



Level Grind

Annie Bellet

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An omnibus of the first four books in the USA TODAY bestselling fantasy series—collected together for the first time in one volume. Jade Crow is a sorceress hiding from the most powerful sorcerer in the world: her ex-boyfriend.

Gamer. Nerd. Sorceress.

Jade Crow lives a quiet life running her comic book and game store in Wylde, Idaho, hiding from a powerful sorcerer who wants to eat her heart and take her powers—her ex-boyfriend Samir. Yet when dark powers threaten her friends' lives, Jade must save them by using magic. But as soon as she does, her nemesis will find her and she won't be able to stand up against him when he comes.

Collects — Justice Calling; Murder of Crows; Pack of Lies; Hunting Season.

Level Grind Details

Date : Published October 4th 2016 by Saga Press

ISBN : 9781481479400

Author : Annie Bellet

Format : Hardcover 480 pages

Genre : Fantasy, Urban Fantasy, Magic, Adult

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From Reader Review Level Grind for online ebook

Kimberly [Come Hither Books] says

Urban fantasy starring a sorceress who runs a comic/game store and taught herself magic using D&D spells as a focus. Fun and fast-paced, with a true love for gamers.

Laurie says

The stories move really well, and the plethora of nerd-pop-culture references are fun and charming. Jade Crow is a well-developed character, and if she gives off a Mercy Thompson vibe, well, a fictional character could do worse than be reminiscent of Mercy Thompson.

Mogsy (MMOGC) says

3.5 of 5 stars at The BiblioSanctum <https://bibliosanctum.com/2016/11/21/...>

In gaming lingo, the term “level grind” often has negative connotations, typically used to describe having to engage in mind-numbingly tedious or repetitive tasks to gain experience or complete an achievement. Happily, this is not at all how I would describe my experience with Level Grind by Annie Bellet, which is in fact a very witty, vibrant, and entertaining urban fantasy. Collecting the first four novellas in the Twenty-Sided Sorcerer series, this omnibus admittedly offers pretty standard fare when it comes to the genre. Still, it manages to be a very entertaining read thanks to the stories’ vigorous pacing, the characters’ irresistible charms, and the author’s fun take on the usual tropes.

Meet Jade Crow, a sorceress on the run. After twenty-five years of hiding from her ex-lover and fellow sorcerer Samir who wants to eat her heart (gross, yes, but that happens to be the only way to kill a sorcerer and steal their powers) she has ended up settling in Wylde, Idaho, home to a thriving paranormal community that includes shapeshifters, witches, and leprechauns. A lifelong gamer and nerd, Jade is content enough to lie low and live a quiet life among friends, running her comic book and game store.

JUSTICE CALLING

Justice Calling is the first novella of the collection, introducing us to our main characters and setting. It was just another day at Pwned Comics and Games when a tall and handsome stranger breezes through the door and accuses Jade of murder. Alek is a Justice, an enforcer for the Shifter community, and he has arrived in Wylde after receiving a vision that someone or something may be harming the lives of those he has sworn to protect, and he believes Jade is to blame.

This first story also sets the tone for the rest of the series: lots of gaming and pop culture references, unashamedly geared towards the gamer and geek demographics. That said, any general fan of urban fantasy can definitely enjoy these books as well. As the opening novella and also the shortest of the bunch, Justice Calling is unfortunately rather light on character development and world-building (imagine a full-length novel by Patricia Briggs or Ilona Andrews compressed into a little more than 100 pages, and that’s how I

would describe this), but it does solidly establish more to come. This is when reading the omnibus comes in handy; with the next book conveniently waiting on the next page, there was no excuse not to satisfy my curiosity and hankering for more.

MURDER OF CROWS

This second story starts with Jade's estranged father showing up at her doorstep, imploring her for help. Our protagonist has never forgiven her family for kicking her out of Three Feathers crow shifter ranch where she grew up, but she ultimately agrees to help after learning someone was out there brutally killing innocent people. As always, Jade suspects Samir, her evil sorcerer ex who could be murdering members of the Crow clan to get to her.

If book one was about laying down the groundwork and hooking readers in, then Murder of Crows is where things start to get a little deeper. Bellet fleshes out her world-building, exploring the various shapeshifting communities in her series and also incorporating Native American history, culture, and lore into her story. But it is character development that gets a huge boost. We learn a lot more about Jade and where she came from, and by the end of the book she is changed by the many difficult decisions she had to make. There's also a strong vibe of mysticism in this one as Jade comes to terms with being a sorceress and what it'll take to control her magic. The only thing I wasn't crazy about was her romance with Alek; I mean, come on, it ends before it even begins!

PACK OF LIES

The next story begins as Alek suddenly comes back into Jade's life, showing up at her door asking her for help (yes, there's a clear pattern emerging here with regards to the way these books begin). The Wylde community is again threatened as news comes that wolves are killing other wolves, but things take an even worse turn when an innocent family is found slaughtered, seemingly caught in the middle of a shifter conflict. Even though Alek broke her heart, for the sake of her town Jade decides to lend him a hand in his investigation.

I didn't get a chance to feel invested in Jade and Alek's relationship in the previous two books, so quite a few of their interactions felt empty. These plots are also starting to become very predictable, especially when read back-to-back; someone always comes to Jade for help with a gruesome terrible crime, and as always, Jade thinks it must be Samir, the big bad who has been a constant threat in the back of her mind and yet he is still nowhere to be seen. To be fair, this is a rather common feeling for me when it comes to novellas, with there being so few pages to really develop a deeper story. Still, these books are meant to be short and sweet, and when all is said and done, Pack of Lies was another fast, entertaining read. Jade also reveals herself to be a sorceress at the end of this book which causes no small amount of tensions in her small town (even the other paranormals are kind of creeped out by sorcerers, with them being known to eat hearts and everything) which adds another interesting source of conflict to the series.

HUNTING SEASON

Yep, this one also starts with someone showing up at Jade's door for help, and again we are led to believe that these dastardly acts (in this case, the grisly mass killings of unicorns) might be attributed to Samir. But this time, we actually get the sense that a greater story is emerging. Finally! A mysterious sorceress also turns up in Wylde, claiming to be running away from Samir and needs protection, and Jade is torn between wanting to help and not wanting to put her friends at risk.

I'll be honest, this being the fourth installment, I thought we would have a lot more answers by now. But this is also a story with some great developments and nice twists. Hunting Season was perhaps the best of the novellas, and a great story to end this first collection.

Closing thoughts: So far, I'm really enjoying The Twenty-Sided Sorceress and I would highly recommend the omnibus format of Level Grind for an easy, convenient way to enjoy the first four novellas one after another. While it's true that UF fans may find it a little derivative and too similar to many of the popular paranormal series out there, I think it aims for being light and fun rather than groundbreaking. And it worked! The stories' short lengths also definitely had some impact on the depth of world-building, character, and story development, but the good news is, these areas continue to expand with each installment. It's probably not a stretch to say if you love Mercy Thompson or Kate Daniels, you will do get a kick out of this series as well. Geeks and gamers will especially have a blast! I look forward to seeing what's next.

Colleen says

Jude Crow is the Native American gamer girl version of the Iron Druid from the first Hearne book. The differences are mostly window dressing but for the power type and source. Jude is a sorceress hiding her powers from her evil ex in a comics and game shop rather than a bookstore. She has a group of gamer friends, a leprechaun pawn shop owner next door, and a crowd of shapeshifters who believe in her. With all the were-animals about, there is no need for a talking dog. The comic relief is shared among the sidekick friends and the Russian weretiger she starts dating.

This was a fun set of stories. The plots aren't hard and the characters are easy to like or not. The scenes and stories were almost at minstrel theater levels of shallow, but that was what I enjoyed about them. Plots. Yes, there are four in this omnibus. Bad evil thing shows up and kills someone who was important to someone else. Bad evil thing must be stopped and likely destroyed. Neighbors start hating on Jude for her powers. Friends start believing she can do miracles. She and Russian boyfriend don't communicate. Magic slags her cell phone, or she drops it, or it gets shot. Then she gets shot or stabbed or burned or exploded on. She has to kill someone. Someone important makes a cutting personal commentary that causes her to hate herself. Her friends badger her into moving again. Lather, rinse, repeat. Sprinkle in some D&D references or movie lines. Happily for me, Phenomenal cosmic power, itty bitty living space was one of them. And yes, In Soviet Russia, references get you!

I picked Level Grind up because it was a part of a Barns and Noble blog post about "12 Highly Binge-able Urban Fantasy Series." This was the only book/series that I hadn't already read that looked interesting. There are blood, guts, and gore, but this still felt like a summer beach book for me.

Jennybeast says

I've been wanting to read some of Annie Bellet's work for a while now, and I'm delighted with this omnibus form -- great series! Super joyful D&D references, yay shifters, and welcome badass sorceress. A bit gory (there is some heart eating), a bit repetitive (reading the first 4 books in a series all at once will do that), but an altogether solid and excellent introduction to the world. Yum.

Debbie says

This is an omnibus -the first four books although they are really novellas - The main character, Jade, has a 'big bad' coming after her - that is in the background throughout these four stories. At the end of the 4th story this 'big bad' hasn't arrived so I don't know if he comes in the next one or the one after that...

I don't really care and am not interested in reading more. Overall it's pretty ho-hum. It is something to read in-between other stuff.

Lisa says

Review from Tenacious Reader: <http://www.tenaciousreader.com/2016/1...>

3.5/5 stars

Level Grind is a fast paced urban fantasy with a gamer sorceress who lives amongst shifters. There are plenty of gaming/geeky references that make this a fun read and make the characters seem that much more relatable (assuming you're a geek, which I hope you are).

Jade Crow is a great protagonist that kept me entertained. A gamer nerd who has been trying to pass as just an ordinary hedge witch, running a comic book and game shop, she is actually a powerful sorceress. In this world, that is not something you want to advertise because sorcerers are feared, seeing as they have a reputation of being cruel as well as eating people's hearts. Not exactly a friendly conversation starter to drop on your new neighbors. Oh yeah, and she has an obsessive ex-boyfriend who is an incredibly powerful sorcerer and is trying to track her down. This is another reason Jade is trying to lay low as she makes a new life for herself in a small shifter town.

Level Grind is actually an omnibus of 4 novellas. While I do prefer novel length books, I think these were enjoyable quick stories that I found myself appreciating more the more I read. The nice thing with a compilation of novellas, is it makes for good breaking points if you want to read something else. Each novella featured a mystery that Jade was trying to solve, often with the help of her group of friends. She also finds herself a sexy ally that brings a bit of romance. For me, reading them all back to back, there was a little bit of recap at the start of each novella which equated to pages that I personally didn't need, but at the same time, the recaps were very quick and could serve to be useful for those who opt to not read them all straight through.

As you would expect, the novellas are each contained stories that work reading them on their own, but as a set you can see how the characters progress in both magical development and their relationships, you get a better sense of the history that led to this point as well as setup for future potential conflict. Although, even by the end of the fourth novella, I don't know that I felt like the characters were deeply developed, but I think that is something that is hard to do in a novella format. Novellas do not have the luxury of page space to devote to complex characters and world building. They are short and need to keep the story going with as

little extraneous information as possible. It's all about keeping the pace going, which Level Grind does nicely. However, with that same page space issue in mind, I also felt some of the resolutions came incredibly quick and easy. This is one of those books where you are better off just going with the flow, enjoying the journey and not trying to theorize how realistic anything may or may not be.

The last two novellas, I felt were stronger. This may be due to both becoming more familiar with the world and characters as well as the fact the last two novellas were longer in length. The stories felt a bit more developed, likely because they were. I also felt that the second novella was probably the weakest of the lot. In the first one, everything is fresh and new, we meet the characters and magic, but the second one has to build on that and rely on the story itself to bring something new for the reader, and the second novella was one of the shorter ones and felt a bit underdeveloped to me. So, if you pick this one up and feel let down by the second novella, but enjoyed the first, I would encourage you to keep reading as the last two have more to offer.

For me, these were straight up fun escapist reads, something I really needed this past month. Especially as I found myself enjoying these more as I read, I do plan on reading the next volume when it releases and I'm curious what is in store next for Jade and her friends.

Milda Page Runner says

2.5*

Lite female-lead urban fantasy with a bit of humour. Redeeming qualities humour and main character being a gamer and nerd – gaming slang and references. Weakest points character development and romantic storyline – insta love based on looks. Everything else is a bit of meh really, nothing terrible but nothing too exciting either.

No sex scenes, no gruesome bits, nothing shocking – suitable for teens. Could be a few swearwords; something like 'fucktoast on a stick'. YA level UF series.

Meigan says

I had tried on several occasions to read the first installment of Annie Bellet's Twenty-sided Sorceress series, to no avail. It was a combination of two things - the first book was quite short and I'm not overly fond of short books, and it also appeared that the subsequent books were also on the shorter side. So, to avoid disappointment on my end, I kept putting the series off altogether, even though the series has mostly favorable reviews. Big mistake on my part, avoiding it, because it turns out Jade Crow and Annie Bellet are fantastic! The saving grace was having the first half of the series together in an omnibus. The books didn't seem overly short packaged this way, which was a huge bonus.

I really adore the world and characters that Bellet created with this series. Centering around shifters, she also has a variety of other supernatural creatures in the periphery. I also like the fact that while Jade is a sorceress, there are reasons she has to hide her true identity from quite a number of people for various and important reasons.

This series is a delight for any gamer fan. Full of gamer culture with geek references aplenty, it was quite fun

to have a main character who doesn't hide her geeky identity like so many other characters do. Jade proves that you can be a geek, but you can kick serious butt at the same time.

Really enjoyed finally getting around to this series and this author, and I'm definitely looking forward to diving back in to Jade's world and catching up on all I've missed.

*eARC received via NetGalley in exchange for my honest opinion.

Beth says

Level Grind is an urban fantasy collection of Annie Bellet's first four books, *Justice Calling*, *Murder of Crows*, *Pack of Lies* and *Hunting Season* in the Twenty-Sided Sorceress Series.

Comic store owner and gaming nerd, Jade Crow is trying to fly under the radar to stay alive. She's built a life and chosen family while hiding from her ex-boyfriend and sorcerer, Samir. He wants to kill Jade and take her powers for his own. To fly under his attention, she must not ever use her powers. But, when it comes down to those she cares about Jade uses her powers and starts all kinds of magical troubles.

Great series, marvelous collection and strong writing make this a bundle worth a read or re-read. Quick, easy, enjoyable urban fantasies!

I received this copy of *Level Grind* from Saga Press in exchange for a honest review. This collection is set for publication October 4, 2016.

My Rating: 5 stars

Written by: Annie Bellet

Series: The Twenty-Sided Sorceress (Book 1-4)

Paperback: 480 pages

Publisher: Saga Press; Combined edition

Publication Date: October 4, 2016

ISBN-10: 1481479393

ISBN-13: 978-1481479394

Genre: Urban Fantasy

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Level-Grind-Ju...>

Barnes and Noble: <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/the-l...>

Reviewed for:

Jacqie says

This was one of those books that I read for an hour and then decided that I didn't care what happened next.

I'm a role-playing gamer so I was hoping for a fun light read with some inside jokes that I could get. There are definitely references to gaming (both table-top and video) and that was fine. The set-up was okay, too. Our heroine runs a gaming store in a small town and as the story opens she's waiting to close up shop so she can run a game with her group. Her gaming group happens to all be shape-shifters, as are most of the people in her small town. She's also next door to a leprechaun who owns an antique shop. Two things happen in short order: 1. a big bad sheriff of a shifter comes in and accuses her of murder and 2. she and her friend go to the leprechaun's shop to help him identify some purchases and the shifter friend discovers her mother, shifted into her fox form, taxidermied on a store shelf! Whoops.

There's also an evil ex-boyfriend that our heroine is hiding from, not letting herself do magic so she won't draw attention to herself. Although she's been living that way for years, naturally one of the first things she does is some magic in order to help her friend.

So, there's really nothing wrong with the book. It just didn't come alive for me. Within 50 pages, big bad sheriff shape-changer and our heroine are dating/sleeping together (the sex is off-screen). The pace felt off-kilter and episodic, and there wasn't that ineffable spark that would keep me reading. I believe that this was originally self-published online. The stories within the book are fairly short, which may be part of the reason the pacing felt off to me. Maybe I've just read too many books like this. Or maybe the author needs to read more books like this.

Laura says

My initial excitement because of the lingo and pop culture references were quickly squashed by the rip roaring pace of the story. I understand it's a bind up but the writing was cheesy at best and cringeworthy at worst. I was slapped with cliche after cliche in this story. Not to mention I found myself disgusted with Jade and her inability to keep herself on track with her mind constantly on Alek's body despite the supposed importance of the 'murder' and how worried she was about her friend.

The stories are predictable, the romance shallow, and the main character tiresome. I struggled to read this book. Perhaps this is just not the genre to me but I feel like the writing didn't help at all. I felt like I was reading a converted smut fiction with all the truly x rated parts skipped. Not that I mind as Alek was just a stereotypical brooding cut out as par the course for urban supernatural stories.

I don't know, I expected more substance, but perhaps that's my fault for expecting it out of a bind up that feels rushed in every way; from writing to editing. Honestly, that's a little harsh. The consistent writing was the strongest part of the book and no mistakes jumped out at me. So it gets an A+ in that department.

I'm sure this story appeals to some people. I was actually telling a friend that it feels like something bored housewives from sitcoms would like since everyone is just so smoking hot and perfect looking. My eyes were strained from rolling too much.

My rating may be a bit harsh, but for me, it honestly feels like a 1.5. One star for solid writing and half a star for premise. Could have been much better. I won't bother reading the rest.

Wendy Bocock says

Really like all the pop culture references, even though I don't get all of the gamer ones, as I am not a gamer. Love the characters, and how the first book gets right into the action, and keeps it up throughout.

Cynthia Parkhill says

Wylde, Idaho, is the "shapeshifter capital of the west," where nearly everyone is some type of supernatural being. Protagonist Jade Crow has settled in the area to hide from a dangerous sorcerer.

Among the population of Wylde, Jade conceals her own identity as a sorceress, because of sorcerers' reputations for killing and eating supernatural beings' hearts.

A stranger arrives, a "Justice" or peacekeeper appointed to uphold the law and preserve the secret that shapeshifters exist within human society; he's drawn by a dream that suggests that Jade may pose a danger to the shapeshifters.

Level Grind is an omnibus edition of the first four books in Annie Bellett's fantasy/supernatural series, *The Twenty-Sided Sorceress*. I found it on the "Staff Picks" shelf at my local public library.

Sarah says

I really enjoyed the world building and different magical elements/powers of the different characters. My only concern is that the separate books inside the main volume are starting to have a "villain of the week" feel to them and it can start to get a bit repetitive. It might not be an issue, but with another book with 3 books inside, it could be a lot of effort before the main payoff. But the writing and characters are cool, so I'll stick it out until the end.
