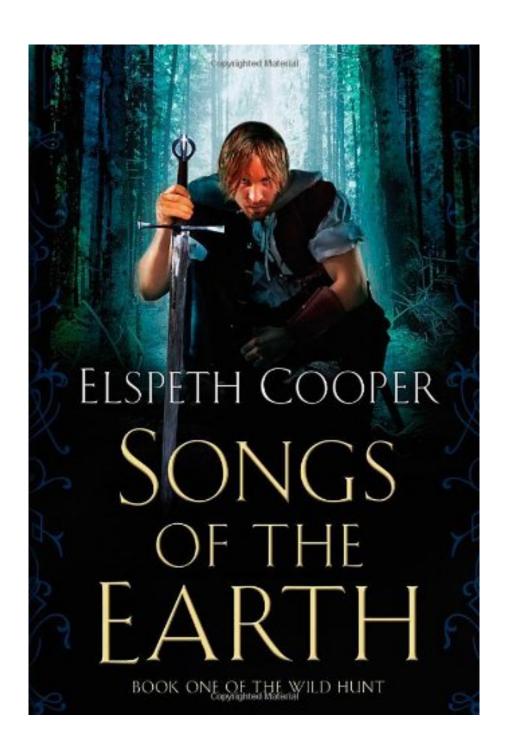


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About the Author

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The Book of Eador, Abjurations 12:14, is very clear: Suffer ye not the life of a witch. For a thousand years, the Church Knights have obeyed that commandment, sending to the stake anyone who can hear the songs of the earth. There are no exceptions, not even for one of their own.

Novice Knight Gair can hear music no one else can, beautiful, terrible music: music with power. In the Holy City, that can mean only one thing: death by fire--until an unlikely intervention gives him a chance to flee the city and escape the flames.

With the Church Knights and their witchfinder hot on his heels, Gair hasn't time to learn how to use the power growing inside him, but if he doesn't master it, that power will tear him apart. His only hope is the secretive Guardians of the Veil, though centuries of persecution have almost destroyed their Order, and the few Guardians left have troubles of their own.

For the Veil between worlds is weakening, and behind it, the Hidden Kingdom, ever-hungry for dominion over the daylight realm, is stirring. Though he is far from ready, Gair will find himself fighting for his own life, for everyone within the Order of the Veil, and for the woman he has come to love.

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Features

• Songs of the Earth

• Wild Hunt

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Most helpful customer reviews

14 of 18 people found the following review helpful. A fair outing with some issues
By Sean the Bookonaut
Spoilers

Songs of the Earth is the first part of the Wild Hunt Trilogy and Elspeth Cooper's first novel and foray into epic fantasy. It's been hailed as the "most compelling debut fantasy novel since Rothfuss' The Name of the Wind." I am not inclined to agree, but we will get to that shortly.

The Story

We begin this epic tail with our hero being readied for execution. Gair is a novice knight of the Suvaeon Order-a holy order that has its history rooted in the destruction of the magic using Sun Cult.

Gair can hear the song, a magical reality that he can reach out to and at times manipulate. But, as it is written in The Book of Eador, Abjurations 12:14: Suffer ye not the life of a witch, and so our hero is doomed.

Until of course, in an unprecedented move, the head of the order banishes him instead of killing him. What follows is pursuit by those who feel he should fry, rescue by a mysterious order of magic users and the surfacing of an ominous evil that threatens the destruction of the very world in which they live.

What I liked

Cooper's writing is polished and for the most part it drops into the background and lets the story come to the fore.

The use of the song, of music as magic seemed a reasonably fresh approach to a magic system. I am sure that is not entirely original but it didn't strike me as over done.

What I didn't

Sometimes it can be the smallest of things that can interrupt a reader's enjoyment. For me it started on line 5 with;

Hail, Mother, full of grace, light and life of all the world. Blessed are the meek [snip]..amen.

which is awfully close to,

Hail Mary full of grace, the lord is with thee, Blessed art thou...

Which, if you are an ex-catholic or a current one you'll recognize as the Hail Mary of Catholic prayer. Possibly more than recognize - it is probably etched forever into your grey matter.

A fellow reviewer found its inclusion slightly offensive to Christians. I found it dropped me out of the story every time Gair mentioned lines like, "blessed are the meek" and finished with "amen". Amen is a baggage laden word of Hebrew origin, co-opted by Christianity that you can't just plonk down in a fantasy story.

I understand what Cooper was trying to do - add verisimilitude by having something that might be familiar to the reader, to tap into the collective shared experience of prayer that the populace might have, craft a secondary world with familiarities that help ground the reader.

In this instance though I feel it's a failure. To find a successful application of this technique we can look at GRRM's Oath of the Night's Watch; its metre, its word choice and tone is reminiscent of a solemn prayer, without feeling like it's Christian prayer with the serial numbers rubbed off.

Night gathers, and now my watch begins.

It shall not end until my death.

I shall take no wife, hold no lands, father no children.

I shall wear no crowns and win no glory.

I shall live and die at my post.

I am the sword in the darkness.

I am the watcher on the walls.

I am the fire that burns against the cold, the light that brings the dawn, the horn that wakes the sleepers, the shield that guards the realms of men.

I pledge my life and honor to the Night's Watch, for this night and all the nights to come.

This small thing was a reasonable hurdle to overcome in my enjoyment of the novel.

Another small thing was the choice of names, one in particular, Alderan(see Alderaan) as the name of an Obi-wan Kenobi mentor figure.

In a book that's also lauded for its characterisation, there were a couple that to me seemed very poorly developed. The first was Goran, leader of the Curia faction that wanted Gair dead. He's presented as an overweight priest-like pervert. This combined with holy knights, catholic prayer, inquisitions and the burning of witches, had me at one stage wondering if author voice was creeping in.

I like my fiction to be fiction, not a veiled dig at institutions, unless it's really well done i.e. subtle and original. My rule of thumb is to leave that sort of stuff for non-fiction.

The poorest characterisation, in my opinion was of Savin, the all powerful evil. The sketch we are given near the end of the book, of his backstory, was utterly unbelievable. A babe born evil that kills both its parents before it can crawl, but that the Order of the Veil decide to raise instead of dashing its head against a rock?

When the rest of the characters are bound by human developmental psychology and motivations, Savin stands out as an aberration.

Recommendation

So despite the issues I had with it, I think it's worth giving Cooper ago. When I put the issues to the side the story worked well enough and kept my interest. Younger readers with less experience of fantasy may have no issue with the work at all.

This book was a review copy provided by the publisher.

11 of 14 people found the following review helpful. Thrilling adventure full of magic and awesome characters! By Evie Seo

Exquisite. A near perfect blend of fantasy, action, adventure and magic. Finely imagined and beautifully told, Songs of The Earth by Elspeth Cooper is one greatly enjoyable and entirely captivating debut fantasy novel. I had a wonderful time reading it. Thanks to Cooper's excellent and engaging storytelling, it didn't take long for me to become totally immersed in the plot. All the characters were carefully depicted, with a mixture of qualities and flaws that really made them jump off the page. The settings were vivid and painted with an exceptional care for details. I could almost feel the cold wind on my skin and hear the glorious song of power and magic. And it felt amazing. And it made me crave more. Mesmerizing - that would be the word. But also adventurous, at times scary and disquieting, thematically poignant, moving, even slightly philosophical. Beautiful. It was, in every sense of the word, an epic story and an exciting beginning to a promising new series.

Suffer ye not the life of a witch and shun ye all works of evil lest they imperil thy soul.

Gair can hear the Song. Which basically means he is a witch. He can touch the songs of the earth and weave magic. Unfortunately, the world he's been born into is a cold and unforgiving one, where practicing magic equals besmirching the sanctity of the Suvaeon Order and is punishable by death. And no one cares about Gair's loyalty to the Lady and his many years of service to the Church. All that matters is that he has performed acts of witchcraft for which he must be punished. Burned. While Gair is doing his best to stay alive, the magic inside him is breaking free and he has to do something with it, has to learn how to embrace it and get it under control, otherwise he'll burst. His only hope lies in the Guardians of the Veil, a secret and well-hidden society that holds the knowledge of the Song. In order to learn how to master his gift, he has to find them, and he has to do it quick. And that's only just the beginning of the many dangers and adventures he'll have to face.

This was, hands down, one of the most wonderful fantasy books I have read in the past few years. I wasn't even 50 pages into this book before it downed on me that I am beginning something truly extraordinary. And the feeling stayed with me all the way to the end, leaving me impressed, amazed, slightly dazed and ultimately satisfied. Cooper's writing style is nothing short of spellbinding. It draws you in, holds your

attention, gets you emotionally involved in the characters' story and leaves you breathless. And begging for more. There's no denying the fact that this lady have nailed her debut in a way that you really don't see very often. For that, and for the way she she brought all her characters to life and made me care about them, I am giving her a well-deserved standing ovation.

I'm not even sure what I loved more about this book - the way the story was driven by the beautifully fleshed out, convincing characters, or the way the events smoothly unfolded, allowing me to take pleasure in exploring all the intricacies of the plot. Or maybe it was the whole new concept of magic that won me over, or perhaps the chilling witch hunts and inquisition. Or maybe I'm just a total sucker for thrilling adventures and epic quests, sprinkled with danger and occasional humor. Whatever it was, it was good.

Gair's journey to self-discovery and self-acceptance was also very interesting to read about. His whole life he's been taught that magic is a sin. Every prayer he has learned was meant to steer him away from it. But when he heard the music, he couldn't resist opening his heart to it, it felt too good, too euphoric not to give in. And he struggled with that a lot. When we meet him, he's still not entirely sure whether he's a sinner, well-deserving of the punishment he's about to receive, or just an innocent victim with a gift. He has to face the cruelty of the world around him, all the while battling demons of his own. Trying to find his place in the world. And it was absolutely fascinating to be able to accompany him on this journey and see him transform from a scared, confused man with not much hope for the future, into a strong, confident, powerful character, ready to take on whatever new challenges are thrown his way.

All in all, I thoroughly enjoyed reading Songs of The Earth and I hope you realized by now that this is a title that simply must be on your shelf. I can't wait for the next installment!

7 of 9 people found the following review helpful.

Rites of passage and religious fundamentalism

By Keris Nine

In many respects, Songs of the Earth is a fairly standard, traditional fantasy novel. There's a young boy, he's an orphan (I know, I know... but there's an assurance that Gair does not have an extraordinary, aristocratic background that will be revealed later, but, we'll see...) who has just discovered that he has uncommon hidden powers. Sure enough those powers are tied to the pagan powers of nature - Earth, Water, Fire and Wind - and as such, they are not only mistrusted by the religious authorities that run the Holy City, but anyone possessing such magic powers is persecuted and killed as a witch.

Gair is rescued however by a man who will prove to be his mentor and help him come to learn how to handle the powers that he has been gifted with (you're thinking Gandalf and Bilbo/Frodo, and you'd be on the right track). This is fortunate, because it's clear that those powers that the Church distrusts (and some other powers that Gair possesses which have yet to be fully revealed), will be of vital importance when it comes to dealing with an age-old conflict that seems to be brewing among the infidel races, and also help restore the Veil which is breaking down between the real world and a dark Hidden Kingdom.

So far, so much standard fantasy scenario, but at the very least Songs of the Earth is very well written and sufficiently involving with strong characterisation. It doesn't pull out too many surprises at this stage, the first book in the inevitable trilogy clearly doing all the scene setting, but striking a good balance between Gair's coming-of-age story and keeping up the key players and developments in the various locations. At the same time it avoids the worst sword and sorcery excesses and medieval "forsooth" dialogue of the genre, feeling fresher and much more naturalistic in a setting that is historically familiar (hints of witchcraft, inquisitions and crusades), but also has resonance with present-day religious fundamentalism. A good start, an enjoyable read, and now that the setting has been well-established, there's the promise of a lot more to

come.

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