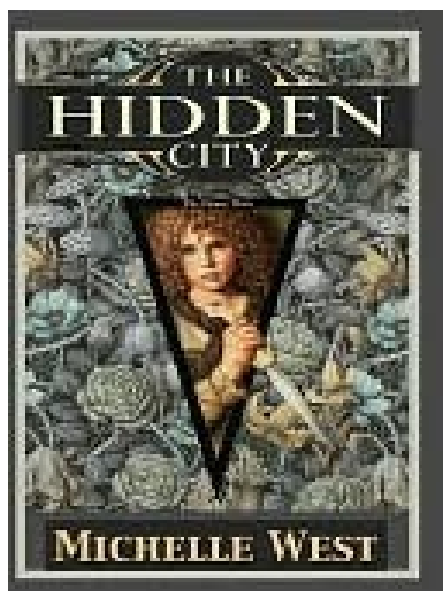




The Hidden City

Michelle West

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The Hidden City is the first novel in *The House War*, a saga of the battle to control the most powerful of the ruling House in the Essalieyan Empire -- House Terafin. But it is also the tale of a remarkable young woman, Jewel Markess.

An orphan living in the slums of the capital city, Jewel (known as Jay by her friends) scrapes by however she can. But after she steals money from a recluse named Rath, he seeks her out to reclaim what is his. Discovering her under a bridge and deathly ill, he takes her in and nurses her back to health. But once she has recovered, Jay insists she must repay her debt, and Rath finds that he cannot be rid of her. Driven by visions she can't control, Jay begins to rescue other children and bring them into Rath's home.

As Jay forms the group that will become her den, Rath walks a far more dangerous path. After a long-ago betrayal, Rath is estranged from his family, while his sister is The Terafin, head of House Terafin. Rath makes his living by prowling the ruins of the undercity, finding relics of an earlier age and selling them to the highest bidder. But now the demons that once nearly destroyed the Essalieyan Empire are stirring again, reaching out to strike down any who can give warning against them -- like Rath.

Soon, Rath, who treads the ancient ways hidden beneath the slums of Averalaaan, and Jay, who is cursed with the untrained talent of a seer, will find themselves targeted by these deadly beings.

From the Paperback edition.

The Hidden City Details

Date : Published March 3rd 2009 by DAW (first published March 4th 2008)

ISBN :

Author : Michelle West

Format : Kindle Edition 768 pages

Genre : Fantasy, Epic Fantasy, Fiction, Science Fiction Fantasy, High Fantasy

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From Reader Review The Hidden City for online ebook

Dr susan says

I was going to say I enjoyed The Hidden City, but 'enjoyed' feels wrong. The House War saga is darker than the Chronicles of Elantra, and the multiple points of view made it difficult to find a character to which I could relate. Perhaps I was enthralled, since enthrallment can be a shadowed thing. I am glad my love of Sagara's Silence led me to Elantra, and then to the House War.

Brad says

I don't know what this will be like for future readers who take all of these books in internal chronological order. Me, I've read all the other related series already. So even on the first time through, the plot was something like coming back to a book you've already read. If you're not someone who ever does that, maybe this won't do all that much for you. But why I reread books - why I'm rereading this one right now, actually - is for the writing and the characters. And the more time we spend with Rath, knowing where this is all heading aah, it's heartbreak. Maybe inevitable in some form or other, but still. Plus Jewel and all the others. Time in their company is well spent.

Audrey says

200 pages of plot, 500 pages of one dude singing about his feelings.

At one point, one of the characters thinks, "So few words, and yet so many."

Dear character, I KNOW EXACTLY WHAT YOU MEAN.

And considering said character is in the middle of a 40-page conversation with the hero (they literally just sit in a room and talk for. Forty. Pages.) there should be a sense of irony, and yet there's not. There's just... more words.

Rath, our hero, is a grumpy asshole. We know this because he prides himself on grumpiness, and because he states that he adopted a street child in order to remake her, because she reminds him of his sister, who he is super estranged from. This estranged relationship, summed up by Rath through most of the book as "Who am I? And what will become of the house of Handernes?" is a constant theme. And by constant I mean that every two pages, minimum, Rath stops and sings about his feelings, by sitting down and asking himself, "Who am I? Who is Rath? And what will become of the house of Handernes?"

It is... long. And it's a pity, because a) I love grumpy asshole heroes, and b) I can see, underneath 500 pages of singing about Rath's feelings, that there's a quite good fantasy story trapped in a well. If there had been a smart editor about, they would've read the 750+ page manuscript, chopped it down to 200 pages and mailed it to the author with a fistful of xanax and their home phone number.

The urchins are awesome. The city -- what we see of it, because there's precious little time here spent on world-building while everyone needs to sing about Rath's feelings -- seems awesome. The villainy is chewy and complicated. Rath will be awesome after ~~his best friend Andrei tosses him facedown on a flat surface~~

and [REDACTED] the stuffing out of him some therapy. Rath will be awesome after therapy.

But 500 pages of everyone, not just Rath, but everyone singing about Rath's feelings is not awesome.

Other things that are not awesome:

--Jewel, who sounds about twenty-three, but, we are given to understand, is ten. This is explained several times; moreover, Rath has to spend a lot of time singing about why he rescued Jewel as part of his navel-gazing, constantly comments on how childlike she is. THIS WILL BE IMPORTANT IN A MINUTE.

--Hand-wave-y magic system. Is mages! Is talent-born! Is... maker-born? Ok! Is fire because demon, yes? Now back to Rath: "Who am I? ~~I'm Jean Valjean!~~ What will become of the house of Handerwringing?"

--Lack of world-building. Lack of time spent on characters of other orphans who are, quite honestly, pretty interesting, so that just felt cheaty as fuck.

--The ending (tw: child rape).

Now, y'all.

I read a lot of horribly depressing and explicit crime fiction. A lot of it. So when I tell you that Jewel's rape by Lord Waverly, while ostensibly taking place mostly off-screen is one of THE most squicky things I have ever read, understand that I am not easily squicked by crime things.

But everyone has spent 700 pages on how Jewel is a child and then we have an anti-hero off-screen listening to Jewel being raped and glorying in it (which I can grant you makes sense for that particular character -- give credit for consistent storytelling where credit is due) and then Jewel gets up and is like, "I'm fine, I'm good," as the rest of the urchins arrive, and then MAKES THE ANTI-HERO HER BODYGUARD BECAUSE AS WE CAN SEE, THAT'S JUST GONE REALLY REALLY WELL, while all her urchin friends and her father figure Rath are standing there staring at her all half-naked and well, just raped and it is seriously, seriously not okay. Not even a little.

--Plus we pause the action while the anti-hero has the rapist on the floor with a knife at his throat to all have a discussion of how we feel about whether she should kill him. This is not actually how action sequences go.

A pox on everybody's house. I'm out.

momokaachan says

This is a terrible book. A wonderful book. An awful book, at times. Frequently a tedious book. I had to poke myself to continue at times, and I would put it down and read something lighter...but I couldn't stand to let it be. I wasn't really happy at all with the ending, so less one star. I need a soaking, steaming bath before I try the next book.

Cyn Armistead says

I love love love this book. If you haven't read anything else in this universe, you'll be just fine. I've read all

the previous books, and plan to go back and re-read them as soon as this bit (duology? trilogy? I don't know West's plans) is done.

The only thing that kept it from five stars was the repetitive nature of some characters' internal dialogues. I got the point right away, but I suppose some readers might need more. I don't know that anyone needs to be hit over the head with Rath, Jewel, and Duster's issues, though.

In any case, while huge, the book is well worth reading, and I am eager to read whatever comes next.

Starfire says

Back when I used to post my book reviews on my LJ, whenever I reviewed a book by Michelle West (regardless of the name she was writing under at the time - West, Sagara, or Sagara West), I'd preface the review with a warning that this was my absolute favourite fantasy author **EVER** so the reader could take it as read that I'd love the book, and that any review that followed would be glowingly positive because... well... that's just how things are.

I wasn't **quite** sure if that would still be the case with *The Hidden City*, because although I *loved* the Sun Sword books with a passion, Jewel Markess ATerafin was never my favourite character... that honour was split somewhere between Kallandras and Avandar, with a few of the supporting characters (e.g. Auralis and Kiriel, and **of course** Isladar) coming in not far behind. Y'know - the broken, morally grey, interesting ones who still manage to be supremely competent despite being completely and utterly messed up psychologically. Jewel always seemed too... balanced and certain of herself, even when she was doubting herself, and allround GOOD, to push my either my broken-but-competent or competent-controlled-and-amoral buttons. And because of that, she was often "just another heroine" to me and I focussed on the other characters who interested me more.

I'm happy to say though, that despite this first House War series book revolving around Jewel as the central protagonist, I still really like most of the book, and I thoroughly LOVED the last 200 pages or so of it. Jewel as the 10-year old she is in this book is very much the same as Jewel as the 30-something she is in the Sun Sword set, but I can live with that: she struck me as a very young 30, and here, she strikes me as a very old 10, so the voice-consistency works for me...

Although *Hidden City* doesn't have the cast of thousands than the Sun Sword set had, the supporting characters it does have are, for the most part, awesome; with several of them feeling as though they're offering me foreshadows of characters I know I'm going to meet later in the Sun Sword set (or at least, Jewel's interactions and dynamics with them offer those foreshadows). For example, in Rath, and Jewel's interactions with him, I see foreshadows/echoes of her dynamics with Avandar; and in Patris AMatie, I see distinct echoes of Isladar.

Not surprising, given his moral greyness, I loved Rath as a character. But he was far from the only highlight for me. My two other favourites were the painfully broken Duster (whom I remember meeting as one of Jewel's memories, and in whom I see echoes of the Kiriel who will come later); and the other is a character who never actually appears in person, but nevertheless informs a huge amount of who Jewel is and why she becomes the person she is, so I feel as though I know her as well as I know Jewel herself: her twisted, angry, resentful, and-yet-somehow-still-loving Oma (*either Aunt or Grandmother - I wasn't clear, but I also didn't find the distinction really mattered*). All of these characters are so wonderfully complex and **real** in their flaws and strengths that their depth quite simply takes my breath away at times.

Then again, Michelle West's strengths, for me, have always been in the richness and the complexity of her characters - that, and her ability to wield small, well-selected groups of words so skillfully that her phrases occasionally leave me stunned, or tearing up, or aching, and *always* wishing I had a tenth of her writing talent.

Contrasted against the characterisation, I found the actual plot of Hidden City pales. That said, however, I like that I can see how events that are going to happen in the Hunter & Sun Sword sets are being set up in this book, but it's a long, slow setting up, and most of the plot that's internal to this book, for me, seemed to happen in the last couple of hundred pages of it. Without wanting to create major spoilers, the point at which Jewel makes it clear she's willing to do what's necessary to help Duster achieve what the latter has been living for ever since the two of them met is the turning point of this book for me. That's the point it changes from a book I really liked just because it allowed me to *be* back in the world of Averalaaan and the Twin Kings again, with characters I loved to spend time with, into a story that I couldn't put down and resented anyone or anything that took me away from it till I found out how it ended.

Had the first part of the book been as compelling and complex and demanding on my emotions as those last 200 pages, I would have given the book a 10/10 and complained that the scale didn't go high enough. As it is, I'm still giving it a **9/10** with a note that I'm **really** glad the next book (City of Night) became available from the library the day before I finished this instalment. I'm just not sure how I'm going to cope when I finish that one and then have to wait another year or so before House Name (Book 3) comes out!

wishforagiraffe says

This book was really excellent. The main characters are a 10 year old girl and a 40ish man who used to be a noble and has given that up to live in the slums of his city. He meets the girl when she tries to pickpocket him, and even though he prefers to be alone, he ends up taking her under his wing. She ends up being more than she seems and they end up getting involved in a strange mire of circumstances. There is an incredible amount of tension and suspense in this story, and the writing and prose is absolutely superb. The dialogue is written a little strangely, but mostly because it doesn't give backstory or history between characters and is written the way that people actually carry on conversations. I'm looking forward to reading more of this series!

Violettebird says

Amazon says this book is 768 pages. If that's accurate, then this book is a criminal waste of space.

The entire plot is: Jewel finds an orphan and takes them home. Rath makes a *:/* face. There is some allusion to the kids being ~important~, but no actual proof. Rinse, repeat, add in some vague conspiracy stuff involving a child brothel.

But after ten? Twelve? orphans, they still don't get any personality. We don't know their favourite colours, we don't know their backgrounds (because asking about their past would be anathema to street kid rules) we don't really know what they do all day beyond maybe learn to read. 768 pages that's supposed to set up these street kids as important and tight knit, and we get NOTHING to make us believe that or give a damn beyond Jewel's say-so. And that's pathetic.

Also, the entire book is written in Important Pauses.

"It's all written like this," Jewel said. Then she stopped and turned to look at her friend, who was not her friend, yet, but might be. Someday. If she found the words. "Every single conversation is like this."

"It doesn't sound much like ten year olds," snapped Duster.

"No."

They kept walking. Someone was wearing a nice dress, and Jewel hated them for buying nice things instead of feeding every poor person ever. She thought about actually talking and developing character with her bajillion foundlings, but found she could, instead, neatly summarize them with a passing sentence about who was in the kitchen feeding people, and who was learning to read.

"I don't think they'll ever actually develop personality," she said regretfully. Then winced. They were the wrong words. Always the wrong words. She remembered her Oma saying something bitter and cutting but deeply insightful. Oma always had exactly the right words.

"I have personality!" Duster snapped. She always snapped, or sneered, because this was her role in the narrative. Except when she was being nice to mute guy, but Jewel had never bothered to try finding out what she was saying because that would involve a conversation that wasn't written in momentous pauses, and this was a book with deep themes about redemption.

-

Lastly, that ending where (view spoiler) was, in my opinion, very unnecessary, and certainly eyebrow raising about what the author considers needed for someone who was going to help others find redemption. Very Christ-like in the whole suffering as you have suffered. I'm not Christian, and I find those beliefs repulsive, and I found this ending repulsive. I don't think I'll be buying the sequel.

Gorgeous cover though. Kudos to the artist.

Katyana says

It is hard to review this book. Let's begin with this: I really, really liked it.

But like all first books in a series - and particularly with a fantasy series (it is so much easier with fiction, because the author doesn't have to establish the particulars of the world when it exists in our real world) - there is a lot of world-building, and character establishing (and this book introduces a HUGE number of core characters). That means that it is weighty, and at times a little slow. But it never felt like a slog.

There's a lot going on. Here's another thing to be upfront about: the core characters in this series are children. Abandoned, poor children who are living on the street. They are abused - and there are glimpses of sexual abuse, in addition to the expected physical/mental - and sometimes it is hard. But it is, imo, tastefully handled... accepted as a reality in their world, in a way which is, at its horrible core, true. To deny that these children would have to deal with this, in the shitty circumstances of their lives, would be to deny something that is critical in shaping them as the people they are. And it would deny something critical about what they need to either fold to - the rage, hate, fear - or overcome.

Michelle West/Sagara writes in a way that is ... it is hard to find good words. Ephemeral and non-linear in its narration. I love that about the Cast series (one of my favorites) and it is just as present here. You wander

through the inner narration of characters, the lightning quick leaps of intuition or the meandering of emotion, with the occasional explosion of contrary anger, and it makes them real in a way that books seldom do. The voice in their head is so like my voice. Not linear. Not always rational. The past and the future mashed into a tangled knot that becomes the present.

I know it's not a thing that everyone likes - I've seen reviews complain about it in the Cast series - but it is generally a thing that I like very much. It is a tone of voice that is unique to her, in my experience - I've not seen any other author write this way. But it is not for everyone, and if you don't like it in the Cast series, you won't like it here. Also, as I've occasionally mentioned in the Cast series, sometimes it stretches too much. Like, in a critical moment, that you know happens over a handful of seconds, the character can have pages and pages of inner monologue as they respond to the situation / choose what to do / grasp for instinct. At its best, it makes me feel right in it. At its worst, it makes that moment drag, and deflates all the tension in the situation... because what is in reality a lightning-quick thing, feels like a decision made after days of discussion in a committee.

And both are present here, the best and the worst. But the good outweighs the bad by a mile, and I've already jumped into the second book. YMMV.

Pam ?Because Someone Must Be a Thorn? Tee says

While the characterization is very good, it is the overall writing that makes this book extraordinary. So much so that I forgave the book it's somewhat hackneyed 'kids join together to combat evil' theme.

Btw, not a book for those who want happy-la-la endings. There is some grit here. Nice dark tones.

I. says

Bitchy Aragorn adopts a Circle of Magic kid (who can see the future, and is determined to save all the other street kids, resulting in Bitchy Aragorn being saddled with many kids). Plus schemes and demons and hidden cities.

Madeline says

Much darker and grittier than the other novels under the West name, and there was some seriously dark stuff in some of those. I would definitely recommend beginning with The Hidden City, and not only because it is chronologically first. (So far. Oh dear...)

Coming to The Hidden City with knowledge of what happens to these characters - who lives, who dies, who changes, who doesn't - makes it a very poignant read. It also makes it difficult.

Aildiin says

It's been years since I last read a novel by Michelle West and I had forgotten how good a job she does at making you like the people that populate her novels.

No big battle, no great quest in this novel, just the storie of a 10 year old orphan girl gathering others orphans around her. And was I enthralled..

I can see how this could not appeal to everyone but a solid 4 stars for me.

The only thing that bothers me is that I read the Sunsword serie more than 10 years ago when it came out and this new serie is going to interweave with it and my recollection of the previous books is very spotty and they have not yet been made available as e-books by Daw...

Shannon says

So amazing. I am still shaky from the emotional involvement in this book. Character driven epic fantasy like this is hard to find, had to write well, and hard to pace properly - I feel like this one hit all the right buttons with me. I'm both excited and terrified of what the next book will bring.

Yehudit says

2.5 stars.

Well, in one word, I would have to call this tedious.

First, let me just mention what I did enjoy: I appreciated how imaginative the writing was, and also how much effort was put throughout the book into characterization.

Now, this book was all about characterization, and almost nothing else, so there was no way I could have finished it if I didn't enjoy even that much of it. I am all for character-driven stories usually, however, I did feel like character development, or even character-introduction, was focused on to the point that there was nothing else much left to the story. The action was limited, laying-of-basics for the magic system was perfunctory at best, and the story as a whole just... lagged.

In a general sense, I would say the whole book felt like little more than a stretched-out prologue, with one never actually getting to the point of the actual story. It felt like extra background information that never proved exactly necessary; it would have been had I cared enough for the characters, but unfortunately, for all the extensive and expansive characterization, most of it still fell flat: It felt like a whole lot of telling in the expense of showing. A study in delineating every single character's thoughts and feelings to every single nuance of an event, even those that proved to be mostly expendable.

To be perfectly honest (and admittedly rather harsh), I think that this story would have benefitted from a drastic cutting-out of words. Situations depicting dynamics between characters, if less wordy, might have gotten the message across 1) more subtly, 2) poignantly and 3) while not slowing down the pacing to sheer nonexistence.

The thing, like I said, is that I did like Michelle West's writing for the most part. There was, I think, just too much of it to be good.

I am still harboring an interest as to the fate of the characters introduced in this first volume, but at this point, I am hesitant to decide whether I would continue with it or not. I might give her another chance, sometime in the future.
