



## The Company of Women

**Forrest Johnson**

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*The Company of Women is a promising high fantasy novel with a riveting main character.*

*The Company of Women*, the third book in Forrest Johnson's *A Foreign Shore* fantasy series, dives into the adventures of warrior woman Raeesha as she organizes an all-women military cadre.

Although she is only a teenager, Raeesha is a force to be reckoned with. Her military knowledge, developed over a series of skirmishes, duels, and battles, is needed to defend her country from a horde of savage nomads, and she has her work cut out for her.

Raeesha's army is made up of 700 women. They come from diverse backgrounds across the kingdom, each with their own unique cultures, histories, and loyalties. Despite past betrayals and conflicts, Raeesha brings them together under a single banner.

Raeesha trains and leads her army against invaders, but their battlefield successes put her in conflict with forces beyond the borders until she's embroiled in a larger struggle. What was supposed to be a temporary role—training women as field scouts—becomes a strategic leadership position.

With fantastic illustrations by Liz Clarke, the novel is a fully imagined high fantasy. Technology—catapults, armor, and palisades—mixes with magical creatures, including seven-foot-tall snake demons, giant mantises, and beaked monsters. Although the creatures that populate Raeesha's world are fantastic, other details are pat and familiar. The food described, for example, includes bread, coconuts, lamb, and rice; characters correspond on parchment; and weapons and medical tools are straight out of medieval history. The book also includes steampunk elements, from airships to magic-infused technology. The result is a hodgepodge of imagined and real details that is jarring at times.

The novel starts *in medias res* and works backward to describe Raeesha's homeland. Each of the five senses is taken into account: when Raeesha walks into a cellar, she detects "a lingering odor of sour wine dregs, mixed with that of sulfur, incense, and smells she couldn't identify."

However, the novel stumbles over itself, packing in details that advance the plot without doing necessary worldbuilding. Raeesha encounters and describes the different species and tribes that inhabit her world, but the book skips through more central plot points, including political decisions, kidnappings, and interpersonal drama that better enrich the story.

The traumatic histories between the kingdom's tribes are alluded to and contribute to the alliances and betrayals that drive the tale, but they are not explicitly stated, and characters' motivations are also murky. More than once, a character makes a significant decision, only to wonder later, "What was I thinking?" Without knowing their backstories, it is hard to say, and some of the work seems superficial as a result.

*The Company of Women* is a promising high fantasy novel with a main character who helps to redeem its flimsier

elements.

CLAIRE FOSTER (August 2, 2019)

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