

Benajah's Keeper

Aeryn Dougan

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Aeryn Dougan's luscious debut romance novel, *Benajah's Keeper*, introduces Evanna Amaranthine, a cool, calculating vampire who protects humanity by killing and sucking the blood of heinous criminals. She carries out instructions given to her by Keeper, the head of the vampire fortress in which she lives—a place known as Benajah.

What begins as a seemingly typical mission to assassinate a threat to Benajah turns upside down when Evanna finds herself questioning Keeper's truthfulness. She also begins having dreams of a past life and experiencing vulnerabilities she once disdained as the province of her ostensibly weak-willed, human-loving vampire friend, Zak, and those pesky humans themselves. Worse still, she finds herself falling in love with a human.

Although billed as a romance, this nuanced novel, in fact, straddles genres. In a masterstroke, the book begins with a Bible-like prologue about how vampires were created with the blessing of God. By connecting vampires to the Creation story, the author gives the beings a mythic, sacred quality not generally found in works about vampires.

As the bloodsuckers struggle to balance their human and vampiric qualities, as well as their relationship to their prey, the plot plants itself firmly within the personal realm of finding oneself. The inner conflict Evanna experiences is combined with outside threats from menacing vampires, evoking the timelessness of a battle-laden epic while exploring age-old themes of love, war, and identity.

The human and vampire characters are well drawn, although Evanna's aloofness initially makes her irritating. Her transformation from emotionally unavailable to deeply feeling occurs with layered realism. Even though the protagonist's love interest has the annoyingly symbolic name of Messiah, he nevertheless manages to transcend traditional Christ-like attributes and become a believable character. Readers will also find themselves invested in the doings of the secondary characters because they are similarly multilayered, even the villains.

Dougan enriches vampire lore by creating a fascinating code by which these beings live and a society of guilds that they inhabit. Anyone tired of standard-issue vampire fare will welcome the complexity the author brings to her bloodsuckers. For those who enjoy tales of reincarnation, the past-life vignettes integrate themselves seamlessly into the present-day plot. Both teen and adult audiences will find themselves drawn to *Benajah's Keeper*.

JILL ALLEN (December 19, 2012)

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