



# Empress

*Karen Miller*

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## Empress Karen Miller

Her name is Hekat--  
And she will be slave to no man.

In a family torn apart by poverty and violence, Hekat is no more than an unwanted mouth to feed, worth only a few coins from a passing slave trader.

But Hekat was not born to be a slave. For her, a different path has been chosen. It is a path that will take her from stinking back alleys to the house of her god, from blood-drenched battlefields to the glittering palaces of Mijak.

This is the story of Hekat, slave to no man.

With her first series--Kingmaker, Kingbreaker--Karen Miller took the fantasy world by storm. Now, with Empress, she has created one of the most remarkable characters and unforgettable stories in recent years. This is an adventure not to be missed.

## Empress Details

Date : Published April 1st 2008 by Orbit (first published June 1st 2007)

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Author : Karen Miller

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# From Reader Review Empress for online ebook

## Alasdair says

WARNING, SPOILERS INSIDE and also, READ THE WHOLE SERIES, this book is not meant as a standalone!!!

I would like to start with the fact that this is the darkest book I have ever read and many will hate it or completely miss the point. GRRM's ASOIAF has nothing on it. Hekat is the most deeply crazy and disgustingly arrogant being ever written about, she is the super villain of all times! She is more evil and horrible than the Governor in The Walking Dead. This aside many forget this is the first in a series, and Karen has written these books strangely, she starts off by telling you the full, unabridged story of the main villain and introducing the main good guy (also happens to be the big bad's son) without even introducing the rest of the good guys.

Karen has set her main antagonist(the books protagonist) in a whole-ly unimaginable world (for most) where the people live in such fear of their deity that every single moment of their short, depressing and chained lives is spent trying not to piss it off or get killed by it. In fact their god is a blood thirsty demon about as bad as Khorne from Warhammer (if you know any of the Lore). Many cannot grasp this book because fantasy novels generally contain some form of magical baddy and a medieval superman in plate-mail not spandex. Here we are shown the horror that is Hekat evolve into the most disgusting example of a human being possible through other-worldly religious zeal to a demon and the most disgusting arrogance possible in a human.

I enjoyed the book, it wasn't my fave in the series. I disliked the repeating use of God..., and everything in the dialect, but she is writing it more as a verbal story board for a psychological horror play than a book, and it made sense for the story.

So yeah, read the rest, this is basically the longest prologue in the world and only focuses on the antagonist and her life before the main story.

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## Mike says

So, I've read a few of the reviews on here so far about this book, and I'm frankly appalled. Not at the book, at the reviewers. "It's a horrible book, nobody and nothing to identify with!" - that's the point, boys and girls. If you identified with the characters in this book (well, with a notable exception), then I hope to never run into you in a dark alley.

I am not going to give away the book, or the ending, or the characters. Well, maybe one of the characters.

The main character of this book is Hekat - and you are not supposed to like her, or want to be her, or even live in her world. She looks down on "slaves" while being one herself, and refuses to accept her lot in life. This is good, right? Well, why look down on slaves as being inferior if you feel you aren't supposed to be one? The inherent contradiction in her character is what drags you in. You don't identify with her, you

identify with the people she abuses and destroys. She uses them to her own ends. She has "god" on her side, and there's some pretty powerful mojo backing her up in that. There's a couple of "why exactly did that happen?" moments (such as WHY exactly she ends up with some items), but they are few and far between. God exists in this world. Is it the "god" we're used to? Not by any stretch of the imagination, but it DOES exist. It's brutal, uncaring, and it speaks to these people. Some more directly than others.

Why people are berating the author for completely fleshing out a world, a society, a religion, and characters... I simply cannot fathom it. Every page, I want to know more, I want to see who did what, and what happens next. The gore fits the world. The author does not put it there for the sake of saying "look, death and blood and raaaargh!" - it's there to explain something, and to show that even the most "evil" beings have a reason for what they do. It's what makes the best villains. I was never scared of Sauron, because he was a nameless, faceless, and rather boring "character" - he didn't exist. Hekat, her little "kingdom," which becomes an empire... it frightens me. It makes me fear for the future of the world in which it exists. Not because "the evil hordes are coming" - but because "Hekat is coming, and the hordes are following her." Not that this series will be the next Lord of the Rings, but the villains are FAR more fleshed out, and not just "there."

Don't skip this series, unless you truly cannot handle any gore (or strange fictional religions bother you).

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## **Foz Meadows says**

The world of Mijak is brutal, unrelenting and savage. Every aspect of daily life is ruled over by a nameless, genderless god who requires regular blood sacrifice and whose symbol is the scorpion; in turn, the godspeakers who enforce these rules wield a magical power that is used both to heal and smite, though more commonly the latter. Slavery exists, and every territory within Mijak is ruled by a separate, conquest-hungry warlord. With the single, strange exception that women can become warriors and godspeakers - a dissonance which is never explained - the misogyny of the setting is absolute. Girl children are referred to as she-brats, women as sluts; sex is only ever called fucking; women are given status by birthing sons, not daughters; warlords can keep concubines; slaves are kept by the godspeakers specifically for soldiers to have sex with; and female warriors are forbidden from falling pregnant.

In this context, we are introduced to a nameless, angry girl who, in the opening scene, hides under a table as her violent, stupid father rapes her mother, all while beating her and complaining that she keeps giving birth to useless she-brats and not enough sons. The girl, who goes on to become the main protagonist and is eventually given the name Hekat, has no sympathy for her mother. She is angry at the woman's weakness in letting herself be abused, and in retrospect, this should have tipped me off as to what the rest of the book would be like.

The title, Empress of Mijak, is a literal spoiler, pointing to the intended shape of the story: we are here to watch Hekat, a self-professed goatslut sold into slavery, as she is taken to the great city of Et-Raklion, where she runs away, makes a pact with the god to be his instrument, becomes a knife-dancer, attracts the attention of Raklion warlord, and, in due time, becomes Empress. That's the plot in a nutshell: the entire novel is dedicated to showing us Hekat's journey. Occasionally, we see things from the perspective of the other, secondary characters, but never for long. We are here because of Hekat.

And now comes the part where I'm conflicted - more deeply so, in fact, than I've ever been in relation to gauging any other book.

Stylistically, Miller has made a deliberate decision to write the whole novel using a run-on sentence structure, with commas used where one might normally find full stops, colons or hyphens. The logic behind doing this - or so I assume - is to heighten the sense that Mijak is another world with its own language and spoken cadences, so that it only looks unusual in English because it has been, in effect, translated. This is further built upon by the constant repetition - and I do mean constant - of particular words and phrases, "the god see you in its eye" being chief among them. Again, there's a reason for this, because Mijak is a culture saturated with religion. Every thought and phrase of every character is sifted through this context, so that the repetition takes on a ritual flavour. The terms Miller has invented to describe the panoply of her religion are a heavyhanded case in point: there are godbowls, godbells, godposts, godmoons, godspeakers, godsnakes, godbraids, godbones, godbreath, godhouses, godsmite, godpools, godsparks, godpromises, godstones and godsight - and all those words are used frequently, often in the space of a single page or paragraph.

Reading the book, I did fall into the rhythm of the writing; I got used to reading that particular voice, and it did feel representative of the culture. I was more aggravated by the constant god-prefixing earlier in the book, when a sudden blizzard of such similar-sounding terminology started to have the same effect that repeating the same word over and over will have. But again, I adjusted, and as the story settled down, I adapted to the ubiquitous god-references. That being said, while the effect was bearable - and while I can understand completely the reason for doing it - the endless repetition weighed down the story like wet sand weighs down a beach towel.

It is an odd thing to find a book which simultaneously has too much and too little happening, but *Empress of Mijak* somehow fits the bill.

On the too-much hand, there are sudden leaps in time between the end of one chapter and the start of another, so that while we start with Hekat as a twelve-year-old girl, by the end of the book her eldest son is well into his twenties. Momentous events, like the conquest and subordination of enemy cities, happen in the space of paragraphs, their success glossed over as background detail. For a novel with such a potentially massive scope - being, as it is, the story of a slave girl rising to the position of empress and her subsequent desire to conquer the world - there is no political interplay, no sense of warring factions or alliances, except within the discordant personalities of the main characters. Lacking this higher, political focus, one might reasonably expect the bulk of the story to be therefore rooted in character development and interpersonal relations.

But on the too-little hand, the vast majority of the internal dialogue of every single character, which in turn constitutes the bulk of the novel's description, is so obsessed with the god - wondering what it wants, asking it for favours, trying to guess if they're in its favour and constantly referencing it by way of the phrases and neologisms mentioned above - that it soon becomes exhausting. More importantly, all that religion comes at the cost of individual insight and development. Beyond the fact that every character believes themselves to be following the god's will, and hoping they've got it right, there is precious little introspection, and even less sympathy. This is personified by the coldness of the protagonist. Hekat is never concerned with anything other than her own wants and the wants of the god. She never doubts. She is rarely curious. She is ruthless, single-minded and selfish, and while that might make her an extremely realistic character, given what she has endured, it also makes her deeply unpleasant to read about.

Which is where, for me, the book really started to fall down. The opening scenes describing Hekat's life in the Savage North are horrific, designed to engender sympathy - and for a while, they succeeded. The way Abajai the trader cares for Hekat, making her feel special for the first time in her life, is bittersweet and compelling, because we know it cannot last: unlike Hekat, we are always aware that Abajai treats her differently to the other slaves, not because he loves her, but because he perceives her as valuable, and plans

to make her into a warlord's concubine. When she finally discovers this and runs away, our sympathies go with her. But even at this point, Hekat herself has never been a likeable character. Her plight has engendered empathy, but she is selfish, spiteful and arrogant: all understandable, of course, all things we tolerate due to her youth and circumstances, but only because we are waiting for her to mature into something better.

She never does.

Ultimately, the greatest failing of *Empress of Mijak* is one of tonelessness, of a static world and static characters. In the entire novel, not one character develops beyond their original description: the only change is in their circumstances, in how powerful or downtrodden they become. After she makes her vow to serve the god, Hekat becomes steadily more manipulative and unlikeable in pursuit of her goals, until we are left reading about a character we wanted to come to like, but who has never even tried to earn our affection.

And here is another strange thing, between the static development and the pervasive religiosity: we do not know where Hekat gets her motivation. Yes, she wants to serve the god, and by certain accounts, that god appears to be real. The godspeakers have power, their rituals dominate society; there is never any question of unmasking a false belief system. And yet, the reader carries these questions with them throughout the story: is the god really speaking to Hekat, Vokta and Nagarak, giving them instructions and protection, or is the power they each possess simply magic, which in this world has been conflated with religion, so that the guidance they think they hear is nothing but their own thoughts echoed back at them? There are flashes throughout the story that this might be so, or at the very least, that it is possible for individual characters to act on their own impulses while believing themselves to be divinely guided, but never more than that. And this is problematic, for the simple reason that Hekat hears messages from the god that nobody else does, and that these messages - which we only ever hear about in her own words, after the fact - constitute her sole motivation. With no way of knowing what she has been told, and with her devotion to the god never in question, it is impossible to tell why she does things, where the line is between her own desires and those of the god (if it exists), or if there's a line at all.

The dilemma posed by trying to understand Hekat's motivation is a dilemma common in the real world, where only our personal convictions are a deciding factor in whether or not a given god is real, where we cannot really know how devout or selfish a given person is except by their actions. In that respect, the above confusions are deeply realistic. But because *Empress of Mijak* is a fantasy novel - because we know that the godspeaker powers are magical, regardless of whether their deity is real - the god itself begins to feel like something of an absent character; because if it is real, then its desires and motivations are the only real substance of the book, and we cannot fully understand them if it remains in absentia; and if it is not real, then everything the characters believe about their world is wrong, and the tenuous, borrowed morality which allows us to understand their frequently terrible actions is broken: we want them to rebel, and instead they persist in making their world a more vile, more wretched place than it was even in those opening, rape-filled paragraphs.

Which leads me to a final point: the misogyny. *Empress of Mijak* is a book filled with institutionalised, socially accepted violence against women, and the only exceptions to their second-class treatment - women warriors and women godspeakers - seem to be present solely to justify Hekat's rise to power, and not because they fit with anything else in the story. Given a lone female protagonist ascending to the heights of power in such a male-dominated world, I had expected to feel at least a little solidarity with Hekat's efforts; or rather, I had expected her to have some fondness or sympathy with women to counterbalance her outspoken hatred of men. But we do not see this, largely due to the dearth of other female characters. We hear, in passing, that one female warrior was killed at Hekat's command because she couldn't accept that Hekat was now her superior, and in the final, grotesque pages of the book, Hekat cuts an unborn child out of her daughter-in-law

to punish her son for his defiance. Hekat is a misanthrope, a sociopath, a woman in a world run by men who, in defending her right to power, actually declares that she is not a woman, but a warrior, a killer, the god's instrument and a mother to her son.

So, there we have it. The world of Mijak was realistically, brutally drawn - so much so that it was impossible to like or feel attachment to either the people or the culture. It was written in a style designed to provoke a sense of place and culture, which it achieved, but at the expense of pacy and depth. The main character was, again, a realistic person, but so savage in her actions and so monotone in her thoughts that she was painful to read about. In the end, I only feel like I persisted with the book in order to get some closure, and so I could feel justified in writing this review - which, in fairness, I've been wanting to write for days, because if there's one thing Empress succeeded in doing, it was making me think, and that is always of benefit.

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## Choko says

\*\*\* 4.25 \*\*\*

Gahhh! This was one very difficult read, but totally worth it! Empress is dark, bleak, vile, desolate and disturbing, but I could not stop reading for a second! The opening scene throws us into a horrifying, denigrating, and very telling of the world episode in the kitchen of a Man and his "she-bitch", discussing the fate of the "she-whelp", which by the misfortune of being female is only good for barter or selling for money, since otherwise she just uses-up the resources rightfully belonging to The Man and his six sons. In this world a female doesn't even get a name, this is how little they are regarded. The place is mostly desert, the people very poor, the G-ds always present and in communication with the world's inhabitants. This World is reminiscent of the time from the Old Testament, when G-d was often in a very bad mood, liked to smite folks for the slightest insult, real or perceived, and made His desires clear to the few he deemed worthy to hear His voice. The Unnamed G-d with the Scorpion as His sign, is not a very loving G-d. It demands constant animal sacrifices, and hundreds of thousands get killed in its name.... The g-d-speakers are its priests and they are the creators and enforcers of the g-d-laws. The only other individuals who could enforce and create rules and laws are the Warlords and their entourages. They rule over free men and slaves with an iron fist. This is a low and base world, where slavery is the norm and slaves are lower than cattle. Women are lower than that...

The world building is immaculate!!! You can feel the sun scorching the skin and everything around you, you can experience the need for water in a visceral way, and the sand in every crevasse of your body is almost tactile!!! The abuse the slaves are put through is so devastating, you want to do something to help them, but your own impotence to do so is stifling! The language used for all the narrative is dialect-specific and I did not find it bothersome - the opposite, it made me immerse myself completely into the story and the region it is playing out in. As much as it helped create the atmosphere, it also gave me the needed something different to which to hold on in order to create some separation, or the story would have been unbearable to get through. The religion is based on several such I have encountered in history, and just as them this one is cruel and merciless!!! Imagine on top of that, having the G-d itself tell you what to do at all times and give you no chance at personal choice or freedom of ideas, since all has to be in the G-d's name, or else!!! I would think this would be a terrible place and culture to belong to...

Our main character, whom no one can call a protagonist, since she is nothing like such, is that same she-

whelp with no name, who was sold as a slave and gave herself the name Hekat. She was bought because she is beautiful, is 12 years old, and the flesh-traitors plan on investing into her so they can sell her as a noble's concubine eventually. In the beginning of the book you want to root for her, the pathetic, ignorant, abused slave girl, who is just starting to discover the world beyond her desert village. You can see she is brave and smart, and you know that given the chance she will become something! But her personality is mostly formed already in that hell-hole of a place, and one more disappointment pushes her over the edge, bringing our the worst in a smart, strong young girl having all that baggage behind her, and developing coping mechanisms perfectly understandable for a world where the G-d walks among its people. The readers' desire to root for her quickly dissipates, turning from hope, to pity, to possible understanding, to "I hate her, she is horrible", to WTF???? Even her best qualities conspire to make her more scary and despicable. She is one sociopathic-narcissistic-mass-murderer!!! The one weakens, her love for her son, is also barely palatable and eventually makes things worse... There really aren't characters in the book I can say are "good". There are some flashes of possibly positive traits in couple of them, but just by being part of this culture and religion, they are not good in any way we might think of it. This is the story of how cruelty creates and perpetuates itself. It is very difficult to read, but darn it, it is soooooo poignant and original, I feel lucky to have fallen onto it! I can't wait to read the next two books in the series!!!

This is not for everyone. If you need a light in the darkness or a character to whom you can give some love and feel good about, this is most probably not for you. But if you want to read something very different and can take the bleakness, I would say give it a try. You might be surprised!!!

Now I wish you all Happy Reading and may you always find what you Need in the pages of a Good Book!!!

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## **Ithlilian says**

A nameless she-brat was born in a desolate desert area where female children were seen as worthless. Her father "the man" decides to sell her to a wealthy merchant that sees beauty in the dirty nameless child. Even at her young age she has fire in her. Her master calls her a Hell cat, thus she chooses her name-Hekat. From then on Hekat decides that she will be no mans slave. For she is strong, she is powerful, she is beautiful, she is chosen of the god.

I will go no further for fear of spoilers. Hekat is a very strong character; she is arrogant, she is unflinching in her loyalty to her god, and she is determined to conquer the world. Some may find her loyalty to the god to be strange, some may see Hekat as unlikeable, ruthless, heartless. She may be those things, but for a reason. When I think of Hekat I see a nameless girl that had been stepped on too many times and a slave that was betrayed. She turned her fate around, the god smiled upon her and granted her wishes, she must be important for this to be the case. I felt no remorse for the people Hekat destroyed along her way to power. Described in one word, Hekat is INTENSE.

This book may not be for the squeamish, but if you can get past the killing enough to grow to like Hekat somewhat, than this book is well worth your time. If you are a fan of character driven epic fantasy with strong characters and great world building, than this is the novel for you. If you decide to read it, I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did!

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## **Zabe Bent says**

Update: I've been rereading with a writer's eye lately. This book is probably not for everyone, but it is brilliant. We are so accustomed to identifying with the protagonist. We want to root for the hero. Hekat is no hero, which spoils the enjoyment of this book somewhat. But this story deserves to be told, and Miller's writing pulls you in. If you can find a way to be as brave a reader as Miller is a writer, you won't be disappointed. On to book two.

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Karen Miller's writing doesn't disappoint. But be warned, Hekat is not your typical fantasy protagonist-hero. I did not find myself rooting for her as the book went on. Quite the opposite, I found fewer and fewer redeeming qualities as the story progressed. That's the real reason for the low rating. On the one hand, I want to applaud Miller for creating a non-traditional, atypical relationship with a protagonist. On the other, I kept hoping something would happen to help me understand Hekat or the direction that the story was taking. It didn't happen, but I was certainly drawn in by Miller's writing.

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## **Melania Ramona says**

I give this book 4 stars because the world Karen Miller creates is truly unique and she manages to make it terrifyingly real and complete. The story is different also. If, at the beginning, I felt pity for Hekat, at the end I couldn't feel one ounce of sympathy for her, on the contrary. It was a tiresome novel, the sacrifice and fight scenes (and there are a lot of those) are so bloody they sometimes become sickening. They remind me of the bloody rituals of the Incas. Also, like someone else said, the ritualistic language becomes tiresome towards the end. It's like the characters can't open their mouths without talking about being in the god's eye.

As I read the novel, I kept hoping someone, anyone would realize they are wrong, that their whole religion is wrong, but I guess, as this is the first book in the series, I was hoping for too much...

On the whole, this is a good and interesting novel. I'd like to read other Karen Miller series. But this series... I think I'll let some time pass before reading the second book (although I know the action takes place in another country and I'm curious about Zandakar - him, I like)

PS: I read a review where Hekat was described as "inhuman" and archetypal. I, for one, think she is not quite sane. I mean, not all the characters need to be "normal", no? And she definitely has the background of a psychotic person. Maybe that was the author's intention.

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## **Nikko Lee says**

Why I read this book?

Empress by Karen Miller was recommended by a coworker who knew I enjoyed fantasy novels.

My one sentence summary:

A woman believes herself to be the instrument of god whether she is or not.

Kuddos:

From page one, Hekat's narrative voice was captivating. Her limited, yet all knowing perspective, is fascinating and pulls the reader into the story. She is not a good person, and whether she is acting on god's will or her own remains unclear. However, I kept reading to see what she would do next. Do not stand in this

woman's way. The world setting is also interesting. It starts off in a desert land and weaves in a very complicated political intrigue. Hekat slave to no man and will destroy anyone she thinks might stand in her way, including her own son.

Quibbles:

The unique voice and dialect can be a little hard to get into at first. The only other quibble I have is that the subsequent books in the series lose that unique voice that made the first book a must read.

Final Verdict:

I'm going to read the rest of the series, even though I fear that the subsequent books will return to the realm of standard fantasy.

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### **Ivette says**

This book made me want to bash my head against the first godpost I could find. I would rather swim with the scorpions than read the next installment. This book is NOT precious. It is NOT chosen. It should be thrown in the nearest godpool where it will definitely be smited. And we will all rejoice!

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### **Kat Kennedy says**

Empress is something different. Kudos to Karen Miller for doing something that I have been ranting about for too long. Creating a strong, resourceful female protagonist. She does this in the form of Hekat, our eyes and ears to the unique world of Empress.

Now if only I could convince her to write a strong, resourceful female protagonist that I actually like.

The story is extremely well-written. The world that Karen Miller creates is something that many authors fail at: a world that is immersive. She manages to bring to life Hekat's surroundings in a way that is both artful and colourful.

Yes, sentences run on slightly at times and some parts seem unnecessary and repetitive, but you can excuse these things when the over all effect is that you can almost see, taste and smell what the narrator is telling you about.

Yet, like someone giving you the best foot massage of your life before ripping off your toenails, Hekat will undoubtedly ruin all Karen's hard work.

This is the fatal flaw of Empress. You can not have such a long story based on a protagonist so unlikable. Now, I don't mean that protagonists should always be perfect or even flirt with the side of wholesome, fluffy bunnies. But they must be either relatable, or likable despite their shortcomings. If you're going to be a ice-hearted wench then you need to at least have style and charm. Hekat wouldn't know charm or style if it rose in front of her from the ground and danced naked with a sparkly dildo while singing "I'm a Survivor!"

Hekat fails to carry her long, heavy narrative and it comes crashing down on top of her, spoiling what was otherwise a good read.

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## dverghest says

I had previously read the *Kingmaker, Kingbreaker* series by Karen Miller, and though I did have some issues with her writing, particularly when it comes to dialogue and the use of very silly accents to signify socio-economic class, I thought they were good reads and wanted to try another series by the author.

I wish I hadn't, and there is very little chance of me ever picking up another book by her.

EMPRESS is a horrible waste of time, the worst kind of "poor and dirty child betrayed by parents and society, only to rise to power". What really bothered me the most is the worshipping of their gods and the portrayal of the society. There are rivers and pools and bassins and entire cascading waterfalls (or so it seemed) of blood everywhere, from sacrificial animals (who then magically vanished, not even leaving the meat to feed the hungry masses) as well as humans. I don't have a problem with sacrifice (errr, in literature), but the amount of butchered-off beings in this book was just insane.

I realise that the author probably quite purposefully painted the society and its people as primitive, war-loving and harsh, and I can well imagine where the next two books in the series will go, but I will never find out. The book and the ideas in it genuinely disgusted me on a level where I just cannot find it in myself to spend x hours reading more about that universe.

There were other and smaller things that niggled me as well (all the God\*-things, the horribly broken language, the main character being a twat etc.), but it was mainly page upon page of streams of sticky, warm, slowly-coagulating blood that made this book a dreadful read.

I actually have no idea why I was so determined to finish the damned thing, but I did and it is quite possibly the worst book I have ever read.

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## Afryst says

Despite the single star I gave it, I'm tempted to recommend this to serious fans of the fantasy genre, as a case study. While I found it belaboured, it has some genuinely good ideas.

The main character, Hekat, is fascinating (for all of several minutes). After a childhood of neglect and abuse, she enters adulthood with a pathological commitment to the acquisition of power. This, combined with boundless arrogance and cruelty, makes her completely inhuman, an archetype. The sympathy her childhood suffering had evoked in the reader is quickly burned away. In its place is left contempt, and distaste for her narcissism. She is not a vehicle or touchstone for the reader, not a narrator or witness. As soon as this transformation is complete, reading "Empress" becomes a chore. We have hundreds of pages of ranting and self-congratulation to go, with not a single likable or morally courageous character to balance the narrative.

The only other major character is, somewhat unusually, the god. This god is not unknowable or aloof, but a god of the fire-and-brimstone persuasion, terrible and unpredictable. The god is referred to on just about every page, and its presence quickly becomes oppressive. At seemingly random intervals, it dispenses

directives or punishment through a human avatar. Though the punishments run the gamut of medieval tortures (and an occasional bolt of lightning), the order of priests who support this seem utterly unburdened by moral doubt. You'll be hard-pressed to find a more serene, cheerful and loving group of religious zealots anywhere.

This absence of genuine sentiment is universal, so the overwhelming impression of this book is one of great debates and moral quandaries neatly sidestepped. The priesthood cheerfully follows every monstrous, contradictory decree, the rulers perpetrate one atrocity after another and the common citizenry seem prone to faint with pleasure at the mere sight of their social superiors.

Despite the tagline "She will be a slave to no man", class upheaval is not the order of the day. Far from it, after Hekat escapes slavery, it is never mentioned again. Slavery, sexism, class struggle, religious oppression, dictatorship, familial obligation, self-determination, racism: Miller weaves these themes together with undeniable skill, then invites you to ignore them altogether.

All in all, this leaves you with a thoroughly unlikeable character, surrounded by a bland supporting cast, following a schizophrenic, poorly interpreted puppeteer. The complete lack of an overarching plot or theme renders the actions of the characters meaningless, while their obvious roles as plot device guarantees you will never form any emotional connection.

"Empress" has some instructional value to aspiring writers and fans of the genre. Karen Miller shows considerable skill in with dialogue and scenery, but ultimately her artifice has no heart, no message and very little appeal.

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## **Heather says**

This is the worst book I've ever read.

First, the dialect quickly grows tiresome. The native language of the characters is formal, ritualistic and somewhat broken at the same time. Were it only the dialogue, it would be tolerable, but the narration is written in the same dialect. 700+ pages of it is too much, especially since an integral part of the language seems to be the misuse of the comma. If all of the run-on sentences were removed, there would be no book left.

Second, the book revolves around a stifling, oppressive religious system that all but kills any sense of free will in the characters. This creates a certain amount of inertia and predictability that, again, grows tiresome. On a related note, the number of things named after the god is tedious. Godstone, godpost, godbraids, godpool, godbells, godsmite, etc. Enough already! Think of a different name to call things!

Third, it is 100% impossible for any person except for a sociopathic serial killer to relate to the main character. She is nothing but selfishness, jealousy, ruthlessness, hubris, and merciless hatred. She is devoid of any redeeming quality. I've heard arguments that you're not supposed to like her, but 700 pages of loathing the main character is too much. It may not be necessary to like a main character, but retaining a reader's interest usually DOES involve being able to sympathize with the main character on some level. Sympathizing with Hekat is impossible; it's only possible to wish she would have died in the first chapter so that one wouldn't have had to suffer her existence throughout the entire novel.

Fourth, the last 50-100 pages of the novel are sickening. I have read many novels that contained graphic violence, and none have ever nauseated me the way this book has. Graphic violence sometimes has its place in a plot, but there is such a thing as gratuitous violence. Some details are so morbid and grotesque and needless that they are not worth the time it takes to write them.

All in all, I was disgusted with this book and will not read anything by Karen Miller ever again. If her other books are better, then it's just bad luck that I read this one first, because now I will never know what those other books are like. I somehow doubt that I'm missing much.

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### **Ren says**

I picked up this trilogy in Hastings for my birthday this year. I had seen it a couple times on the shelves before and my mother has always gave me this rule: If you see a book--or a series--on a shelf and you are unsure of it then leave it be. If you come back the next two or three times and the book is still there then you're meant to pick it up. So, I finally picked it up. My friend advised me to only get the first book, just in case I didn't like it I wouldn't have wasted money on the other two. However, I went ahead and bought them all together. I did not regret it at all. This series was absolutely amazing. It wasn't the best written in the world, but it was very creative in the story and I loved the characters. We're introduced to Hekat, whom many readers of this series seem to either love or hate. In fact, that seems to be the way it is with many characters. Anyway, we see the rise of Hekat, once unwanted she-brat, to the great Empress of a blood thirsty nation and a prophetess of sorts to their bleeding God. The trials that she overcomes, her faults, her positives, her 'lovers', her children. This first novel explains the birth and life of the series' villain. But is she really a villain? Read this and the last two books, then decide.

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### **Terence says**

Perhaps it's because I'm coming down from a China Mieville high having recently finished Embassytown but trying to read this was an awful experience.

When the author's idea of representing the ignorance of peasants is to have them talk like The Cookie Monster\* you know you're not in a good place, literature-wise.

\* Mea culpa: I impugn The Cookie Monster - at least he used verbs.

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### **Sandra Glenn says**

I applaud Karen Miller for taking a risk in creating the character of Hekat. In theory, it's the kind of book I've been craving. However...

I really wanted to love Empress, but by the time I was 2/3 into it, I hated who the protagonist had become. I simply cannot enjoy a book unless I can identify with the main character at some level. I got within 50 pages of the book's end, and couldn't quite finish it.

Also, it was unclear to me whether Miller's imagined world actually contained magic, or the characters just

believed it to be so. I don't mind that sort of ambiguity if it's handled well, but there were so many conflicting yes/no hints throughout that I grew weary of trying to decide.

Finally, I found Miller's use of a single descriptor "god-" as a tag for anything considered magical or divine rather tiresome. Godbells, Godsmite, Godthis, Godthat...I felt she hadn't really put sufficient thought into that part of her world.

However, your mileage may vary.

I should add that while I found G.R.R. Martin's Song of Ice and Fire books maddening because of their brutality, I also loved them because of the occasional sympathetic character (Tyrion!). Danaerys Targaryen, for example, is a lot like Hekat, and also does some terrible things, but I love her character because she isn't pure evil.

I can handle antiheroes, but they must have some spark of underlying humanity, and the world of Empress was just dark, dark, dark.

That said, Ms. Miller can definitely write, and while I might not have fully enjoyed the choices she made with her characters, I must give her credit for whisking me off to another world, though a world too brutal for me to feel at home in.

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## **Donna says**

I wanted to like this book.

It's an epic fantasy that has a detailed setting and some really unique touches. It's about a common girl who, through a combination of ability and ruthlessness, raises herself to power.

It's also depressingly flat. Most of the characters are unlikeable, and aren't interesting enough to make up for that. Hekat sees things in terms of black and white, which makes her reactions predictable and her few moments of introspection dull. Characters who are initially more sympathetic eventually seem weak or foolish because they never understand her, even after seeing numerous examples of how far she'll go. Also, a good bit of what might have been early suspense is ruined by the title spoiler.

The story has a lot of opportunities to explore some of its themes on a deeper level, but instead it just skims along the surface of the plot. Lots of issues are raised but never really addressed. Hekat's stark worldview and total self-confidence mean that she never faces a real challenge or even a difficult decision. She always knows just what to do, and she is never thwarted for long.

I think the biggest weakness of the story is its ever present deity. When your main characters are all guided by a god, then there's very little for them to choose or question.

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## **Tea says**

This one of the first books I have never finished, but it is one about which I can see that the reason for

ditching it was probably a matter of preference in storytelling, not because it was a poorly done book.

While Karen Miller is proficient with words and had neat concept and plot, I think the major mistake was writing this book from the point of view of Hekat. Hers is a character that I would have enjoyed and been more fascinated with had she been viewed from the perspective of others, not from her own. While I could sympathize and in some cases empathize with Hekat's position, feelings, and perspective, reading a story from the point of view of someone who has been so psychologically and emotionally abused is exhausting. If there had been one or two other characters with whom Hekat could have shared major portions of the narration, or given over to it completely, I might have been able to endure, but in this case it was too much.

From what little I know of those who have suffered the forms of abuse and neglect which Hekat herself has experienced in early life, I can say that the impact of these things upon her character is quite accurate and realistic (such as attachment disorders).

Again, this is not necessarily a bad book. I am sure there are many who will be fascinated with Hekat's psychology and purpose, and who won't feel compelled to put down the book in the face of her personal sickness. But if you are the sort that, like myself, is easily exhausted by severely distorted characters, this may not be the book for you (or you may want to pace yourself).

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### **Shaitarn . says**

I'm giving *Empress* two stars for the richly imagined setting. Based in a desert world where the kingdoms are slowly becoming infertile, this world has a rigid, very patriarchal, social structure and a heavy handed religion that demands obedience. The sights and sounds of the world are vividly described, even if they're not for the squeamish (lots of animal sacrifice).

Sadly all the good work the author put in with the setting was ruined by the main character, Hekat. Born a nameless 'girl-slut' to a worthless father and a beaten mother, Hekat is sold to slavers for a few coins and groomed by the slave trader to become a concubine of great worth. When this penny finally drops with Hekat, she escapes to forge her own destiny.

Sounds intriguing, but Hekat is unbearable as a main character. Self-centred, arrogant and completely uncaring of everyone around her, I found it impossible to feel any empathy for or interest in her. Apparently this was the author's intention, to create the background for a villain character - well if so then hat's off to you, Ms. Miller, you succeeded - to a point. Hekat isn't a charming or compelling villain, she's just someone I don't want to spend time with. So I won't be reading the other two books in this trilogy - they've already been cleared off my shelves and will be going to the charity shop. Hopefully someone will appreciate them more than I did.

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### **Hannah says**

This is now my favorite book. I strongly urge anyone who hasn't read this to read it, and to read it with this in mind- you're not SUPPOSED to like Hekat. I grew tired of seeing reviews with people rating it only one star because "she's too mean" or "there's just something about her that makes me hate her." Hekat is set up in the first book to show you the background of the villain; to give you a look into how she got the way she did

later on. If this book wasn't here, the next two would make you wonder "why is she like that?" This book is the answer to your question before you even ask it. And you're SUPPOSED to hate her... which means that the author actually did a fantastic job.

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