



## The Oathbreaker's Shadow

*Amy McCulloch*

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Fifteen-year-old Raim lives in a world where you tie a knot for every promise that you make. Break that promise and you are scarred for life, and cast out into the desert.

Raim has worn a simple knot around his wrist for as long as he can remember. No one knows where it came from, and which promise of his it symbolises, but he barely thinks about it at all—not since becoming the most promising young fighter ever to train for the elite Yun guard. But on the most important day of his life, when he binds his life to his best friend (and future king) Khareh, the string bursts into flames and sears a dark mark into his skin.

Scarred now as an oath-breaker, Raim has two options: run, or be killed.

A gripping YA action-adventure fantasy, the first part of a planned duology.

## **The Oathbreaker's Shadow Details**

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Author : Amy McCulloch

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## From Reader Review The Oathbreaker's Shadow for online ebook

### Katy says

3.5 stars - I struggled with the book at first because I was bored with all of the history that McCulloch felt the need to lay out all at once and frustrated with way too many characters for me to keep track of that I had to keep looking back. But the story picked up about the halfway point, and I found myself really liking it. I am, however, frustrated that I still have so many questions, but I am eager for the next one to come out.

First of all, I think the concept is really interesting. However, I'm left to rely on pure faith alone on how the oath making and breaking system works. If it's based on Sola's beliefs, then something like a piece of string or hair seems kind of silly for me. And with all that background that McCulloch laid out so quickly, I would have thought she would have explained how that tradition came to be. That doesn't come until much, much later.

The other thing was the book's summary established that Raim was going to break his oath and be considered a traitor. But we don't even get to that until about a third of the way through. It just seemed like there was so much reading involved up until that point, but not much has happened.

The other thing that frustrated me about this book was with all the set up, I thought I would have had a better idea of what was going on as I was reading. But that wasn't the case. There were some many times that I had to stop and think, "Wait a minute, what just happened?" and I would have to go back and try to figure out if I had missed something. Only, I hadn't. It just wasn't explained until later or it wasn't explained at all. Take for instance around Chapter 20. My mind was reeling on what was going on and how in the world that can happen. It wasn't until near the end of Chapter 28 when Draikh rehashed what had happened did I really understand.

Major Spoiler Alert - (for reasoning and later memory refresher)

Also, Raim was on this quest to find out the mystery behind the original knot. Only (view spoiler) Instead, we're distracted by a ton of other scenarios that I'm not really sure where to follow here on out - (view spoiler)

Having said that, I really think that story has a lot of potential. I liked Raim, although I think he was way too naive (can a guy be such?) and was way too trusting, and his faith in people and the good caused him to make too many stupid mistakes. However, I can't fault him for being the way he was. And I'm always down for books that have tough heroines that do not take nonsense from anyone, especially overly buffed guys who think it's their job to protect everyone.

I was really caught up with the second half of the story. I enjoy reading about kingdoms or tribes or other groups of people traveling through the land, battling not only their enemies, but also nature itself. And I really do believe that once they reach Lazar, it wasn't exactly what I was expecting, and I was very interested in the stories that they had to tell. It really put a lot of things into perspective for me, but at the same time, it did open up more questions, as I have too many of them at the moment.

I mean, it wasn't hard to guess who we should be suspicious of and who will have more important roles than they first appeared to. And even though I predicted some of the things that would happen and could feel the build up to that point, I was still caught up when McCulloch did reveal whatever that certain surprise was

supposed to be.

The last several chapters were very climatic, and I was really swept up to the story. However, I thought everything was rushed, hitting you all at once, that the end felt like the aftermath of a battle. You step back, see all the casualties and loose ends that are lying around, and you have to wonder, "Where do we go from here?" A few off the top of my head (view spoiler) I'm excited about the next book coming out, not because McCulloch left a cliff-hanger ending for us (no, it wasn't what I would call a cliff-hanger), but more because I'm really curious about finding answers to my questions. Either way, I hope I don't have to wait a year for the sequel.

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### **Stefan Fergus says**

(Really 4.5\*)

I really enjoyed this: the world, characters, magic and the story were great.

There were a couple of minor issues with flow, and maybe a passage here or there which didn't quite work for me, but I am absolutely champing at the bit for book two.

McCulloch's created a world that is very easy to sink in to, and I was hooked from the start. Love the Mongolian-esque feel.

I also have an idea of how Raim will win in the end, but I'm not 100% sure I'm right. Frustrating I'll have to wait so long to find out...

Definitely recommended. Longer, fuller review coming up on the blog on Thursday (after an interview with Amy on Wednesday).

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### **Trisha says**

I really loved The Oathbreaker's Shadow. It really feels like an epic fantasy with a rich and complex world, all without being bogged down by tiresome commentary or exposition. Raim's world is fully realized without sacrificing the plot's pacing, the story is exciting and imaginative, and the ending left me wanting to read the next book immediately to find out what happens. The Mongolian influence also sets it apart from other epic fantasy stories. I think it would appeal to fans of George R.R. Martin, Diana Wynne Jones's Christopher Chant series, Philip Pullman, and the Kushiel Trilogy.

Past the first few chapters, which establishes Raim in the context of his community, family, and friendship with Khareh, the story is a fast-paced adventure that doesn't stop until Raim figures out the truth about the promise he doesn't remember making. His quest takes him from the harsh, unforgiving landscape of the desert, where he travels with the Alashan, connects with Draikh (Khareh's spirit), and meets Wadi, and then to Lazar.

The last third is really exciting and sets the stage for the following book, which I can't wait to get my hands on!

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### **Jessica says**

This is a rough book to fairly rate, but my review falls somewhere on the lower side of the 3-star range. It's just that this book is all over the place, and that makes it hard to really 100% comprehend everything that's laid out. McCulloch should get credit for creating a magic system that is actually fascinating. The concept of promise knots, and the events that unfold if you break one, are solidly interesting. The execution and explanation of this magic system? Not so much. For as long as it took to set things up, and all the info dumps that were present, I really felt lost for a long time in this story. The magic system is there, but it's not well explained, and that's frustrating.

The other part of this book that was rough for me was the lack of character development. I'm a very character driven reader, and I like to feel like my protagonists are learning and growing. I didn't feel that way during my read, although I admit that I did like Raim overall. I just felt like he spent so long trying to find the secret behind his knot, and then right when he was close the book went on all sorts of tangents. It just didn't flow, and Raim just didn't grow, and that made it hard for me to really connect with this story.

I think there's a lot of good things in *The Oathbreaker's Shadow*. I think that the premise overall is solid and that, with a little bit more love, this book could have been great. I am actually interested to see what happens next, to be honest.

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### **Demitria Lunetta says**

Recommended for fans of: YA Fantasy

The premise for this fantasy novel is unique and I love the idea that there are real consequences to breaking a promise. You are immediately thrown into Raim's world, and McCulloch's world building is fantastic. I also like how severe and unwavering Raim's society is. They have rules for a reason and breaking those rules means banishment. Even Raim's status can't save him. It's a set up for a fast-paced, suspenseful story.

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### **Mitch says**

I have only one word to describe *The Oathbreaker's Shadow*. Painful. It's a rare book I would compare to an instrument of torture, but there are so many things wrong with this, between the massive infodumps, the meandering story, the loose plot threads that go nowhere, the poorly thought out magic system, the fast and loose characterizations, the blatant cultural (mis)appropriation, I am not exaggerating when I say I literally felt like I was being tortured every time I read one more agonizing word of this. And you know what the worst part was? There was actually a three or four chapter stretch in the middle when I thought the book was actually improving - well, thanks for the false hope.

Obviously, to say I didn't enjoy *The Oathbreaker's Shadow* in the least would be a massive understatement. First of all, the world building was just awful. I usually refrain from making direct comparisons between one book and another because I feel every book should stand or fall on its own, but in this case I just can't help

but compare Amy McCulloch's fantasy debut with another Central Asian inspired fantasy, Elizabeth Bear's Range of Ghosts. In this case, I think it's warranted because both books borrow heavily from Mongol culture as a starting point, and just having read both its readily apparent what the dos and do nots of writing this type of book is:

Do - creatively weave the cultural elements into the narrative, so the whole thing feels authentic and interesting.

Do not - litter the story with catchphrases (yurt anyone?) and foreign sounding names while following every new character or setting with a two or three paragraph description explaining the cultural significance (hint: it's headache inducing, but more importantly, boring).

Do - develop an understanding of the culture, so the things you talk about, the nomadic lifestyle, the horse culture, the significance of living on the steppes, resonates.

Do not - start writing until you get a handle on the material, or like this book you'll end up having your characters living in a village when they're supposed to be nomads and the description of the capital reading like it was copied from the Wikipedia entry of Ulaanbaatar (hint: it annoys people who know better).

Anyway, I like my world building to read like a homage, not a poorly done ripoff, and unless you're intentionally looking for a book in which one third of the story is literally just that (ripoff, not homage), The Oathbreaker's Shadow is a chore to read.

Then again, the actual story isn't any better. You know how the hook is about the titular oathbreaker Raim needing to figure out what his broken oath is? Well, forget that, cause we never find out. And if that wasn't bad enough, the summary gives away the entire first third of the book, though either way it drags hard thanks to McCulloch's need to include explanations for literally everything. Sure, there is actually a point to oathbreaking and the stigma attached, but it hardly makes any sense. (view spoiler) Then again, very little about The Oathbreaker's Shadow makes any sense. The villain, for example, umm WTF? Talk about weird character development. (view spoiler) Seriously, the climatic action scenes are almost comical given how these characters were developed earlier and I didn't get the point of Raim's pet bird at all. The only chapters I actually liked were the desert scenes once Raim is forced to flee for his life, because I thought McCulloch did a good job with the harshness and the desperate struggle to survive, but you know everything that happened afterwards just led back to those problems I mentioned and that for me just felt like the book equivalent of watching a boring ten hour movie, finally getting somewhere, and then immediately being jabbed in the eye with a hot fire poker.

Honestly, the only good thing about The Oathbreaker's Shadow is the cover. Whoever designed that deserves every bit of credit for this book's success. What's inside the cover though? Pure torture.

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## **Nathan says**

Fantasy Review Barn

A person's word is all they have. Never has this been truer than in the world of The Oathbreaker's Shadow. The nomadic group central to the story doesn't just believe in keeping promises, they enforce it. Each promise made requires a knot to be tied; a magical binding with grave consequences if broken. Before a

certain age breaking a promise results in a painful lesson. But lessons are for children and there comes a point where the consequences are much more dire. Breaking a promise is the very definition of taboo in this land, even if done inadvertently.

Raim is a young man training to be Yun, an elite warrior and likely bodyguard to his best friend in the world, heir to the throne Khareh. But on what should be his most proud day something terrible happens. A promise is broken without any knowledge of what it contained and suddenly Raim is the run. Forced into the desert he fights to figure out how he was cursed by an action he had no knowledge of and zero ideas of what he could possibly do about it.

This is a story about unintended consequences; at least it wants to be. In actuality it is a cool premise that unfortunately begs to have holes poked through it. Because everything this society believes in will start tearing apart due to the actions of a few; and the frailty of this system is an indictment that the society shouldn't have lasted with it for so long. Arbitrary age restrictions could be explained away on their own but they are only the start of me outthinking things.

Raim's broken promise, a promise made when he was a baby, should have never been possible. This is the catalyst of the story but and therefore is completely intentional but still should be impossible by the rules as they are laid out. Once the consequences are made clear, especially the titular 'Shadow,' I was able to guess (correctly) the other major plot points coming down the pipe. The rise of a villain, the discovery of a new magic, I was not surprised by a major plot point past the first third of the book.

Despite having serious issues making any sort of logistical sense out of these details the author really manages to hide these flaws with a quick paced, entertaining plot and some engaging characters. Raim looks to be building toward a redemption arc but things do not turn out to be that simple. He is joined on his journey by Wadi, member of another nomadic group that wanders an even harsher land. At first their connection is confused but eventually it comes out that she too is bound by promises not necessarily her own. And McCulloch is not afraid to shock a reader; violence and death are no stranger in this world.

If I could pick a highlight it is in fact the ethical and moral implications of a promise based society. When right and wrong sit on a sliding scale I find myself intrigued. Karen Millar wrote a tale where the 'moral path' was often the opposite of what we would expect due to a divine mandate. The affect is the same here; any promise broken results in exile. This means a promise made under duress, or through lust, or under the influence potentially sets the moral course for a person's life. Some very questionable promises come into play for some characters; up to and including a promise of death.

This is a smart, fun book that excels when it is clicking. As long as a reader is not prone to overthinking things I have no problem recommending it. And there is always a possibility, as this is the first of a duology, that many of my concerns will be answered in due time.

3 Stars

Copy for review received through NetGalley

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### **Robin Hobb says**

I know it is often a part of a fantasy review, but it's so true. An original and unique magic system in a book is

like finding a wonderful new spice in a dish. It gives the tale a unique flavor.

This is a tale of friendship and loyalty and betrayal. Of power and outcasts. It's a good solid story. I recommend it.

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### **Marjolein says**

*Read all my reviews on <http://urlphantomhive.booklikes.com>*

On one hand, I wanted to say I haven't quite read a book like this one before. The magic is really complicated and different from usual. On the other hand however, a lot of the critical plot points were not so original at all.

In this clan-based nomadic society promises are for real. For as you break a promise (and thus the knot that binds you to the person you promised to) you'll be tormented by that person's shadow (a piece of their soul) and exiled. So, better to keep your promises.

Raim is best friends with the heir to the throne and besides training to be his bodyguard. When a promise is broken he has had since he was a baby (although that's impossible since a promise made by a child is not binding) with dead parents, he has to flee as everyone thinks he's betrayed the heir.

The first part of this book was really boring, it just couldn't keep my interest. And I tried. But there is so much exposition thrown at you that I felt at the same time overwhelmed by the infodump and underwhelmed by the story. Not everything made sense to me either. Afterwards there is more action and the story moves forward a bit, but still nothing came as a surprise. Well, perhaps one person's transformation into the great villain of the story did come completely out of the blue.

All this said and done, near the end I was actually quite enjoying myself with the book even though I can't put my finger on why exactly. I did really like the idea of the promise knots even though I didn't completely understand why so many people were gambling with their lives. Even if you plan to keep your promise, people in this book make promises (with this kind of consequences) far too easily. So much so, that I might even check out the second book some day.

The Oathbreaker's Shadow is the first book in the Knots Sequence series. The second book is The Shadow's Curse.

Thanks to the publisher and Netgalley for providing me with a free copy of this book in exchange for an honest review!

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### **Marc Aplin says**

The Oathbreaker's Shadow is a book written by one of the country's most renowned and talented editors, Amy McCullough of Harper Voyager. That's right; adviser has become applicant in a bold move that surely places a lot of pressure on her shoulders to perform. You see, over the years Amy has worked on books by George R.R. Martin, Robin Hobb and Raymond E. Feist, and leads the editing process on work by new and

upcoming stars such as Blake Charlton, James Smythe and Janet Edwards too! Her job revolves around being in regular contact with these kinds of authors: advising them of their grammar, characters, plots and even marketing prowess.

So, when I heard that she had written a book I was really interested to see how she, as an ‘industry expert’, performed. I doubt I was the only one either; you know the authors under her watch are going to be checking out the ‘bosses’ work. Anyway, here’s the blurb:

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Fifteen-year-old Raim lives in a world where you tie a knot for every promise that you make. Break that promise and you are scarred for life, and cast out into the desert.

Raim has worn a simple knot around his wrist for as long as he can remember. No one knows where it came from, and which promise of his it symbolises, but he barely thinks about it at all – not since becoming the most promising young fighter ever to train for the elite Yun guard. But on the most important day of his life, when he binds his life to his best friend (and future king) Khareh, the string bursts into flames and sears a dark mark into his skin.

Scarred now as an oath-breaker, Raim has two options: run, or be killed.

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So, yes, when we meet our protagonist, Raim, he is unbearably close to fulfilling his destiny and becoming a Yun Warrior. Since he was a young man he has been best friends with the future king and should he become a Yun Warrior he is expected to be the closest bodyguard to the King – so everything looks rather rosy for him. I wouldn’t say that Raim is ‘cocky’ about that fact, he is actually quite humble, but there is certainly a confidence about him and he has great ambitions and expectation in regards to how his life will play out. So, when it happens, when Raim is shown to have broken a promise and has his future fall from one of guaranteed respect to one of being loathed and wanted dead, it is a truly emotional path that we must follow him on; breaking a promise in the society that McCulloch has created truly is akin to being a spy or murder in our own.

The setting of The Oathbreaker’s Shadow is one that a couple of years ago – when the book was released – felt very unique, but today is starting to feel more familiar. This isn’t a bad thing at all, McCulloch’s novel being set in a hybrid-desert society (with strong Persian and Mongolian influences, I would suggest) feels very much like Arabian Nights and it wouldn’t be a huge jump to say that Raim shares many traits with characters from such tales, such as Aladdin. What separates Amy’s setting from the numbers that are filtering in is both the beauty of the description that she offers and its seeming authenticity. Without going into Jordan-esque detail, Amy creates vivid images of the scenery and landmarks you’d expect to see in the aforementioned movies or the Prince of Persia games.

We’ve covered it a little already, but to give some more details on the magic system: as the blurb says, the novel is set in a world where promises can be magically bound by the tying of a knot. Let us say you promise me you will never hurt my family – we cement this promise by performing a quick ritual and tying a knot that you shall wear as a reminder of your promise to me. Where it gets interesting is that if you were to break this promise – perhaps attacking my son – you’d end up with a large scar on your person and a shadow would appear behind you, haunting you, letting everyone know that you’re an Oathbreaker.

I felt this was a great concept, even more so when you consider that the book is for Young Adults. The question of who you make a promise to, what you promise and when – if ever – you can make a promise that will destroy your life, should you break it, is an interesting one that is likely to resonate with younger and older people alike. All the best Young Adult novels provide a moral dilemma such as this and I think Amy's encouraging a younger reader to reflect upon their opinions of trust and truth makes this Young Adult more than just a 'pop' novel.

I will skip ahead a little, so as not to spoil what happens once Raim breaks this unknown promise. Raim is away from the town and determined to find out what this promise was, who he made it to and get a solution as to how he can prove it wasn't his fault, that there has been a mistake of some kind. With trust and truth being the main themes of the novel there is plenty of lies and betrayals along Raim's journey after he has made his decision to get to the bottom of what has gone on. It is a journey that is full of adventure, packed with interesting characters and loaded with revelations that are likely to shock and surprise its young adult audience (less so those adults who have read novels such as *A Game of Thrones!*).

Overall, *The Oathbreaker's Shadow* is an absolutely fantastic debut and I can say without a doubt it was one of the finest debuts of 2013. My hope is that once this 'duology' is complete, Amy takes an even bolder step to writing a longer novel with a deeper, more complex plot aimed at adult fantasy readers. I think that if she chooses to shed the YA genre's constraints and can combine her literary and descriptive abilities with a complex plot we'll all be treated to her full abilities as a writer. That said, this adult can't fricken wait for the sequel!

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### **Justin says**

<http://www.staffersbookreview.com/201...>

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### **Laura Lam says**

A wonderful, rich YA epic fantasy with a Mongolian influence with great characters and a message of the value of promises and the consequences of breaking them. Full review/blurb pending.

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### **Jeffrey says**

Amy McCulloch's "The Oathbreaker's Shadow" sets up as an interesting story and magic system, before going off the rails.

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The likeable main character Raim, is training to be a member of the Yun, the elite warriors for the Khan. His best friend, is Khareh, the son of the Khan, but while Raim likes Khareh, he is blind to his implied faults, which McCullouch implies to the reader. Raim and Khareh want to swear oaths to each other when they are of age.

Promises to each other are imbued with power. When two people make a promise and tie a knot to each other, the promise is wrapped in magic. Break the promise, and magic is angrily released. The oathbreaker is scarred and the person exiled to the desert. In addition, the person is haunted by a spirit of the person who

was wronged by the promise breaker.

Raim, who is an orphan, has a promise bracelet on his arm tied with a knot, but he is an orphan and no one knows what was promised.

So McCulloch sets up a promising story and challenge for Raim to find out the meaning of the promise bracelet.

Enter a Sage from the desert, who promises that he can teach anyone to be a Sage with awesome power and the inevitable is bound to occur.

But whether its because McCulloch has to spend a lot of time doing info dumps or the long buildup to the first big event in the novel, I found myself skimming nearly 40% of the book at the outset.

The action did not really pick up until I was around 60% through with the story, and then, I have to say that Raim seemed less engaging and interesting.

Yes its a coming of age story and the petulant youngster who must master magic and come to be a man and potential hero is a standard trope in fantasy, but I found Raim's eventual awakening just not that engaging.

So I skimmed a lot of the beginning of the book and was not enthralled with the more action packed late middle and end.

That is not good.

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### **Stuti (Turmeric isn't your friend. It will fly your ship says**

Eh?!

This is hurting my head.

Like, giving me an actual migraine. Or what I think a migraine feels like. I've never had one before or I did and I just couldn't identify it. When DOES a headache turn into a migraine? Is there a significant and distinguishable margin, like you coalesce from one range of pain into another much more terrible one? Or is it just more cool to say you've got a migraine? I'm not good at biology. The only thing I've figured out by far is that migraine gives you that weird pin-in-your-brains-and-eyeballs feeling, but then if you jump into a pool at the wrong angle, and water goes up your nostrils at an even worse angle you get that feeling as well. Which makes you want to rip out your eyes.

This book didn't make me want to rip out my eyes but it definitely bored me with its endless and clunky info-dump, cookie-cutter characters, late beginning, lame dialogues, unrealistic relationship, and world-building & its telling that could have done with a bit more emotion and feeling. Moreover, one scene jumps straight into another and when its time to get back, dude, it beams out of the sky. No guiding smoothly or amalgamating the story sequences.

I'm going to try and relax.

I'm going to ALOOOHHHAAA!!!

Aloha, baby! Do it with me! Two simple steps. Wave your hands and shake your ass. To the right! To the left!

Do it alone if you're shy!

Or do it with me!

It's fun either way.

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### **Emma Pass says**

In Darhan, promises are everything. When you make a vow, it is bound by magic and tied into a promise knot, which you wear until the day you die. Should you break that vow, you become an outcast, scarred and unwanted, doomed to wander the desert where your every move is dogged by a merciless spirit known as a haunt.

Fifteen-year-old Raim has had a promise knot around his wrist since he was born. No-one can tell him why, or what promise was made, but he hardly notices it any more: he's too busy training to be an elite Yun guard, and preparing to make an Absolute Vow to become the protector of his best friend (and future Kahn) Prince Kareh.

But when he makes the vow, another promise – the promise bound into the knot around his wrist – is broken, and Raim is outcast as a traitor. Now he's thrown into a desperate struggle to survive – and to find out the truth behind the mysterious promise that has changed his life forever...

From the first sentence of **THE OATHBREAKER'S SHADOW**, I found myself immersed in Raim's world. The worldbuilding is rich and intricate, yet at no point does it get in the way of the story. Amy McCulloch is well-travelled, and her love of exotic locations shines through as the reader is transported to a realm of nomads and weavers, soldiers and kings, deserts, mountains and hidden cities. The description is so vivid, you can almost feel the sand trickling through your fingers, and the heat of the desert sun pounding onto your head.

Raim is a brilliant character. He is intelligent and spirited, sometimes coming across as older than his fifteen years – but then his is a society in which children are expected to make the transition to adulthood at an early age. He also has a vulnerable side, which makes him empathetic and believable, as, in his quest for the truth, he often finds himself getting into even more trouble than he was in before.

Then there is Wadi, the girl who helps rescue Raim from almost certain death in the desert, and becomes Raim's main ally in the mysterious city of Lazar. A feisty, take-no-prisoners sort of girl, she is more than a match for Raim, and one of my favourite characters in the book. Prince Kareh is a compelling antagonist, and his transformation from Raim's childhood friend to tyrant, although not unexpected, is still a shock. This might sound like a cliché, but as the story barreled towards its climax, I literally couldn't tear my eyes away from the page.

THE OATHBREAKER'S SHADOW will appeal to anyone who's after a fast-paced, exciting read to help them escape the ordinary world for a while. I can't wait for the next book in the trilogy!

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