

Intro:

Atonement of the Spine Cleaver is a fantasy fiction centered around an FMC who is very powerful but doesn't believe she's worthy of power due to her genocidal past. It's an exciting book full of intrigue, action, teamwork, moral greyness all around. Each individual has 1 or 2 magical powers tied to one or more of the 12 magic houses in the universe.

The origin story:

It is F.E. Bryce's debut novel. She started writing it in 2020 during the pandemic when stuck at home for 2 weeks in quarantine. In her own words, she worked on it tirelessly for 2 weeks. For years, she'd struggled writing anything past a couple hundred words, but something about this story stuck with her. The character Rorax stuck with her.

You can glean more about her from her Instagram <https://www.instagram.com/f.e.bryce.writes/>

How it crossed my path:

I was browsing *no surprises here* sub-Reddits about badass FMCs, great storylines, and E2L romance fantasy fictions when I came across these 3 words "Atonement" "Spine" "Cleaver". In a world of A ___ of ___ and ___ title formats in fantasy fiction, this was all it took for me to know this book would be different. People mentioned it was a debut novel and had 'Editing errors' they couldn't tolerate. I thought to myself 'Well, who cares about that?! Sure, it'll be irritating, but I can handle it'. I was right.

Feeling the feels:

I felt this book had multiple powerful, badass FMCs who were unafraid to kill or use violence when needed. Which was different compared to many books that have assassins that don't assassinate or warriors that don't do any war or thieves that don't do thieving...you get the gist. I felt the stakes rise as the Prologue painted a picture of blood, fire, screaming civilians in the midst of an ongoing genocide from the POV of a soldier committing it in the year 10,033 A.R., faced with an irreversible choice, kill the queen or kill her mother. The main story then started about 50 years later.

The initial chapters introduced me to friendships among fiery warriors of a Heilstorm unit, a world with various elemental magicks, and a protagonist who gets branded to participate in a competition. The middle chapters had complex world building and an expansive magick system, severe heartbreaks and complicated loves, and a lot of action that made my jaw drop. The last few chapters escalated every aspect of the book and left it on a cliffhanger, of course. I really liked how the author managed more than 5 POVs very smoothly in one book, which IS a challenge and generally not recommended. The characters were distinct, complex, fun, aggressive and their interactions were written beautifully.

3 excerpts that aggressively hooked me:

1. Glimpse into the title

"You are a monster!" the man snarled, spitting in the dirt at Rorax's boots, yanking his body fruitlessly against his constraints. "In the eyes of the Lyondreans! In the eyes of the gods! You're all monsters!"

Volla wisely ignored the man and continued down the hall, but Rorax gripped the man's face gently, tipping his chin to the side so he was forced to see her easy grin. "I might be your villain, but don't forget that Lyondrea started this when they started opening the Pits and sending their soldiers over the border to kill the Realm's civilians."

The man didn't register Rorax's words as his rage splintered into fear when he stared up at Rorax, his terror plain to see even as he started to tremble under her fingertips. "I... I know you, *Spine Cleaver*."

2.

The black dress Jia had borrowed whipped around her calves in the sharp wind blowing over the castle. Dark clouds stretched over the sun and casted everything into shadows. The dark clouds matched her mood.

She stood at the top of the battlements, looking out over the empty fields of the castle grounds. She turned the two letters she had penned over in her fingers, running her fingertips over the cursive names she'd scratched onto the front of each with her quill in black ink. General Frostguard and Kiniera Kulltoug....

....It was tempting really, more tempting than she would have believed to just pitch herself off the side of the tower where she stood, to both ensure the Guardian held no power over her friend and fellow Heilstorm, and to put an end to her grief.

3.

"Wait." Jia ignored him and took one step closer. "Is it true you fought a Minotaur in the woods?" Raengar nodded. "But my testimony was not enough to prompt the Council of Houses into action."

Jia reached out into a bag at her side and fished out five vials. Two of them were full of hair, the other three were filled with blood. She stuck her hand out, offering them to him. "Take these. Kiniera said they needed to get to the University of Poison as soon as possible. They're samples of our blood after we..." Jia's voice broke, and she took a long settling breath before trying again. "They're samples of our blood after we were exposed to the blocker. Kiniera wants to know what it was, who made it, and who ordered it..."

....Raengar's eyes widened a fraction, and he took the vials very carefully from Jia's hands. As angry as he was, this evidence was desperately needed. As it was, the trial against Määr hung by a thread.

Parting thoughts:

At the end of it, I felt excited about all the twists and turns and plots, subplots, sub-sub-plots that had opened up. I was happy about the different friendship, love story, and enemy dynamics explored. I was left feeling incomplete at all the incomplete threads and couldn't wait for book 2, *Ascent of the Copper Dragon* (Readers beware, Ms. Bryce seems to be pulling off a Patrick Rothfuss. The launch of book 2 has been continuously delayed, so pick this book 1 at your literary peril). But most of all, I felt goosebumps at how a genocide plot and its characters can be handled, how two sides of a horrific tale can be looked at with compassion, and how unimaginable forgiveness works along with true atonement.