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## The Witness for the Dead, by Katherine Addison. Reviewed by Megan B. Abrahamson.

Megan B. Abrahamson

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## REVIEWS

Katherine Addison. *The Witness for the Dead*. TOR, 2021. 256 pp. \$16.99. Reviewed by Megan B. Abrahamson.

Set in the world of *The Goblin Emperor* (which I reviewed in *Mythprint* #374), Katherine Addison's new novel follows the story of elven cleric Celehar, a minor but intriguing character appearing briefly in *The Goblin Emperor*. The title of the book, *The Witness for the Dead*, describes Celehar's supernatural duties as a prelate of the deity Ulis: he can speak with the dead, and "witness" for them, or represent them, in legal and religious matters. Now, maybe I'm just too dedicated to the cleric class in *Dungeons & Dragons*, but deity-granted vaguely necromantic superpowers are metal as heck, so I was sold from the initial concept.

The steampunk world has a chance to shine now that we follow Celehar through daily city life in a fantasy world revolutionized by steam power (more so than when our protagonist was an emperor). Celehar lives in an apartment block, he feeds stray cats, he reads trashy novels and takes his meals at tea houses, when he takes them at all. Living in the middle of a large city, he walks everywhere, and has to deal with the expense of a train ride, carriage, or horse rental if he needs to get somewhere further afield (or is just tired of walking).

This novel does not focus on a single driving plot, but covers the day to day life of Celehar. This means solving several mysteries and entanglements related to his office, the chief of which is solving two separate murder mysteries. Celehar becomes embroiled in a witnessing for the dead that grows political, when in witnessing for a dead nobleman reveals a fraudulent will: like the rich and powerful tend to do, the accused calls Celehar's piety and office into question through powerful friends. This gets Celehar sent on several dangerous missions that require him to confront ghosts and ghouls as a trial of his faith before the witnessing can be verified and the accused arrested. When an airship explodes and kills hundreds, Celehar is called in to witness for the dead, in case sabo-



tage was the reason for the explosion, as was the case in *The Goblin Emperor*. Intrigue abounds in the murder mysteries: one surrounding an opera house singer who was drowned in the river, and the other a case of stopping a serial murderer who marries and kills young women for their money.

This book is much easier to pick up and enjoy than *The Goblin Emperor*, with a reduced cast of characters, and slightly less political and courtly intrigue. I mentioned in my previous review that reading stories set in this world feels a bit like being thrown into *The Silmarillion*, where characters may have multiple names but also fantasy forms of address replacing more familiar titles.

The appeal of this book was adding to the already intriguing worldbuilding in this universe. For me in particular, I love a good undead-fighting heroic cleric as much as the next person, but what makes this cosmology compelling is how *sad* the ghosts and ghouls are, and that Celehar “fights” them by essentially reminding them who they used to be. Celehar, too, is sad, traumatized by his past and by existing as a queer man in a homophobic world—but instead of being irritatingly brooding, he always makes room for kindness in his daily life, nurturing others while reserving no softness for himself. Generally reserved, Celehar manages to make friends with the flamboyant opera house owner, a relationship which swings flirtatious and I would like to see develop into something more. Celehar has other friends, too, mostly extroverts who show their friendship by bullying him into taking care of himself.

The goblin-elf racism is less pronounced among working class characters here than among the nobility in *The Goblin Emperor* (though it’s possible our elven protagonist simply doesn’t notice these issues as much as our biracial emperor did). Issues of class and classism, and in some cases thinly veiled homophobia, are necessarily a bigger problem for Celehar. After addressing these other “-isms,” I would personally love to see Addison deal with gender more in a future novel in this universe, perhaps featuring a female protagonist. All in all, I was excited to read a new story set in the world of *The Goblin Emperor*, and *The Witness for the Dead* did not disappoint, featur-

ing exciting new magic and cosmology, a new perspective on the world, and an admirable new protagonist to fall in love with. Though I mention *The Goblin Emperor* a lot in this review, this isn’t the MCU: it’s definitely not required reading before jumping into *The Witness for the Dead*.

