

M A R T H A   W E L L S

THE ELEMENT  
OF FIRE



## The Element of Fire

*Martha Wells*

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# The Element of Fire

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## **The Element of Fire** Martha Wells

The kingdom of Ile-Rien is in peril, menaced by magical threats and court intrigue. As the weak King Roland, misled by treacherous companions, rules the country, only his ruthless mother, the Dowager Queen Ravenna, truly guards the safety of the realm. But now Urbain Grandier, the dark master of scientific sorcery, has arrived to plot against the throne and Kade, bastard sister of the king, has appeared unexpectedly at court. The illegitimate daughter of the old king and the Queen of Air and Darkness herself, Kade's true goals are cloaked in mystery. Is she in league with the wizard Grandier? Or is she laying claim to the throne? It falls to Thomas Boniface, Captain of the Queen's Guard and Ravenna's former lover, to sort out who is friend, who is foe in a deadly game to keep the Dowager Queen and the kingdom she loves from harm.

## **The Element of Fire Details**

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Author : Martha Wells

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## From Reader Review The Element of Fire for online ebook

### Reni says

Gah, I'm just so conflicted on how to rate this book!

I've rated books 3 stars that I liked much less than this, and I've rated books 4 stars I loved way more.

The characters, their chemistry, the historical detail, the court intrigue and the fencing all deserve 5 stars! The book made me laugh, the book made me cry, the book made me sigh with heart-break.

But the fantasy aspects of the world building, parts of the narrative structure and the book's pacing in parts of the story didn't make me a very happy reader.

Let's begin with the world building: I like how this book both ties into early modern European history, but without replicating it exactly. Well, most obviously the book's Royal court is based on 17th century French royal courts, complete with a musketeer body guard and politically powerful, scheming favourites. There's direct references made to events that did occur in French history like the exorcism of Loudun, referenced here down to the name of the poor schmuck who got punished for it (Urbain Grandier), and the young king's relationship to his favourite is reminiscent of multiple examples from history as well (Cinq-Mars comes to mind immediately).

The parts of the setting that replicated history (albeit with a twist here and there) are the parts that worked best for me.

However, the fantasy aspects read a little bare-bones, rudimentary.

(view spoiler)

It's a waste of what could have been a great means to create tension early.

Kade is our only early example of a Fae hostile to the human Court and only manages to read as a threat the first two times she's mentioned.(view spoiler) I'm a tiny bit upset that there isn't a more direct follow-up to this novel (i.e. set within the same time-frame) that could have explored these things in greater detail.

All this causes the big battle scene in the first half of the book to feel a bit hanging in the air without built-up supporting it. The situation isn't helped by the fact that the scene is further interrupted by Kade's POV finally explaining the way Faire works and introducing the main baddie on the side of the fay - all of which could have been mentioned earlier without disrupting the flow of the story.

Another issue I had with the plot is the amount of coincidences that just happen to keep the plot moving, such as characters who could have imparted information relevant to the plot being interrupted and subsequently removed from the story until their information becomes outdated (view spoiler). This is a type of storytelling that can be effective once or twice, but definitely is overused in this book.

However, the mystery novel aspects to this book that are mainly fed by the many intrigues and outright plots being spun at the palace got me enthralled every time. I wanted to find out what was going pretty badly - always praying that my favourite characters would make it through unscathed - and was loathe to put the

book down whenever there was a promise of fresh pieces to the various puzzles.

The main characters and the reader's worry for these characters are the true strengths of this book. As a reader we get to look surprisingly deep into the minds of characters like Thomas, Ravenna and Kade, and I found myself unable not to fall for them - and rather quickly, too! I've stopped expecting it from single Fantasy volumes, but all of these characters are granted a complete character arc and come out of it believable marked by their journey.

As for the characters... Man, I loved Thomas so much. He's the kind of hero you want in an adventure like this. Since the comparison to the Dumas' musketeers probably has to come up at some point: Think of d'Artagnan but more The Vicomte de Bragelonne era d'Artagnan than Three Musketeers d'Artagnan. Or maybe Athos without the angsty past or the misogyny. As a huge fan of the honourable but slightly cynical dashing swordsman type of character, I found this guy irresistible. He also gets roughed up a lot and has great chemistry with the ladies, which is a great plus in my book. (view spoiler)

Kade is rather interesting as well. I didn't know quite what to make of her, but by the end I was rooting for her. One thing that confused me about her was that I found it quite hard to gauge her age. At times she read more like a 19-year old than someone well into their twenties, but this is actually well in line with her backstory that gets revealed throughout the book, since her upbringing is so unusual - and unhappy! However, I never felt the need to wrap her in a blanket and feed her cookies. Her bravado is mostly show at first, she has to fight for her bravery and shed the parts of her that tied her to the child she once was, but lucky the path she gets to take there is a sympathetic one.

Romance spoilers: (view spoiler)

Likable secondary characters like Falaise round off the good impression.

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**In summary:** If you read for characters, can overlook the sparse world-building, and enjoy swashbuckling heroes, fierce queens, and troubled heroines on a journey to decide want to be, you should give this a chance.

## Lata says

Pretty conventional fantasy based in a European-like city/country. Swords, rapiers, jherkins, smocks, ladies-in-waiting, sorcerers, fae, scheming and double-dealing abound. I did, however, care about Kade and Thomas and Ravenna. I could have spent lots of time with Ravenna.

The book was a pleasant enough diversion, and piqued my interest sufficiently for me to continue with the next Il-Rien book, as I understand it's better than this one.

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## Lindsay Stares says

Premise: Set in the same world as The Wizard Hunters and its sequels, but takes place centuries prior. In the kingdom of Ile-Rien, the Captain of the Queen's Guard goes to rescue an academic sorcerer from a dangerous foreign wizard. It seems simple enough, but with power-hungry sycophants circling the young king, who himself seems disinclined to care about the kingdom, everything is part of someone's plot and

everyone will be drawn into the battle for the future of the country.

I really enjoyed this book. Wells seems to have a knack for characters who I find likable because of their abrasive ways. In this book, it's Kade Carrion, half-fay bastard sister to the king. She's all sorts of awesome. She could be powerful, but chooses to mostly skate by on her luck and trickery. She's snarky and sad and simply delightful.

The Dowager Queen Ravenna is pretty spectacular as well. Just because her weak-willed son has reached his majority doesn't mean she'll easily give up the power she's wielded her entire life. She's often cynical and angry, but also extremely clever and hard, as she's needed to be to keep her land safe through violent war.

Captain Thomas Boniface is a bit more generic, but he's a good-hearted sort, although he's learned enough cynicism and deceit from Ravenna to have survived this long at her side.

The story is easy to follow and trips along at a good pace. I did see one twist coming, but just long enough to really feel the foreshadowing hit. The romantic subplot is well handled, and while it informs characters' motivations, it never overwhelms the story.

The descriptions of the various fay creatures are great, and the differences between fay magic and human sorcery (only alluded to loosely in the other books in this world) are explored in depth.

Overall, while neither groundbreaking or perfect, I found this to be a thoroughly engaging and enjoyable read.

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### **Miriam says**

Swashbuckling, intrigue, sorcery, snide banter, evil attack fairies...

Free at <http://www.marthawells.com/eof1-8.htm>

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### **Bettie? says**

Read for free: <http://www.marthawells.com/eof1-8.htm>

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### **The other Sandy says**

I normally don't like fantasy novels that revolve around court intrigue because politics bores the crap out of me, but Martha Wells has a way of making political maneuverings seem just as exciting as the battle scenes, of which there are many in this book.

It gets off to something of a slow start with the author dropping the reader into a large body of characters, only to switch scenes and drop the reader into another large body of characters. Fortunately Wells is good at drawing connections between those characters so you don't feel like you need to take notes to keep track of

everyone. Of course after the initial attack on the palace, there are a lot fewer characters to keep track of.

Aside from action and intrigue, there's also a bit of romance, but it's the kind I can totally get behind. No dewy-eyed looks or statuesque bombshells here. Kade goes through the entire book with tangled hair and a mud-spattered dress because it frankly doesn't occur to her not to. Thomas has a sense of irony and wry humor that allow him to appreciate and not feel threatened by strong women, while still being a brilliant soldier himself. There are no scenes of repressed lust either. Kade and Thomas come together in small increments (Him: Maybe she's not the person I always thought she was; Her: I'm not going to be one of those silly cows in court who swoon over Thomas Boniface...even if he does have beautiful eyes...not that I care...well, crap.).

Wells has a breezy writing style and a wonderful ear for dialogue that make every conversation a joy to read. This is by far my favorite book this year and the most fun I've had reading anything in ages.

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### **Tiara says**

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I'd probably rate this somewhere between 3 and 3.5 stars. In the beginning, this book was a ball of confusion for me. I said it started slow, but that's not correct. How can a beginning that includes the Queen's Guard literally being fought by a warded house be a slow start? Definitely not a slow start, but the particular moment left me feeling disoriented for a while. Things didn't start becoming clearer until around page 50 or so. That's when the book started to answer my question, "To what end?" While I saw a certain reveal coming, I was glad she didn't let that drag out to the end. She introduced it about midway through the story, which gave the plot room to explore other things. Once things started to happen, this book built momentum, escalating fairly quickly by the time readers start nearing the middle of the book.

However, with the momentum came a few hiccups. There were too many instances of buildup for certain plot points and then, the denouement for these things didn't deliver that satisfying sense of closure one expects, which can be frustrating. Some other things that were twined into the plot had a tendency to come off as "Oh my, what a coincidence!" moments, followed abruptly with, "Well, if that was the case, why didn't they do/say/tell [insert scenario here] instead of nothing?" Some things seem to started to buildup to something interesting and then suddenly fizzle out.

I liked most of the main characters. Ravenna, Thomas, Grandier, and Kade really got to shine throughout the book. Grandier's gray morality and "be the monster they made you" attitude was interesting. I loved Ravenna, especially the fact that, unlike other book nobility, Ravenna surrounded herself with gentlewomen and queen's servants that she taught to be as scrupulous, resourceful, and quick-thinking as herself. Her servants were not fodder, and she was just as loyal to them as they were to her. Other characters felt a little weaker in their roles, such as the King and Queen, but they had some memorable moments as well.

I also liked that Wells' magic system didn't automatically make the fay overpowered. She stuck more to the mischievous, flighty, chaotic nature of them and their magic while sorcery was a more powerful tool as a learned art. Fay magic is quick and illusionary where sorcery takes years of training and dedication to master. The fay are afraid of this careful control of magic because a fay can only be so good whereas sorcery gives its users access to remarkable power. Kade toes the line of human and fay, using both fay magic and sorcery to her advantage. Kade wasn't a magical genius, though, because she's not a master of either magic,

but both forms of magic gave her a varied arsenal of attacks, such as pulling glamour out of the air or using spellfire to light a candle.

This book was part fantasy, part mystery. I'm curious about the Seelie and Unseelie Courts and wonder if I'll see more of them in future books. Derek Perkins was an engaging narrator and an excellent voice for this series, though I did find some of his voices a little too similar for some characters. His vocal characterization of both Ravenna and Kade were my favorites, but he did do well enough that I will continue to listen to the audiobooks. I loved the various little pieces of the puzzle coming together throughout the book, even if I felt the ultimate reveal was very dramatic against the more mellow tone of the story, especially considering how so many points had such underwhelming conclusions. I wasn't as taken with this book as I was *The Cloud Roads*. *The Cloud Roads* feels like the type of book that I would use to introduce people to Wells' work, but I had fun with this book all the same.

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### **Darce says**

DNF at 30%

I was lent this book by a friend, but I just couldn't get into it, no matter how many times I gave it another chance. I was confused about who was who throughout the book and everyone seemed to have the same name.

When I lost my page one day, I took it as a sign to stop reading, especially given I couldn't remember where I had been up to in the story because it was so boring!

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### **Alissa says**

I liked this tale. It is very fantasy, maybe a bit on the classic side but it holds up well, and I particularly appreciated the clear narrative approach, its refreshing straightforwardness –by no means to be confused with simplicity. There are interesting characters, action, politics, irony and mysteries. And the Fay! 3.5 stars rounded down because the romance is dropped like an afterthought and it fell flat, anyway considering this is a debut book I'm impressed; surely this won't be my last Martha Wells's story.

*"Do you think you can control your desire for martyrdom and let me manage this?"*

That's what I wrote a couple of weeks ago when I jotted down my review. Actually, I've just finished *The Death of the Necromancer* and I'm in awe.

In this respect, though a very enjoyable book on its own which I would recommend for a pleasant fantasy read, the *Element of Fire* is kind of a dry run (pun intended, probably) compared to the second standalone of the *Ile-Rien* series. There all my minor gripes have been fully addressed: the characters are adult and well-rounded while the romance is just hinted at and it's very, very clever.

*Thomas had always known that if he had to die to please a royal ego, he wanted it to be as scandalous, messy, and politically inconvenient for as many persons as possible.*

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## Cat M says

Reread. I think I first read this sometime in 2010.

This is a secondary-world fantasy set in the approximate equivalent of 17th Century France only with both sorcery and Fae creatures.

The heart of this story is the subtle balances and shifting alliances of court politics, in a country with a young, too-weak King and a ruthless, perhaps too-strong Dowager Queen. And it centres on the unlikely alliance that develops between Thomas Boniface, Captain of the Queen's Guard and Kade Carrion bastard, half-fay sister to the king, when the court comes under threat from forces both without and within.

The first third of the book is full of court intrigue and figuring out what angles the various characters are playing. That was fascinating to reread knowing where it was headed and picking up on clues and bits of foreshadowing I didn't necessarily catch on first read.

And then things take a turn for the worse and there's a lot of death and destruction and fighting the dark forces of the Fay and in general rather a large mess.

Wells doesn't flinch from showing the violence and chaos and death, but she doesn't dwell on it either. Horrific things happen, but they aren't the focus of the narrative and I appreciate that.

As is usual with Wells, where she soars is with her characters, all of whom are complicated and messily human, none spotless in virtue and none entirely, unredeemedly evil.

I especially love Thomas and Kade and the slow-burn distrust turned friendship turned romance between them. This is one of my favourite lines in the book that captures the development and appeal of their relationship:

*"They could hardly object to each other's eavesdropping, Thomas supposed, having just come to the mutual conclusion that they were both too despicable to live in polite company anyway. "*

Thomas and Kade are perfect foils for each other with contrasting experiences and abilities that allow them to shore up each other's weaknesses and support each other's strengths, and I love them together rather a lot.

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## Estara says

This was Martha Wells first published novel and while the manybooks.net edition may have been revised, I can't discern any breaks in between original and revised edition.

This may be the most tour-de-force action story I've read so far from the author - my feeling mostly stems from the fact that the timeline is only a few days at the most and nearly everything happens around the royal palace and within the capital of the country. The only other distinct setting is Kade's favourite castle (and what a brilliant fairy-tale fae confection it is, for the short time we are here) - this made me feel the developments as almost simultaneous and incredibly fast.

The plot concerns one archvillain (but even he has been made into one by the horrific practices which his country practices on magicians who supposedly have broken church rules) who has decided that he needs to lead a more tolerant country, the one this story is set in, into a war with its neighbour, so those horrible anti-magic inquisition rules can be abolished.

This plan depends on destroying current rule - and here it meets the current situation at the court: a strong, capable, strict dowager queen, rightful heir of the royal house - who managed to win the recent war against their neighbour but had to leave her son and the illegitimate daughter of her husband - a weak, egotistical megalomaniac sociopath - in the capital at the mercy of their father.

The horrific result of this situation is never just told, just constantly shown in the interaction with the current king, her son, with the original revenge and now return of his sister - whose mother was one of the fae queens: the queen of Air and Darkness, balancing Seelie and Unseelie Court.

The man at the centre of it all, doing his queen's bidding since he became Captain of the Queen's Guard is Thomas Boniface, whose office has made him cut all ties of loyalty except with the royal family when he took the job he had aimed for in his 20s.

The dowager queen Ravenna wants her son Roland to become an able ruler, but she sees that he is dependent on an egocentric cousin of his, Denzil. Beautiful and in her 50s she has just recently stopped having her guard captain as a lover.

And now that the war is over, Thomas has found that he no longer wants to be a tool to hold up the reign of a person who may not even be qualified to rule the country and to mop up unpleasant critics of the crown, whose stupidity didn't really deserve killing.

Into this situation, threat from the outside, threat via a weak king and the queen whom he only married for dynastic purposes, comes Kade/Katherine and wants to make some sort of peace with her past. Kade, who has had feelings for Thomas because he was one of the few people in her past who never treated her as only the daughter of her mother (yes, we do have 20 years of age difference).

Basically the reader then follows Thomas in his dealings with the current crisis situation, see how Kade and her own past bring some unexpected powers to bear on the situation and how Thomas deals with his new insights into a grown-up Kade, fae powers and all - unexpected by the court and the villain - and has to ride the roller-coaster of changing chances in the fight for the rule of the country and the final fate of Thomas and Kade.

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### **Aoife says**

First of all, I should have read this and not listened to the audiobook. My memory for names is bad at the best of times but combine it with unusual names (here some fantasy names with a pinch of French thrown in) and some really gripping scenes got ruined for me because I tried to remember who the person was that just did the thing that was apparently a big deal.

Otherwise, this book falls into the 'I can see other people enjoying this a lot more than I did' category. Not that I didn't enjoy it at all. It had great characters. None of the human characters were one-dimensional and also the bad guys got their proper motivation beyond 'I like laughing diabolically as often as possible'. And

the good guys sometimes had to do things that weren't so good (without angsting about it). Also, the author clearly put a lot of thought into the workings of the royal court and the court intrigue (a lot more than many other fantasy authors...) . Oh and the final battle was pretty epic.

Now for the but. Well, the variety of minor buts that wouldn't have bothered me as much if there hadn't been so many. Like the overuse of the 'I have important information but I can't tell you right now because of reasons. I will wait till it's too late for my information to be helpful (or I just die before I can tell you)'-trope. I buy that once (but will still hate it), but this book just did it over and over...

I also just don't like the fae. Like, at all. I'm not that fond of books that base their magic on fairy mythology (fairy rings, land of the fae etc.) This is very much personal preference but it's just such a convenient way of adding chaotic evil for the sake of evil characters. And especially if you compare them to the well-thought out human evil guys in this book it feels like a let-down.

Lastly. The Romance. It did not work for me *at all*. I don't think I ever went WTF as much at a character proclaiming that they had fallen in love. (view spoiler) Because I just didn't see it at all. I saw a great friendship but the romantic feelings just came completely out of the blue and mostly just annoyed me.

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### **Wealhtheow says**

The best fantasy I've read in at least a year. If you enjoy GRRM's Song of Ice and Fire series, you should pick this book up as well. The old king is dead. In his place rules his only living son, the weak and ineffectual King Roland, who is utterly at the command of his treacherous childhood friend. It falls to the dowager queen Ravenna and her faithful, but aging, Captain of the Queen's Guard to keep the country together. Into this already explosive situation comes Roland's bastard sister Kaid, who is the fey daughter of the Queen of Air and Darkness, and a serial killing renegade magician. Internecine court politics, well-rounded characters, and a whole lot of adventure combine to make this a truly enjoyable book.

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### **carol. says**

Three and a half stars.

If you are considering Martha Wells, I suggest starting with one of her books besides The Element of Fire. The Death of the Necromancer (review), for instance, or The Cloud Roads (review), or even City of Bones (review). I thoroughly enjoyed—and own—all of them, though all are very different approaches to the fantasy genre. Fire was her debut book, published in 1993, and lacks the finesse of her later works. It is a more traditional fantasy focused on a court setting, with court politics, kingdom disputes and intrusions from the land of fairy defining the struggle.

Much like Necromancer, the story begins with a heist. It's an engaging way to begin a story, but in this case, requires attention as the team begins an orchestrated break-in. Captain Boniface is conducting a raid of a foreign sorcerer's house, an undercover mission to rescue a kidnapped but disgraced sorcerer Galen Dubell. At the same time, a theater troupe in the capital city of Vienne is preparing to perform with one of their new players, Kade. The two find themselves on the same side when a golem breaks loose during a performance. From there, both internal and external conflicts threaten to destabilize the kingdom of Ile-Rein. Captain Boniface finds himself unsure of who to trust, and Kade discovers herself questioning everything she knew

about the court and her upbringing.

Viewpoint alternates between Boniface and Kade, creating a situation where the reader gets insight into each as they work to prevent the kingdom from falling to the opposition. The villain isn't particularly hidden, but unraveling the complexity of the scheme keeps a few surprises in store.

It took a long time to understand the world Wells was creating, which hampered my initial ability to immerse into the story. Starting in the middle of an action sequence, in a fantasy setting with magical elements is only the start. Adding internal court politics that have their beginning in the distant past, a neighboring country with a radically different culture, as well as the realm of fae means the number of complicated elements build instead of resolve. As Captain Boniface and Kade are also attempting to find their emotional footing, it's a lot to weave together, and enough for a trilogy. Sanderson, had he written this, would have made the events into a six-book arc. At least. Eventually I lost myself in the world, but I don't know that this is a book that one would want to pick up and put down, or read over a month, at the risk of losing continuity.

While I enjoyed the writing style, the tone felt uneven. Though the book jacket describes it as stemming from a "swashbuckling tradition," and cites "Errol Flynn panache, style, and atmosphere," I would disagree. Multiple deaths and the possible fall of a kingdom raise the stakes beyond a simple adventure where all the hero risks is pride or a short stay in the local prison. These characters are fighting for identity, beliefs and ultimately, their lives.

If you are a fan of traditional fantasy, or a fan of Wells' work, I'd give this a go. But if you don't have large amounts of reading time, I'd recommend one of her other works over *The Element of Fire*, particularly Nebula nominee *The Death of the Necromancer*, which feels like a more polished version of this work.

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## **Joy says**

Yay for free ebooks on Stanza/iPhone! This had been recommended to me in passing, but I didn't follow-up on it until I found myself in this recent mood for fantasy of manners. And this was exactly what I hoped it would be: filled with adventure and court intrigue, with very complex character development, flashes of wit and humor, and a dash of romance. I especially appreciated the strong women characters (Kade!), but even the less likable characters were very interesting and felt real. And while I confess I completely lost the threads of the plot toward the end (as people endlessly found ways to doublecross each other--will have to reread and make sense of it), the resolution was still very satisfying.

I should also note that I managed to enjoy this despite my very strong aversion to faeries in fantasy literature. (I blame said aversion on lots of mediocre urban fantasy. My dislike of faeries in fiction almost rivals my dislike of elves in fiction.)

I believe a free download of this is also available on Wells' website; I think the physical book is out of print.

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