



# Vessel

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Liyana has trained her entire life to be the vessel of a goddess. She will dance and summon her tribe's deity, who will inhabit Liyana's body and use magic to bring rain to the desert. But when the dance ends, Liyana is still there. Her tribe is furious — and sure that it is Liyana's fault. Abandoned by her tribe, Liyana expects to die in the desert. Until a boy walks out of the dust in search of her.

Korbyn is a god inside his vessel, and a trickster god at that. He tells Liyana that five other gods are missing, and they set off across the desert in search of the other vessels. The desert tribes cannot survive without the magic of their gods. But the journey is dangerous, even with a god's help. And not everyone is willing to believe the trickster god's tale.

The closer she grows to Korbyn, the less Liyana wants to disappear to make way for her goddess. But she has no choice — she must die for her tribe to live. Unless a trickster god can help her to trick fate — or a human girl can muster some magic of her own.

## **Vessel Details**

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Author : Sarah Beth Durst

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## From Reader Review Vessel for online ebook

### **Felicia says**

I am kind of a sucker for lore, and folklore, so i really liked this book for the believable world that was built. I think it could have used a bit more pacing, but overall, I really thought it was original, no vampires, yay!

This is set in a fantasy world with a nomadic people who sacrifice a child to be a "vessel" for the gods to come back to the earth (the gods take over their bodies), but Liyana, when they try to sacrifice her, doesn't disappear and become a goddess. This is a huge shame on her family, but part of a bigger story that's happening with the gods and the Clans around. Liyana is meant to die for her shame, but she survives due to help and unveils the greater plot against her people (which, of course she helps fight!)

I loved the storytelling here, it reminded me a lot of a YA Hundred Thousand Kingdoms by NK Jemisin. Amazingly detailed and very folklore-ish. If you think about the plot TOO HARD it...isn't good, haha, and the first 1/3 is definitely the strongest, but still, I really enjoyed it and recommend it for a change of pace from your average fantasy world.

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### **Tamora Pierce says**

Wow! Where Durst has always placed her books at least partly in our world, this is an otherworld fantasy, where there are flying serpents made of unbreakable glass, wolves made of sand, and subsurface giant worms that live in salt! Here the gods are vanishing and humans are in the midst of a great drought and famine, blaming the vessels who are supposed to house the gods when the gods don't come. But the god Raven, a wonderfully strong-hearted girl vessel, a troubled young emperor, and a handful of other vessels are determined not to let their world die!

(Oh, sorry--the book doesn't come out till September 2012. Sometimes it's great to be me!)

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### **Katy says**

3.5 stars - I have mixed feelings about this book. On one hand, I really liked the story because it was unique and thought provoking. On the other hand, I felt the story progression kind of dragged, and I really didn't connect with any of the characters - with the exception of Raan - until the last part of the book.

I was really impressed with the world Durst has created. The concept of training your whole life to be worthy as a vessel and sacrificing your life for the gods is beyond intriguing. And each clan had its own characteristic symbolic for their namesake animal, for them to all come together and set aside their differences for a common cause was truly admirable. On top of that, I liked that Durst didn't try to go TOO far-fetched. "Magic isn't about miracles. All we do is speed up or slow down what happens naturally."

And I liked how Durst threw in little fables and anecdotes to explain why things are - the story of the sun and the moon compromising and creating an island for the turtle people, the raven's trickery, even the

horrible spider story. I admit, **I didn't get them at first and thought a lot of the stories were irrelevant**, especially when Korbyn and Liyana were sharing to fill the silence on their journey. But it was nice to see how the **pieces all fell into place and how the stories truly were symbolic**, as such with the story about the raven compromising with the moon.

HOWEVER, the **pacing was kind of slow**, and I struggled a bit instead of being sucked into the story. In fantasy stories, I'm usually intrigued by the adventures they have on their journey, and for some reason, in this book, the story just kind of dragged as we move from clan to clan and then to beyond (I didn't want to spoil the story). The story **didn't really blow me away until the last 10 percent or so with the big twist**.

And there were **SO many inconsistencies in the book**. For example, the beginning felt a bit weird because the Goat Clan had been at this settlement for a certain amount of time, and I didn't get the feeling that the people were in any danger (other than the drought) or that they were constantly being attacked by nature. But left alone, Liyana was immediately attacked by a cobra, the sand wolf (which was totally weird) and other harsh conditions. You would think that Bayla was trying to punish her, but no. Or, where was everyone else during the sandstorm in Chapter 17? And there were some sentences that just threw me off like "Pia's voice sounded as thought he slaughtered a kitten for dinner." This is coming from a girl whose singsong voice is sweet and beautiful.

And the **romance was really weird in this book**. For those who HAVE to have romance in their books, yes there is romance. However, ummm, how do I explain this without spoiling it? (view spoiler) I'm not sure how to explain it. I guess you just have to read the book. But **the romance doesn't drive the book**, which I guess it is a good thing because there's more substance to the plot than just the romance, but at the same time, I found myself **kind of annoyed whenever there WAS romance**.

Like I said, **I didn't START connecting with the characters until probably the last third of the book**. I didn't really think they grew as the story developed - again with the exception of Raan - until near the very end, and by then, it was more than expected. Liyana possessed a lot of strength and was brave to just march up to people and demand their attention. But for some reason, I felt **Liyana lacked "character" and was kind of flat, and she didn't make much of an impression on me** to where I will probably easily forget her. And **Korbyn was an oddball**. I usually like people with weird personalities to set them apart, but there was just something about him that was awkward and didn't sit well with me.

I thought **the book's strongest character was Raan**, and I'm disappointed that she was the "youngest" character, being the last to be introduced in the book. I felt she was far more interesting and had far more layers and developed so much more as a character than anyone else - with her resistance to become the vessel, her temper tantrum and attempted escapes, what the Falcon Clan did to her and her struggles with Maara.

And the end was expected and predictable, but that doesn't make it less good.

Overall, I thought the story was pretty great. But the pacing, the lack of memorable characters and too many inconsistencies kept me from giving this book a higher rating.

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### **Mitch says**

Creatively, *Vessel* hits all the right notes. Combining an intriguing premise - a girl's raised to be a vessel for

her goddess but is instead abandoned by her deity and her tribe - with a vividly stark desert landscape and plenty of moral questions, Sarah Beth Durst has certainly written one of the most highly original books I've ever read. Yet at the same time, the somewhat lacking characters and shallow plot really torpedoed what could've been a great book for me.

My problem with the characters can pretty much be summed up in three words, engaging, empathy, and development. Liyana has a great story, almost her whole life, she's been raised as a vessel, not expected to do anything except give her life so her goddess can take her body and use it to provide for her tribe, but she never engaged me. She's described as a practical character with a wry sense of humor, but those moments are few and far between. In the meantime, she shows her practical side with some pretty mean feats of desert survival after she's left to her own devices, but, as a practical person, she just does exactly what's necessary to live. Sure, she fights against the forces of the desert, snakes and sand wolves, heat and thirst, but I never got a sense of the desperate struggle for survival that would've drawn me to her story because she's so darn practical she has everything calmly taken care of almost as soon as the danger passes.

Her personal story too, it could've been deep and meaningful, but it never goes anywhere. How can anyone live knowing that her entire purpose in life is to die, that her entire tribe depends on her to die, just so her goddess can live? That should've been the central question in *Vessel*, but instead Liyana's quest to find her goddess sucks so much air out of the story that her own personal feelings about her role remains one of resigned acceptance. Maybe it's her practical character again, but I couldn't empathize with her, never got a sense that even a small part of her wanted to live. The entire book turns on the morality of gods taking vessels, and yet the driving character, rather than weighing her life and her tribe's survival, is just ok with the whole thing? And, as the story progresses, as Liyana's confronted with differing points of view, as situations put her in the position to judge the gods themselves, she never has second thoughts? That lack of development was just hugely disappointing for me.

Actually, a lot of other things are glossed over too. The first half of the book is just Liyana and Korbyn going from tribe to tribe recruiting vessels to rescue their gods, but, like Liyana, none of the other vessels feel like fully a formed character. Sure, Fennik's tough and dedicated to his god; Pia's blind, an excellent singer, and even more dedicated to her goddess; while Raan's the rebel with the drinking problem who doesn't want to be a vessel, wants to live, but not only does the story feel really repetitive, going from one tribe to the next, Korbyn giving the same our gods have been kidnapped and we need your vessel to join us speech to the mistrusting chief of each tribe every time, Fennik, Pia, and Raan never gave me the impression there was any more to their characters than their dedication (or sacrilege, in Raan's case) to their gods. Rather, they're all a single motivation each and free of second thoughts. Only Korbyn really kept me reading, not only because I'm a huge fan of mischievous but generally well meaning trickster gods, but because of his complicated relationship with Liyana and her goddess Bayla, because he made the backstory of the gods and the world generally interesting with the myths and stories, and because he's the only character, god or mortal, to really address the morality of taking vessels, balancing the good of the vessel with the good of the tribe.

I thought the story would improve once the vessels gather and head off to save the gods, but for me, *Vessel*'s second half is even more underwhelming than its first. Durst writes some pretty amazing scenes of the desert, that's something she gets right, but the villain of the story, the Crescent Empire, just failed to impress me. Rather than being the rich, magnificent, or even militarily powerful realm like all the characters swear it is, it came across to me as some vague, amorphous political unit. Leaving the desert was like a night and day moment because the setting immediately went from interesting to a blank canvas. And the leader of this Empire, the Emperor, while I understood his motivations completely, his reasons for doing what he did, like many things about *Vessel*, was just shallow and leads into one of the most convenient relationships I've ever read. The entire time, I didn't feel like the conflict with the Empire had the same tight focus or level of detail

as the journey through the desert.

Despite its unique premise, *Vessel* is a decidedly average fantasy for me. Nothing about the characters made me particularly invested in their stories, and what enthusiasm I had for the fairly imaginative desert scenes dropped off as the book leaves that interesting world behind.

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### **Jessica says**

How does she do it?! None of Sarah Beth Durst's books are remotely similar in topic or style, yet they are all superb! She's done middle grade fractured fairy tales, contemporary vampire romance, and now this gorgeous fantasy set in a desert world where the gods walk among the tribes. Beautifully descriptive, with an interesting theme of the morality of sacrifice (both being sacrificed and accepting sacrifice).

I even liked the stories within the story! This is my pet peeve: when authors have someone tell a story, and the story is stupid, or doesn't work, or the moral of the story doesn't make sense. There's actually a YA author I cannot stand to read because storytelling figures prominently in their books, and the stories are jarringly stupid. But that is not the case here! Sarah Beth's stories were great, and truly enhanced the narrative. You can tell that she both knows trickster tales and traditional folk tales, and has her own innate sense of writing style.

Just a jewel of a novel!

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### **Shambhawi P. says**

*Vessel* is a book that seems so predictable at first that you seem to have all the cards about the story laid down.

You know who the bad guy is.

You know how the romance will phase out.

You can guess what the big mystery is.

You can predict how the characters are going to act throughout the book.

Aaand, you will probably be correct about that. Until the shit hits the fan, that is.

*Vessel* has everything one would want out of a fantasy YA book - a tough female protagonist, a sarcastic cocky hero, a well developed world, side characters whose personalities do not resemble a lamp and a journey across the vast unknown lands in a quest that seems impossible. And it does this quite beautifully.

So what sets this book apart from the rest of its brethren?

The Writing. Sarah Beth Durst is a miracle worker with words. Her description of things, be it Liyana's dance to summon the goddess, or the details in the simple things in the world around them - it was done wonderfully and smoothly. The dialogues were witty and engaging, the characters themselves well defined and interesting.

But the best part of the writing were the plottwists and how the fact that we had just been thrown a shocker of an info would not be clear to us until in hindsight. It all had been woven so beautifully to the narration that it did not seem sudden or surprising at all ~~until you would find yourself in the middle of the night turning toward the ceiling and chanting 'Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.'~~ like its some sort of a prayer to reclaim your sanity.

Liyana was one of the best female protagonists I have ever read about. She was beautiful and fierce and had a decidedly practical streak that made her a survivor at its best and a ruthless opportunist at its worst. And I loved her for it. Her feelings for Korbyn, her loyalty to her goddess Bayla, her dedication to the mission and her strength to accomplish it was apparent in every word of the book. It shaped her character and her decisions. She was not afraid to take chances and could handle anything that was thrown at her. She was bloody amazing.

And Korbyn, the trickster god. The lying raven. The god nobody trusts, save Liyana. Who is leading the vessels on the way to find their lost gods and yet is more lost than all of them. He hides behind his facade, his sarcasm and his snark but is afraid of failing all the same. His love for Bayla and later his feelings for Liyana show us another more honest side of him that we do not see very often, and is more precious because of that.

The secondary characters, Pia, Fennik, Raan as well as the gods had their own space and were wonderful. The Emperor especially was another character I loved - though not as much as Korbyn - his motives and his dedication to his Empire seen in his every step.

The plot was mindblowing. I actually dislike books that are too predictable, which Vessel is not. Yup, ya heard me. To a point it follows the stereotype and then at some point in the it breaks off from the expectedness. And boy does it ever break off..

I.  
Totally.  
Loved.  
This.  
Book.

Totally unexpected. Totally amazing. Perfect. I can find no flaws - yet.

## 5 Stars

Probably the best book I've read in 2013 so far. And trust me, I've read many.

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### Nafiza says

I was surprised that this novel wasn't more aggressively marketed because it has all the elements necessary for a blockbuster in the book world. I have been waiting for this novel for ages and it did not disappoint. Liyana is an extremely likable protagonist and following her journey is exhilarating and thrilling at times. The mythical world created by Durst is also fascinating with its different ecosystems, tribes, arts and religion. The desert is almost a character in its own right and I believe Durst is able to accurately portray the harsh conditions in which people survive in the desert.

The supporting characters are also well hewed with their own personalities and idiosyncrasies. All the vessels are unique but perhaps I most felt for the vessel-whose-name-I-can't-remember and her struggle to live even when her soul is in danger of being consumed by the "God" living in her. The mythology is also very well constructed with things being logical and fantastical (see, it's possible!). What I found really fascinating was the concept of ritual soul death that led to the emptying of the body (thus vessel) into which the God will pour themselves. Korbyn, the trickster God, is the only one of the Gods who manages to correctly fill his vessel but I don't think the reader is able to forget at any time that the soul and body are different. Korbyn is intriguing – as Gods are wont to be – and though he is much easier to understand than N. K. Jemisin's Gods, he is still fey and fickle.

His fascination with Liyana and her reciprocating his feelings has the air of a forbidden romance especially when you consider that Liyana is the vessel for Korbyn's true love. Then you throw in a young Emperor trying to do his best in the circumstances for the people he rules, a nefarious wizard, magic and burgeoning feelings where there should be none. Yes, it is a rollercoaster journey. I loved the ending. I thought it was sufficiently postmodern and tuned in to contemporary expectations instead of traditional. The only thing that detracted from the novel for me was that a very important character, the prince, could have been developed much more than he was. His interactions with several key characters needed more building and depth. That is just a personal thought and other readers may be quite satisfied by the way that relationship is built. All in all, I heartily recommend this fantasy. It's very entertaining in all the good ways.

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## **TheBookSmugglers says**

Originally reviewed on The Book Smugglers

### **REVIEW**

#### **Ana's Take:**

Thousands of years ago, the people of the turtle made the desert their home and divided into several clans. It was a difficult way of life and many people died in the harsh desert. Those souls of the first dead wandered around our world until they found the Dreaming, where they remained.

But the souls could not rest in peace in the Dreaming when they could see how their people suffered in the desert. And so it has come to pass that the souls of the dead ancestors, using the magic of the Dreaming, created the Gods – one for each clan. And now, every hundred years they send the Gods' souls to walk around their people so they can help them survive.

But the souls of the Gods cannot inhabit just anybody – they must enter the bodies of a Vessel, a person who has connections to the Dreaming and to magic. Liyana is the current Vessel of her clan and has prepared her whole life to be the vessel of her Goddess. She loves her life and her family but she is prepared to sacrifice herself and to die so that her clan can live, especially now with the Great Draught. The day arrives for her Goddess to come and Liyana says goodbye to her family and to her clan, then dances the night away calling for the Goddess.

But her Goddess never comes. And although she has done every single thing right, although she has danced with a pure heart, her clan deems her unworthy and leave her behind. She is devastated and expects to die alone in the desert.

Until a God walks into her life – he is Korbyn, the trickster God, inhabiting his own vessel. He brings news that some of the Gods (including Lilyana’s) have been kidnapped. They say need to find their vessels and then go in search of the missing Gods and Goddesses.

In the meantime, the Emperor of the people-not-of-the-desert is also finding a way for his own people to survive the Great Draught – and will stop at nothing to make it happen.

*Vessel* is an absolutely brilliant book and I found very little to criticise. It reads a lot like an old-fashioned adventure Fantasy and it features a very thought-provoking premise. Everything works here – the lovely writing, the well developed world-building, the vivid desert setting and the characters. Lilyana, is an absolutely fabulous character: ever so practical, determined to do her best for her family (especially her little brother) even as she is trapped between wanting to live and knowing she must sacrifice herself.

In that sense, the most striking aspect of *Vessel* is how thought-provoking it turned out to be. This is a story full of questioning and the author incorporated this questioning really well into the narrative – in the way that the story is told, with the way the characters interact with each other and with their world.

The premise – the thing that these Vessels MUST believe, as they have been told all their lives is that 1) the desert clans cannot survive without the magic of their Gods and 2) the Vessel must die so that the clans can carry on living. But are those things even true? I thought fascinating how, as the story progresses and as Lilyana and the other Vessels interacted, different facets of these “truths” were disclosed. From different ways of thinking and different ways of living to how each clan is different and how they treat their Vessels differently.

The Vessels themselves are portrayed with variety: there are those who don’t question anything, those who are completely dedicated to their Gods, those who do not want to die or even care about their Gods. And of course, there are the Gods themselves – to some they are benevolent creatures, to others they are but leeches. Although the better developed God-character is Korbyn (and who doesn’t love a trickster God), the other Gods and Goddess all embody different aspects and act accordingly – some love the people they come to save, some only care about enjoying a body once again. Do the Gods even need the bodies of the Vessel to work their magic? Is there even logic to all of that?

In addition, there are great discussions about tradition, faith, destiny and survival. The presence of the Emperor – a young, charismatic leader – brings a bit of politics to the proceedings: should all the peoples unite against a common enemy? Or should they fight for their independence no matter what? There is no easy solution to this question and as such none is presented here.

There is also an incredible amount of importance given to stories and storytelling within this world. Often Lilyana will tell traditional stories of her people which in turn, bring up other questions. How do you interact with the stories and the myths – are they supposed to be seen as truth? Are they supposed to be lessons? What do you take from those lessons?

On the down side, the Emperor is not as a fleshed-out character as he should have been. And the romantic development (as “right” as it turned out to be) between certain characters was perhaps too abrupt and underdeveloped. Those things said, they did not detract at all from the reading experience.

In summation: I really, *really* loved *Vessel* and think it is a superior, welcome addition to the YA Fantasy ranks.

I also love how the author succinctly, perfectly described the book:

“Vessel is a story about losing your destiny and what happens after.”

### **Thea's Take:**

I wholeheartedly agree with Ana - *Vessel* is a beautiful, thought-provoking, brilliant gem of a novel that I loved from beginning to end. In fact, I think I'll come out and say it - it easily makes my shortlist of notable reads of 2012, and may even hit the top 10 list. Suffice it to say: *I loved this book.*

Ana has already talked about the awesome writing and questions that the novel poses, observations that I echo. I love that while *Vessel* is a fantasy novel about a girl whose destiny is thwarted and who finds her own way to help her people, it is also a parable about growing up. When Liyana is young, she - like everyone else in her clan - unwaveringly accepts her tribe's way of life, their beliefs and traditions. She does not *want* to die, necessarily, but she knows that by letting her goddess Bayla use her body as a vessel, she will be saving the lives of her clan, as countless vessels have done before her. When Bayla doesn't come as summoned, however, everything that Liyana has held as simple truth, everything she has been taught and told is challenged. And isn't that the way it always works? Gods or Goddesses aside, Liyana's eye-opening journey about the history of her people and the infallibility of her deities and elders is one with *any* reader can identify.

Another standout feature of *Vessel* are the characters themselves: protagonist Liyana, the big-hearted trickster god Korbyn, the other vessels Pia, Fennick, Raan, and the mysterious Emperor himself. Liyana, our heroine, is sorely tested throughout - abandoned by her clan (but given a chance at survival by her loving family), abandoned by her goddess, she must fend for herself in order to survive. Even when she is joined by the trickster god Korbyn (who was able to make it to his vessel safely), Liyana remains calm and in control, grounded in her own sense of self and always remembering that she is a vessel and that she must find her goddess Bayla. I love how her perceptions of both her world and herself change over the course of the novel, as Liyana clings stubbornly to her desire to *live* - and why shouldn't she? The other vessels are also given life and depth, from Fennick of the horse tribe and his brawny pigheadedness - but with a heart of gold beneath his bluster - to Pia, the beautiful blind songstress who is a haughty princess at first, but a true pure and perceptive soul. Of course, my favorite other characters are Korbyn, the beguiling trickster who comes to care for Liyana as more than just the vessel for his beloved Bayla, and Raan, the stubborn, questioning contrarian of the group. Raan is the only one that voices her defiance of being a vessel, who questions *why* she must die - which comes into play in the pivotal climax of the novel.

And the plotting! *Vessel* is an adventure novel, spanning the desert and another empire, even to a forbidden lake of magic and the creatures that guard it. The plotting and worldbuilding in this book are truly masterful, unique and utterly memorable.

Ultimately, *Vessel* reminds me of the great sweeping works of adventure fantasy that made me fall in love with the genre - and *Vessel* will be placed on my beloved books shelf, right in between my collection of Jacqueline Carey and Rachel Neumeier novels.

### **Rating:**

**Ana: 8 - Excellent**

**Thea: I'll see Ana's 8 and raise it to a 9 - Damn Near Perfection**

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## Mitticus says

3,5

*On the day she was to die, Liyana walked out of her family's tent to see the dawn.*

The people of the desert believe that every hundred years the gods/deities choose someone in their clans, a human vessel, to walk again.

Liyana is the vessel of the Goat Clan, but at her ceremony the goddess fails to appear. That Is. Not. Good. The goddess means WATER, food, and the life of the clan.

*“It sickens me,” Raan said. “Killing people so they can play at being human.”*

*Pia clucked her tongue but didn’t quit brushing her hair. “Without the gods, we’d perish. We need them to revitalize our clans — to fill our wells, bring life to our herds, and instill health in our children.”*

*Or we could simply move somewhere we don’t need gods,” Raan said. “Move to where there’s water. And fertile land. Leave the desert.”*

Alas, is not that simple.

Original world building. Strong and **practical** heroine (believe or not)

So, what is lacking? Well, she thinks, she walks, she ride, she does. But she don't feel. Everything is entertaining, but is difficult to feel in depth with this book. Like a tale, and not a novel.

I like the other characters too, Korby (the trickster no one wants to believe), Pia, Fennick, Raam (view spoiler)

The ending is a little rushed as well.

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Pensaba encontrarme con algo semejante a Destiny's Star, pero no, lo único que tienen en común es la magia, caballos y curanderos.

A pesar de que hay algunos avances chico/chica, ese no es el nudo central de la historia. Sino los dioses y sus avatares, un modo de vida conservado por cientos de años. El cuestionamiento de las creencias, y como la tradición se conserva en las historias considerados mitos.

Lo que me gustó de Lyana es que a pesar del inevitable ser 'especial' de toda heroína, no es super omniciente,

ni cae en eso de '¡todo esto es mi culpa!', de que adolecen gran cantidad de protagonistas femeninas en fantasía ultimamente y que dan ganas de darle un par y decirle: no todo es acerca de ti.

El fin si me parece demasiado arreglado. y me hubiera gustado algo más de drama (y es increíble que yo diga eso)

Entretiene. Give it a try.

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### **Bidisha says**

Glass serpents AND sand wolves? WHY DON'T I HAVE THIS ALREADY?!

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### **Krystle says**

4.5 stars.

Holy crap, this book is amazeballs!

I have no idea why this book hasn't received more hype than it did. I mean, there was a big rush of it when the cover first came out but then as the months went on, the chatter died down.

And that cover. Omg, that cover. Lemme salivate for a moment...

It's one of the most GORGEOUS COVERS EVER! I swear! Holy shizz. I want to have a huge giant poster of it plastered on my wall. It's THAT awesome.

Guys, I want to tell you how much I loved this book. It's so awesome. The first thing that's great? The world building! Okay, no it's not maybe like, you know, George R.R. Martin or Tolkien style, but it's still awesome. The way she crafted the desert lands and the monsters that roam them is so engaging, you are immediately immersed into it. I can feel the scorching heat, the grind of sand against skin, and the sweat that drips off my body. This is so wonderfully thought out and unique and original compared to the masses of generic medieval Europe type of setting. Even the clans have their own set of values, beliefs, and behaviors that can be a cause of conflict, concern, or admiration within them.

There are a lot of main characters in this story but they all shine and don't become similar to the other. I was able to connect with each of them, even the gods! They all present different sort of views regarding their duty as a vessel and the author manages to deftly stay away from making them into clichéd tropes and realize them as actual characters that have emotions that live and breathe on the page. Even the bad guys in this story are developed so as not to be stock. I loved Liyana's character growth. She can be soft, quiet, determined and driven, but also brutal and ruthless (a very good descriptor another/other reviewers have

said) when she needs to be. I'm so happy she's not a weak spined creature that gets jolted around by the plot and the administrations of men. And the way she develops from a character that acquiesces to what tradition tells her to do and into someone who realizes her own needs and wants but is always mindful of her clan and the people around her is just awesome.

The plot it just wow. There is no boredom here. It's one smooth, swift journey that just builds and builds to the climax. And when you think the book is going to stray into the ho-hum of predictability it veers off in another direction you never expected. The ending of this story? Fabulous. I can't tell you how much I enjoyed it. Instead of giving us the fluffy and expected, the author totally throws everything out the window and turns it into a logical, realistic, that's perfect for the story.

So in other words? READ IT. READ IT NOW! It's just too good for you to pass up!

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### **Misty says**

Okay, so *what had happened was*, I wrote a very glowing review of this last year after I read it, and apparently somewhere along the line, it got deleted. Couldn't tell you when, as it was around the holidays that it would have gone up (and who can focus on anything except yummy turkey dinners (mmm, gravy!\*), ugly holiday sweaters and family dramz around the holidays?); all I know is that I went to link to it for something a few weeks ago and noticed it was no more. =/

[\*But seriously, though? I am a gravy MASTER. So full of yumz, you want to pour that shiz on everything.]

I was going to try to rewrite it right then, but then I realized that, though it's not a fairy tale retelling, it has a strong folklore and mythology basis and style to it that actually makes it a really good fit for FTF! And here we are.

So though it's now been months since I read this, and I'm sure I was dazzlingly witty the first time around, I'm just going to give you guys a quick rundown of why I think this book is awesomesauce, and you should pick it up.

I have to start, of course, with the world building, which is such a stunner that I'm pretty sure it will be what comes to mind first for just about everybody. It was so amazingly strong, detailed and unique; I think Durst really did a knockout job of creating a world that felt complete and utterly fascinating. It manages to be both realistic and completely fantastical; because Durst really built the world from the ground up, history and all, there's a really strong foundation that the story is rooted in, which allows the more fantastical elements to kind of play on top of that. Its strong real-world basis - a culture which felt really believable, with authentic customs, superstitions and interactions and a strong folkloric feel - just lures you right in, and makes you *see* everything that's going on, and the layering of the mythos on top of that was flawless. And the truly amazing thing, is that all of this fantastic world-building is done with almost no info-dumping. Everything about it just feels so utterly natural - from the first page, you're immediately plunged into this world that just feels *right*, and you don't even have to think about it. There's no overly-detailed infodump, and there's no confusion - just a beautifully realized world to immerse yourself in. The religion and fantasy elements Durst has created are unique and executed really well, and I think even if I hadn't connected to the characters, I still would have loved this book on the strength of the world alone.

But I *did* love the characters! The main character, Liyana, is easily one of my absolute fave female leads of recent memory. The same is true of the male lead, Korbyn. I *defy* you not to love Liyana and Korbyn. But it's not just them - I like even the *not*-likable characters. All of their interactions; their individual strengths and

weaknesses; the way they related to their worlds, religions, clans and each other; the way they fit as pieces in the larger puzzle - all of it worked brilliantly for me. There's a perfect amount of different types of tension (a ticking clock, looming war, romantic tension and the kind that comes when clashing personalities have to work together), and it made for a really compelling reading experience that I could *feel*. I love it when a book makes me physically feel something.

There was a slight bobble at the end, when things began to feel a little more rushed or just...not as strong as the rest of an otherwise extremely strong book, I guess? But I still endorse it wholeheartedly; it ticks all of my boxes for a stand-out, reread-worthy fantasy:

Compelling world building with a believable real-world basis ✓

Believable, intelligently conceived and carried-out mythology and history ✓

Thoughtfulness and complexity ✓

Unique "visual" elements, like sandwolves (ie, they are literally sand-wolves - they show up in sandstorms, and howl in the howling wind!) and flying glass serpents ✓

Strong, intelligent, competent female lead ✓

Intriguing male lead (who happens to be a trickster god!) ✓

a "love" story (dare I say, a triangle, even) that is complex and lacking in foregone conclusions ✓

**Memorable-ness ✓**

and tension, tension, glorious TENSION ✓

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Durst gets stronger with every book, in my opinion, and has become one of my top authors to watch.

## **Yodamom says**

4.5

Gods, Sacrifice, love and adventure all blend together in this wonderful fantasy. It follows an amazing heroine as she struggles to make a sacrifice to save her people. She meets and grows to know many gods, people and hear their stories. There is a lot of myth/story sharing which I loved.

Liyanna, she never weakens her beliefs, she does not cower in fear she charges into action even when all seems hopeless. She walks with the Trickster god- Raven, a fascinating man/god to spend time with. She is strong, smart and loyal. She had me cheering, sifting and laughing, just a fantastic character.

There is a bit of a love triangle but it is not what you have read before. This is an intelligent book with intelligent characters. Duty, logic and loyalty are at work here. I think it is a true unselfish love I wish we would see more of in books.

I loved it, I will search out books from this author in the future.

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## **Kelly says**

Once every hundred years, the desert clans' gods come to walk among them. One young man or woman from each clan is chosen to serve as the vessel for that clan's deity. The human soul dies and returns to the Dreaming, while the god takes over the body. Now incarnate in the vessel's body, the god works magic to help keep the clan alive in the harsh conditions of the desert.

Liyana has known for years that she is destined to be the vessel for the goddess Bayla. But Bayla never shows up. Believing the goddess has found Liyana unworthy, her clan abandons her to the elements, but soon she is found by the incarnate god Korbyn, who has shocking news for her. Five of the desert deities have been magically imprisoned, including Bayla, hence why she never appeared to claim Liyana's body. Now Liyana must help Korbyn find the other four vessels, traveling across the desert to the encampments of the other four clans, each of which reacts in a different way to its deity's non-appearance. Once they've done that, they must learn where the deities are trapped and free them. This mission returns purpose to Liyana's life, but it's a bittersweet one, because if she succeeds it means sacrificing herself to Bayla. What's more, Korbyn has personal reasons to wish for Bayla's return.

Liyana evolves as a character throughout the novel. She starts out resigned to her fate (if not quite ready for it), actually becomes pretty ruthless for a little while in her determination to get the other vessels on board with the plan, and then begins to realize she doesn't want to die. And to wonder if everything she's been taught about the gods is accurate. The eventual resolution is carefully set up; Sarah Beth Durst gradually introduces similar situations to the reader so that the plan the characters try at the climax feels like a believable next step rather than a *deus ex machina*.

Durst spins a plot full of adventure and poignant tragedy (there are a couple of deaths that just knocked the wind out of me) and hope, and sets it in a wonderfully creative world. It's a world not only of gods wearing human flesh, but sand-wolves and giant salt-worms and sky serpents made of glass that can cut through anything. The prose fully engages the senses, bringing to life the beauty of a gown or the terrifying maw of a sand-wolf. And at times it's funny:

*"Bayla, is this how you'll kill me?" she asked out loud. "There are easier ways. You could send another snake. I am sorry I ate the first one." Hearing her own voice made her feel braver. "He was delicious, though."*

There's a romantic element to the novel, even a few overlapping love triangles, but Durst keeps a good balance between romance and the rest of the story. Then, in the romantic relationship that turns out to be the central one, I'm reminded of the romance from Durst's earlier book *Ice* in that the most important aspect of the relationship is the partnership between the characters in their pursuit of a shared goal, rather than the swoony feelings of infatuation (which are fun, of course, but won't sustain a relationship in the long term).

*Vessel* is one of the best and most creative novels I've read this year. It swept me away, kept me on the edge of my seat, and occasionally punched me in the gut. I highly recommend it to YA and adult readers.

[www.fantasyliterature.com](http://www.fantasyliterature.com)

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### **manda says**

Do not let my three-out-of five rating deceive you, this was a beautiful book, and I enjoyed it immensely. The world was rich in a mythology of its own, which added a touch of history to the culture and background that **Durst** created.

I appreciated many things in *Vessel*. The first being that it is a standalone fantasy novel. I've noticed an increasing amount of fantasy series, specifically marketed at a YA audience, and it's been difficult for me to find an enjoyable standalone novel in that genre. I truly recommend this for anyone looking for a fantasy

read geared towards a younger audience, although not quite would I call this fantasy-lite per se, as it has more depth in terms of worldbuilding than YA fantasies such as *Throne of Glass* or even *Seraphina* . I suppose, for fans of *The Emperor's Knife* , you would find that *Vessel* by **Sarah Beth Durst** lies in the same vein.

Similar to *The Emperor's Knife* the world of *Vessel* takes us to a desert land, parched and scorched, although in this novel, we get more of a feel of the wastelands. The world is inhabited by nomad clans, whilst an empire stands upon its borders. In addition to the empire, we also visit five of the many clans, and catch brief glimpses of their different ways of life. The tribes, the peoples, are so different from one another, meaning also a variety of ethnics.

(view spoiler)

For this, **I am truly appreciative of a non-white heroine** .

The plot itself keeps us engaged. Although a fair amount of the beginning is spent on travels across barren wastelands, **we are still prodded forwards with promises of a greater mystery** : someone has *stolen* the gods and goddesses, preventing them from returning to the world and helping the clans from surviving a century-long drought that has been plaguing them. Who, and why, is up to our heroine and her band to discover.

If you read the synopsis, you may get the impression that this is a romance fantasy. To avoid any disappointments, I feel the need to clarify that, although we *are* presented with elements of romance -- and a vestige of the all-time dreaded love triangle -- **romance is in no way a propelling force of this novel** . And for that, I am greatful.

But here, I'm going to have to stop singing praises and get down to what I do best -- griping. I should make it clear that I liked the characters - I liked Korbyn, and I liked Liyana. I could definitely see their interactions leading towards a romance, and their meeting wasn't exactly laced with love-at-first-sight. These are all positive things, of course. However, **I was not fully satisfied with the development of their relationship** . I felt as if more time and more depth could have gone into their interactions, and more thought processes that went beyond *He is so handsome and perfect and good looking and I love the way he laughs* would have been preferable before Liyana started falling for him.

As it were, the relationship -- not only between those two in particular, but also between and amongst all the other characters -- seemed rushed and half-hearted.

Since I am on the topic of characters, I should also add that although I liked Liyana as a heroine; although she was resourceful, intelligent, and generally all-round likable, I just couldn't *feel* her. The same applies to Korbyn, and also to the emperor. I adored Korbyn, I really did. His witticism, his selflessness ... and the fact that he wasn't unbearable as a potential love interest. But I never grew *attached* to him. I'm not quite sure why, but **I never felt connected to any of the characters** - which is such a pity, as I liked most of them. Perhaps they felt a little too unreal? A little like fleeting shadows?

My Gripes end there, though. The ending was ..... touching. Sad. I felt as if I could have cried - but not quite there. Again, perhaps because of my investment on the characters weren't as rooted as I would have liked. But there you have it. Perhaps you'll feel more connected than I did; perhaps you'll enjoy it far more than I. At any rate, if you're looking for a quick fantasy read, one with a hint of romance, with adventure and monsters and a heroine who can fend for herself, then you should definitely give this one a chance.

