



The Etched City

K.J. Bishop

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Gwynn and Raule are rebels on the run, with little in common except being on the losing side of a hard-fought war. Gwynn is a gunslinger from the north, a loner, a survivor . . . a killer. Raule is a wandering surgeon, a healer who still believes in just--and lost--causes. Bound by a desire to escape the ghosts of the past, together they flee to the teeming city of Ashamoil, where Raule plies her trade among the desperate and destitute, and Gwynn becomes bodyguard and assassin for the household of a corrupt magnate. There, in the saving and taking of lives, they find themselves immersed in a world where art infects life, dream and waking fuse, and splendid and frightening miracles begin to bloom . . .

The Etched City Details

Date : Published November 23rd 2004 by Spectra (first published 2003)

ISBN : 9780553382914

Author : K.J. Bishop

Format : Paperback 382 pages

Genre : Fantasy, Fiction, Weird Fiction, New Weird, Science Fiction, Steampunk

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From Reader Review The Etched City for online ebook

Ross Lockhart says

I picked up *The Etched City* because it was name-dropped in the jacket copy of Jay Lake's *Trial of Flowers*, along with texts by China Miéville and Jeff VanderMeer. Like Lake, Miéville, and VanderMeer, Bishop's novel is Fantasy, but a branch of Fantasy that owes more to the Surrealist, Magical Realist, and Noir literary movements than to the swords and sorcery of epic fantasists like J.R.R. Tolkien and Robert E. Howard. Although it does occasionally get bogged down, particularly near the novel's middle (as first novels are wont to do), *The Etched City* features captivating storytelling, memorable characters, and outstanding set pieces (including a battle on a statue-covered bridge that manages to affect a tone both epic and personal). Unlike Lake, Miéville, and VanderMeer, however, whose *City Imperishable*, *New Crobuzon*, and *Ambergris* actively become characters within their novels' narratives (in the mode of M. John Harrison's *Viriconium*), Bishop's lush and teeming *Ashamoil*, while evocative and picturesque, never quite rises to the occasion, remaining a setting that is well-imagined, yet never quite real.

Bishop's leading characters, the gunslinging soldier for hire Gwynn and his female counterpart, the outlaw surgeon Raule, are compelling, charismatic, and believable. While the duo technically share protagonist duties, peacock-coat clad Gwynn quickly moves to the narrative's center, becoming a peacock himself, taking the more active, adventurous role as Raule spends most of her time on the sidelines, observing, philosophizing, speculating, and tending to the wounded. Although Gwynn cuts a flamboyant figure with an affectation of glam-rock panache, for a novel that name-drops Aubrey Beardsley and J.K. Huysmans in its jacket copy, *The Etched City* depicts a surprisingly heteronormative world, with a touch of tacked-on exotic orientalism included to make the city seem decadent. Frankly, Lake and Miéville both do decadence better. Still, I would call *The Etched City* an easy recommendation, an enjoyable and thoughtful bit of fantastic escapism with plenty to offer.

Jacob says

April 2009

Gwynn, a mercenary gunslinger, and Raule, a doctor, both of them outlaws from the losing side of a bad war, escape their decaying homeland for the city of *Ashamoil*, where they discover blurred realities and monstrous births in the hospitals, taverns, and private rooms of the city's people.

I almost read *The Etched City* four years ago: saw an advertisement for it in *Realms of Fantasy* magazine, checked it out from the library, and almost read it...until I noticed the blurb on the cover which favorably compared this book to *Perdido Street Station* by China Mieville. I had noticed Mieville's books before but had never read them, so I took this as a sign. Long story short, I got me a copy of PSS, read it, loved it, got hooked on the rest of Mieville's works, and promptly forgot about K. J. Bishop. Oops.

So I got to it four years late. Probably a good thing: *The Etched City* is slightly stranger than PSS, a bit more surreal and decadent, more *fluid*. I'm not sure I would have liked or understood it four years ago: even now I had moments of doubt. The intersection between Beth's art and Gwynn's reality, along with the strange deformed stillbirths Raule delivers among the poor (neither of which are ultimately explained) lend some layers of unsettling strangeness to this largely plotless novel. It's still a fascinating story in a fascinating

world, but The Etched City still manages to play with the reader's expectations and comfort. If this is Bishop's first novel, I can only look forward to what she gives us next.

Oscar says

'La ciudad del grabado' (The Etched City, 2003), de la australiana K.J. Bishop, es una novela de fantasía oscura, aunque es difícil de encasillar, ya que conjuga el *spaghetti western* a lo Sergio Leone, de 'Por un puñado de dólares', por ejemplo, con toques de fantasía *New Weird* a lo China Miéville.

La novela empieza en el País de Cobre, donde la doctora Raule y Gwynn, ex capitán de una compañía de soldados, huyen a través del desierto. Tras el fracaso de la revolución, sus cabezas tienen precio. Pero hay otra protagonista en la historia, la ciudad de Ashamoil, cercana a la desembocadura de un río plagado de cocodrilos. Ashamoil, una ciudad decadente, mezcla de país tropical y africano y colonia victoriana, donde el crimen organizado y la esclavitud están muy vigentes.

El punto fuerte de la historia de Bishop reside en las descripciones. Con un lenguaje barroco, no exento de belleza, Bishop nos muestra los olores, sensaciones, arquitecturas, calles y pasajes, de esta peculiar ciudad. Pero si hay una faceta donde la escritora destaca, es la creación de imágenes impactantes y extrañas, como los viajes oníricos de Gwynn, los grabados de la enigmática Beth, o ciertas historias relatadas durante la trama. Si tuviese que ponerle un pero al libro, sería el afán de la autora por querer transmitir al lector todo el mundo que tiene en su cabeza en pocas líneas. Pero se trata de una primera novela, y es perfectamente perdonable.

Recapitulando, **'La ciudad del grabado'** es una novela original, que sorprenderá y agradará a los paladares más exigentes de la fantasía, y de la literatura.

CAW says

Ah, I'll seem star-happy, but I think this is one of those books everyone should read. It is made of layers on layers of shiny.

Also, a man and a woman who *remain friends* throughout the book without any kind of sexual tension!

Dude.

And a sword called Not My Funeral.

Tamara Romero says

And so I'm done with The Etched City. It took me a while but don't get it wrong, it's an amazing story that worths taking its time. It's a story about fantastic details that build up a strange city. A few spots in the plot didn't convince me though: Raule, the doctor who seems the protagonist in the beginning, does not appear much in the story. Also the story takes about 80 pages to start but, as I said, I don't think the important here is the plot. Gwynn is an excellent character, full of nuances. And yet the best, the little things: snakes crawling around the night clubs, the river, full of crocodiles, the man with the flower on his belly, a tiger appearing

amongst the shadows of the night, mysterious fortunetellers and drinking brandy while watching Tareda's dances. I almost was there too. And a great writer indeed, I hope to read another K.J Bishop book soon...

Zach says

You know, I just read another story of Bishop's in THE WEIRD and it struck me that I am dying for her to release another book and I'm not sure why I gave this one four stars instead of five so I am retroactively bumping it up.

It took M. John Harrison years and a good number of novels and stories to create a secondary fantasy world and then get disgusted with the idea of a secondary fantasy world and subvert and deconstruct the whole thing by reducing the characters to ghosts and surreal phantoms, but K. J. Bishop manages the same thing in the course of a single book. She also manages to attain his level of utterly opaque meaning, at times ("The Lamia and Lord Cromus" retains a special place in my memory for its sheer cursed inaccessibility, and actually now that I think of it the sphinx-Beth character in The Etched City bears some resemblance to the mythical lamia also. Do you see what this book has done to my brain?).

Ok anyway this book is about two comrades from a failed revolution journeying together across a desert to escape the triumphant general's troops.

No it isn't.

It's about the female wanderer, Raule, a doctor, who tries to save what's left of her conscience by taking a post as the lone capable doctor to the denizens of the poorest quarter of Ashamoil. Ashamoil being, of course, a city the two adventurers suddenly find themselves occupying, the characters seeming almost as disconnected as the readers, who have been given no transition from the above chase to these newly sedentary lives.

No it isn't.

It's about the male wanderer, Gwynn, a sharpshooter, who has become a hired goon for one of Ashamoil's crime lords, and his brutal descent into the underbelly of the city.

No it isn't.

It's about Gwynn's affair with the aforementioned Beth, who is human or isn't human or is perhaps both, simultaneously, and is an artist (and is perhaps, in some way, the author? and is also the only character in the novel with a typical real-world name, I believe) and who spends much of her scenes deconstructing Gwynn's thought regarding their place in the world, and then perhaps deconstructing his world entirely? Again, it's all very Harrisonesque. When you get down to it, this book is about stories, and it keeps switching up stories on you. In the end, it is Beth, who seems to create a different story altogether from the one Bishop is telling here, is wracked by thoughts that she doesn't belong in this world, having been brought here against her will as a child, and who then basically removes herself from the book, leaving Gwynn mystified and unsure of what his own story is or what is real or possible anymore. This is the constant slipping throughout the book: it's a desert escape story, then the chapter ends, and then the characters are already at their destination, and

have been for some time. This narrative slipperiness/metatextuality/commentary on the role of stories (in both creation and telling) calls to mind Borges, and Bishop seems to acknowledge this by having one character (a crazy old man, no less) tell Gwynn what appears to be a reworked version of Borges' "The House of Asterion."

Aside from these conversations he has with Beth, Gwynn spends a good deal of time debating theology with The Rev (this title always just making me think of Monty Python for some reason). Within the context, though, this becomes a discursion about Bishop as much as it is about any other God. The Rev, we learn, was once a messiah figure able to perform miracles reminiscent of those attributed to Jesus, but he lost this ability years before. His loss of faith in the narrative mirrors that experienced by Beth and Gwynn, but where the Rev aims for redemption, Beth settles on escapism (quite literally) and Gwynn on nihilism.

I am, honestly, a bit mystified by the number of people on goodreads who seem to treat this book as just another New Weird excursion and complain about the lack of a plot, because if you don't read this as a kind of surrealist meditation on art and creation, then there... isn't much to it. Ha. I also didn't think there was much to Ashamoil or the larger world, but then again, by this reading, I don't think there was supposed to be - the whole thing was rather hazy and dreamlike. It seems that Bishop took notice of Harrison's rantings about world-building and escapism and the "clomping foot of nerdism," but she flips his oneiric approach to fantastical writing on its head.

I think, anyway.

Like I said... they are masters of obscurantism.

Nikki says

I don't remember exactly what I heard about *The Etched City* before I bought it. I may have just bought it on a recommendation, because I don't remember reading about it being New Weird, or in any way akin to China Miéville; I had heard that it was gorgeous, which is true in many ways. It is a weird story, displaced in time - is it the Wild West? Medieval times? Or the nineteenth century? to me, it seemed to slip between them all, inhabiting none of them but taking something from each -- and hovering between some kind of magical realism and total fantasy. There are some amazing images that will stick with me: the lotus growing out of a man's naval, for example. And the way the book starts out, deceptively run-of-the-mill fantasy, and then opens out as the weirdness unfolds, like, well, like flowers growing out of a split cranium. (That quote was my first hint about the weirdness of the story.)

In a way, I found it unsatisfying because I wanted to know more about Gwynn and Raule, more about the world, more about Beth. I would venture another comparison, though: to Catherynne M. Valente. There's a certain beauty about this story -- too robust to be called whimsical -- which makes it worth reading even if you're more of a plot-and-characters person.

It is, incidentally, also one of the books I picked for the WWE Women of Genre Fiction challenge.

Alissa says

This novel is rightfully weird and I was expecting no less since I tried it because it's one of the flagships of the "New Weird" wave of fiction. It's also a terrific blend of learned language, horror, sumptuous descriptions and magical realism, without many of the classic staples of conventional fantasy.

Personally, when I read a story that deliberately defies labels it's not just the boundaries it pushes around, it pushes me as a reader too, and the experience is often charted at opposite sides of the spectrum.

This time the result isn't so clear-cut. I picked this book for a reading challenge and being out of my comfort zone (I'm all for visceral and inference but I also want purpose) it was an uphill race from the onset. I didn't dislike it, but the dreamlike quality of the narrative simply painted a disconnected picture, full of bizarre visuals. It may have worked, because I appreciate both poetic eloquence and intricate tales at large, but with "plot" being the operative word pure aesthetics and abstract adventures are not the thrill I seek or understand.

Cohesion aside, this novel is mainly a bravura piece built around nested stories, a wondrous city and a tight cast of characters.

Occasionally I was engaged, the worldbuilding is impeccable for instance, and the metaphors, the philosophy and the reasoning around art, life and *"the unspoken and nameless longing in the human heart"* are very interesting. The writing is gorgeous, direct and embroidered at the same time, with several classical references. I valued the stylistic beauty of this work and the thought-provoking themes, but the lack of a basic direction, or of at least some story outline, tipped the scales.

Anyhow I'm happy I've read it.

"For a long time, I have believed that it is human nature to invent the strangest explanations for the things that mystify us, and to believe in something beyond all we yet know of, because we cannot abide limits and endings; we are insatiable, and we desire the impossible. I prided myself on having no illusions—but, like any man, I must have desired them."

aPriL does feral sometimes says

If one was to argue this was a pointless exercise in story-telling, there would be plenty of evidence from the book to make such an argument, as it covers familiar ground in such a vague, spiritless journey. There is no clear Who, What, When, Where and Why - at least, not anything truly fleshed out except in vague dream-like descriptions. It seems to take place somewhere on Earth, maybe the Eurasian continent, but the mash-up of science, weapons and technology either puts it outside of our timeline/universe or in some future post-apocalypse period. People generally use swords and horses, and some guns. There are aristocrats, slaves, mediums, priests, artists, gunslingers, mobsters, military men, mathematicians and astronomers, as well as magic, which is off-stage for the most part except for certain crucial turns of fortune. New discoveries mentioned are electric lights and lobotomy surgery. However, everything is ultimately sad and temporary, and struggles for power and survival accomplish nothing to show for all of the effort.

It's beautifully written, nonetheless.

The book's plot could be a script for a Clint Eastwood spaghetti western, in particular, a cloned version of 'For a Few Dollars More' with philosophical and religious arguments made explicit (religion as an explanatory wisdom fails, but appears to provide a medium for magical forces to act). Art is proposed as a creative, motivating force, particularly in the character of Beth Constanzin (sadly, however, even the beauty and strength of Art goes sour and turns monstrous over time). Healing is a small dubious victory. Entropy is the true winner and by the book's end proved the only permanent known force whatever men do. All that Man desires blows away, and Ideas, despite being reinvented, vigorously argued and explored, are proved inconsequential in the face of unexplained powers made eminent and mysteriously immanent in the universe.

It opens in a desert, with two survivors of a war - a healer, Raule and a gunslinger, Gwynn, escaping retribution by the winners of the war. Much later, years have past, and the two are now living in a river town called Ashamoil on the cusp of falling apart. A variety of characters are introduced, violence leads to the just and unjust destruction of lives, love and hope, and an ending mirroring the beginning.

The writing is wonderfully moody and atmospheric, covering many metafictional ideas, and inventive of new imagery. While the book has violence and movement, the characters are listless and hopeless. The growing incidents of baby monsters seems to be ill for the future

At least someone wins in the spaghetti westerns.

Kim says

A blurb on the cover informs me that this book is "fantasy as high literature." Or "high fantasy as literature," I can't remember which. I think the book has to be judged separately as fantasy and a literary novel. As a fantasy, it's a failure. The world-building was vague, perfunctory, and confusing. There was no plot. As a pretentious literary novel, in which unpleasant people collide with each other and talk about the nature of reality, I guess it's a success. I happen to really dislike that type of "literature."

The "plot" of this book was two ex-freedom fighters leave a desert nation to go to a big city, where they do jobs and meet people. Weird shit happens, then some weirder shit, then they leave the city. I finished reading the last page and went "What the fuck was the point of that?" I think there might have been an attempt as some sort of message about the fluidity of reality and the inability of humans to understand each other or something...I don't really care. I wasn't given any reason to care about any of it. Not to mention that I spent a large part of the book in frustration, trying to figure out the nature of this fantasy world. It's vaguely medieval? Except they have guns. Ok, it's roughly 19th century based on tech and fashion and carriages and whatnot. Except then there's a cigarette lighter (even though the author pointedly avoids calling cigarettes "cigarettes" throughout the book, but then calls it a "cigarette lighter") and then an alarm clock. Really? This shit is DISTRACTING.

So, umm, yeah, not a big fan.

Fuchsia Groan says

Esta novela y yo sufrimos un flechazo, esa portada, ese argumento, la comparación con China Miéville (a pesar de que odio estas cosas). Recuerdo esos momentos antes de empezar a leerla, esa seguridad absoluta de

que quedaría enamorada definitivamente.

K. J. Bishop escribe de maravilla, hay aquí pasajes bellísimos, descripciones maravillosas, cuentos alucinantes (la historia del minotauro, la del hombre de loto, la siniestra colección de Raule, la historia de Marriott...). Los personajes son atractivos, y la ambientación es impresionante, Ashamoil bien merece una visita. Pero no hay historia, no veo el hilo conductor, siendo más bien una sucesión de descripciones, historias o conversaciones.

Dan Schwent says

Etched City is the story of gunslinger Gwynn and doctor Raule. Together, they flee the wasteland of the Copper Country and make their way to the city of Ashamoil. Raule starts treating the poor of Ashamoil, occasionally delivering crocodilian babies, while Gwynn gets a job as a guard for a slave trader and has a heated affair with an artist.

The Etched City is definitely atmosphere over action but when the action comes, it's hard and fast. Bishop knows how to build tension as well as create a realized fantasy city. While Ashamoil isn't as detailed as New Crobuzon or Ambergris, it's still great. The style is a mannerly kind of new weird.

Amazon recommended this one, based on my ratings for The Dark Tower series and Perdido Street Station. It did not disappoint. My only complaint was that it could have been much longer.

Observations from the July 2012 re-read:

1. Bishop makes the desert of the Copper Country interesting, giving it aspects of Australian and Middle Eastern desert culture while still making it feel like a Western.
2. Gwynn has a lot more dimension than I remember. He's a deadly mercenary of dubious morality but also kind of a dandy. I'd forgotten he played the piano.
3. Raule is tough!
4. Bishop's writing has a kind of poetry to it in places. Her use of similes and metaphors was something I'd totally forgotten about since my initial read.
5. Yeah, Beth's a little batshit
6. Deformed reptilian babies are creepy
7. Gwynn doing some huffing and then riding around looking for Beth while having a conversation with his horse reminds me of the shroom scene from Young Guns.
8. The gunfight on Memorial Bridge between the Society of the Horn Fan and the tax collectors is right up there with the OK Corral scene in Tombstone.
9. Gwynn having to kill Marriott was a powerful scene.
10. The man with a lotus flower growing out of his navel
11. Hart and his magical axe are pretty impressive.
12. While it looks simply like an odd fantasy story, it's really a story of love and obsession.
13. The twists at the end were well done and not expected.

In conclusion, this book is just as good the second time. I'm ready for K.J. Bishop to write another novel.

Ghostsoup1313 says

There is no doubt that the author of *The Etched City* has created an interesting world. Or that the author is an excellent descriptive writer. But this book lacks any coherent story. The main characters are, for the most part, passive and don't seem to have any specific goals. There is no antagonist, no conflict and no action and reaction on the part of the characters. They simply exist. And have long pointless conversations.

This book reads more like a travel guide with description of the settings and plenty of history and backstory. But no action in the present tense.

Look, I understand that there are readers who enjoy books that are mostly descriptive writing and have very little or no plot. I'm not one of them. I like a good story - a la Charles Dickens or Thomas Harris. It really feels like the author has taken one too many "creative writing courses" and none of the teachers ever explained what a scene with conflict is or how to create character driven plots or what makes a great antagonist, etc.

If you enjoy descriptive writing without a story line this book is for you.

If you enjoy character driven plots and story lines this book is not for you.

NOTE: This book was recommended to me as a Steampunk novel. I would never categorize this as Steampunk.

Daniel Roy says

Books are quite often like a meal. Some books I read I labor through like a meal of broccoli and liver, hoping there's something good for desert. Other books I gulp down avidly, like a starved man given tiramisu. But *The Etched City* is in a rarer and better breed still: it's the kind of novel you read like a fine wine.

After a few pages of reading K.J. Bishop's first novel, I was already lamenting the fact that each page I read was bringing me closer to the last one. I read the book in small doses, drinking the words from the page, savoring the prose and the images, making sure not to ruin it by going too fast. Yes, it's that darn good.

The Etched City is Ashamoil, an imaginary city poised at the edge of a vast desert called the Copper Country. Like China Miéville's New Crobuzon, Bishop's Ashamoil is a character of its own, and arguably the main character of the story. However, further comparison between Ashamoil and New Crobuzon are unwarranted. Ashamoil is dreamy, subtly undefined, like an opium vision; etched, as the title wonderfully suggests. It seems to exist in one of Neil Gaiman's 'soft spaces', these areas where realities melt down and coalesce, from *The Sandman*.

Enter two drastically different protagonists from the Copper Country: Gwynn, a gunslinger who quickly becomes attracted to the city's less savory elements, and Raule, a battlefield doctor who tries to maintain her morality despite the city's incredible erosion of her principles. The two of them came to the city together, trying to rebuild their lives after a failed revolution has branded them as traitors in the Copper Country.

From that point, any semblance of plot takes a backseat to the dreamy quality of the city's life. Bishop takes good care to tone down the fantastic elements of her city, and actually maintains a strong sense of skepticism, or realism, throughout her story. This is one of the book's most astonishing elements, as fantasy worlds tend to put the reader in a context where they accept strangeness *ipso facto*. Here, it feels like weirdness and true fantasy are just around the corner, but never fully visible. This incredible restraint is one of the major reasons why I dislike likening *The Etched City* to *Perdido Street Station*; whereas Miéville packs his landscape to the gills with breathless wonders and fantastic elements, Bishop exercises restraint to such a level that the bits of fantasy that make it through are all the more potent.

The core of the book is such an exercise: many times, it seems like something incredible is about to happen, and the fantastic elements are absolutely tantalizing. But rather than plunge in them, Bishop pulls them back from the stage, teasing the reader, then bringing forward the next mind-boggling morsel. Some of these morsels, such as the birth of the crocodile god's infant, or the story of the men desiring the red hair, left me breathless, and actually forced me to put the book down and savor the current chapter before I could pick it up again. To say this book haunted me is an understatement; it haunts me still.

If it sounds like I absolutely adore this book, well, it's because I do. It's not for everyone, though. As a matter of fact, it shares more with so-called 'high literature' than it does with traditional fantasy, especially in terms of plot construction and pacing. Some readers, used to more action-focused plots, might grow frustrated with the fact the story floats forward, instead of racing ahead to the ending. Yes, there is a plot hidden in there, but to tell you the truth, when it comes around, I found myself wishing it didn't and simply left the protagonists continue living their daily lives in relative peace for thousands more pages.

If these warnings don't deter you, then by all means do yourself the favor of picking up this one. Its depth, restraint and imagination make it one of the modern masterpieces of a crowded genre, and demonstrate once more than fantasy can be for grown-ups, too.

Dfordoom says

Australian author K. J. Bishop's first novel, *The Etched City*, reminds me somewhat of M. John Harrison's Viriconium stories. There's the same sense of a world that has decayed, and there's the same lack of moral certainty or moral absolutes. It also has some of the melancholy of Harrison's work. It tells the story of two former revolutionaries, one a gunfighter and one a doctor. They are drawn to the city of Ashamoil. Raule gets a job in a charity hospital, and she observes what seems to be an epidemic of monstrous births – children with the heads of crocodiles, and such things. Gwynn, the gunfighter, becomes a bodyguard, to a fairly unsavoury character. He is drawn into debates on theological and philosophical questions with a drunken priest. He also becomes involved with an artist. And perhaps her art is as real, or even more real, than Gwynn's reality? The real is something that is not absolute in this book, it's changeable and it's debatable. Bishop has, probably inevitably and I think reasonably accurately, been seen as part of the New Weird. *The Etched City* certainly has more in common with the work of writers like Kelly Link, Jeff VanderMeer, Jeffrey Ford and China Miéville than with mainstream commercial fantasy. It's a brilliant first novel, and I recommend it very highly indeed.
