opposite point, so that was a bit hard to believe.

Still, it's not a bad book, and the intensity of the moral struggle made it a good read. Recommended.
