



A Matter of Oaths

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Commander Rallya of patrolship Bhattya thought she had a talent for making enemies--until she met Rafe. For no crime on his record, the young officer had been identity wiped, and his innumerable, now-forgotten enemies were still tracking him across the galaxy.

A Matter of Oaths Details

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From Reader Review A Matter of Oaths for online ebook

Nikki says

Throughout reading this, there were basically two major thoughts in my mind: one, why didn't I read this sooner? And two: fans of Ann Leckie and Becky Chambers are probably the ideal audience (and maybe fans of Yoon Ha Lee, as well). And hurrah! It's been republished recently, so it's out there and ready to be picked up by just those people. I can't quite put my finger on all of the things that reminded me of those authors, but nonetheless, remind me it did (without them being in any way derivative — that's not what I'm saying).

Worldbuilding? Got it in spades. A unique way of interfacing between ship and crew, two warring empires, a mystery plot that turns out to reflect on the politics quite significantly, overt and perfectly matter of fact queerness... I loved the characters, even though they have their flaws (and I think I'd have liked to see more of Vidar, who kept fading in and out). I loved the way things came together, one question raising other questions while answering things you wouldn't expect it to answer. And I read it really fast, too: I'd look up and I'd be 50 pages down the line with no real sense of time having passed.

And the ending. So much potential, without the need for more but just... telling you that more is there: the world goes on after you've left, as it began before you arrived. I'd love more time with Rafe and Joshim and Rallya; I'll probably eventually reread this to get that. But the ending in itself is satisfactory and doesn't, to my mind, leave anything hanging in a bad way.

I'm trying to think if I have criticisms, and really, I don't. What the hey: I'm going for five stars here.

Reviewed for The Bibliophibian.

Sherwood Smith says

Read this thoroughly enjoyable space opera on a very long train ride. From the beginning, when the chief officers of the *Bhattya* look for a new candidate and consider Rafe, a highly talented young webber (this is cybertech that borders on telepathy) but whose identity was wiped for betraying the Oath, the story grabbed me.

The world building is a bit fuzzy--so much crammed in that is not explained--but the story itself rockets along, with a wonderfully diverse set of characters. Rafe proves himself to Rallya, a tough, aging commander who knows she is losing some of her edge, and to Joshim, the webmaster, and is accepted on board. Within a short time Rafe and Joshim connect in a way that becomes vitally important to the events that begin to unfold, accelerating to extremely high stakes.

There is so much unexplained, or I should say unexplored in this universe. I was glued to the pages in my Kindle until we reached the end, leaving me hoping that the author will get back to this world, though this book came out in 1988.

Lark says

I really can't remember why I chose to pick this up. I think I was in a hankering for some space opera. And

the blurb of this book seemed particularly engaging. A mysterious character with a hidden past, space ships, a sharp female Commander, an interesting system to connect to the "web" in space.

Unfortunately, this gets 1.5 stars from me despite the very interesting start. Oh, let me tell you - the start was great. It opens with a decidedly clever character, Commander Rallya, with her barbed tongue and casually flippant tone. She and her ship Bhattya need a qualified First, and there simply are not enough to spare. So enter in Rafe, our mysterious character with an even more mysterious background. He's brilliant in the beginning. Doesn't back down to the intimidating Rallya, holds his own, and he just reeks of confidence (or arrogance, however you want to spin it). And then we enter into space where they have this system of entering into the "web". Delightful, just delightful. Space opera, just the way a Firefly fan can dream of.

And then it all falls apart. I was just completely frustrated by all of the characters. The once clever Commander Rallya became nothing but an old crotchety woman. I kept waiting for her to do something crazy and daring and utterly impious. But all she did was spoon feed the reader through the Rafe mystery. She was more than a little useless. She learned nothing on her own initiative, her bravado was all talk, her barbed tongue always missing its mark.

And I really didn't like Rafe. His confidence so quickly turned sour and fell completely into the terminology of arrogance. I hate it when characters are that cocky and not useful. I wanted someone to shut him the hell up and give him a good smacking. (spoilers: no one does). He has not one shred of likability and not one flaw - unless you count amnesia a flaw. Ugh.

And then, even worse, the plot was just mind-numbingly boring. 90% of it was figuring out the mystery behind Rafe's mind wipe. WHICH WASN'T EVEN A BIG DEAL. Oh sorry, maybe just 75%. The rest is sex and romance, whoop-de-doo. The sex isn't even that sexy and the romance has no chemistry. Plot points are sprung out of thin air, characters are introduced only in the late second half of the book, random connections are made. It's all quite horrible.

And then the worst part of the whole book. The ending. The ending was just atrocious. Hardly any build up for the "big fight" and what an utter loser an Emperor turned out to be. It just doesn't make sense that someone that old could be trapped so easily. Ugh so annoying.

The only thing I liked was the atmosphere of the book. I've always had a penchant for space opera and almost-Firefly-esque. But holy fuck, what an annoying book. No characters I liked. A plot that has too many holes and snooze buttons. Ugh. Just no.

1.5 stars rounded down. I am so sorry I even picked up this book.

Jain says

Fun space opera with a lovely queer romance and interesting characters. I especially liked the aging but forceful female commander, the highly principled webmaster, and the amnesiac oathbreaker. The ebook is available for free on the author's website; if any of the above piques your interest, why not grab the book and check it out for yourself?

Enjoyable as it is, it does have some pretty big flaws. The worldbuilding is intriguing but rather too incomplete. In particular, there are a couple of immortal emperors whose immortality is never explained, which feels like an increasingly glaring omission as the story progresses. The ending is far too abrupt: at a certain point, the plot *rockets* to its climax and the denouement is almost nonexistent. And Wright should

have excised about 90% of her adverbs and used the word "said" a lot more frequently, rather than various synonyms for the word.

Still, I had a great time reading the book (when my fingers weren't itching for a red pen), and I look forward to rereading it sometime.

William says

3.5 stars - The first half is terrific, but the second half is a verbose, confusing mess, and abandons the Hero Rallya. Wright has talent, and I'm not sure what went wrong in 1987 for her. She had great promise, and is an enigma today, sadly. I wish she had tried again on a second and third book.

Note: Wow. Introduction by Becky Chambers!

As usual with my reviews, please first read the publisher's blurb/summary of the book. Thank you.

Helen S. Wright has been an enigma for years now, but is writing again, I'm very happy to hear.

An Interview with Helen S. Wright, December 2017. Very illuminating.

What Happens When an Old Woman Steals Your Story? November 2017
Ms. Wright's notes on how this story came to be.

40% finished... Excellent, we now have a hero, on the Hero's Journey! Unfortunately, just as the book gets really good, it falls flat, hero abandoned.

Rallya smiled contentedly. No mistakes this time, she promised herself. Handle it slowly and carefully, like the explosive it was, and detonate it where it would have the most impact: under the [place]. There would not be many with anything to hide who would survive the shock waves that would travel through the [place]. Especially not those who had accepted the offers that Rallya had turned down thirty-five years ago. The ones who had achieved power since then because Rallya had spoken out too soon, before she had the whole picture. The ones who would soon learn that thirty-five years was not too long to wait to win a war. Unfortunately, the promise here is left unfulfilled.

...like most spectator sports, love was chiefly enjoyable for the incompetence of its participants. - Perhaps a clue as to what went wrong in Wright's life, something sad that took the joy from this book?

The last 1/3 of the book was a mess. Confusing, new characters momentarily, a focus on indecision and recriminations for past mistakes, and the delightful Rallya reduced to a whiny old woman.

Very sad.

David Harris says

I'm grateful to the publisher for an advance e-copy of this book.

A Matter of Oaths was, as the preface by Becky Chambers (The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet, A

Closed and Common Orbit) makes clear in an interesting introduction first published in 1988 but seems to have gone relatively unnoticed then. Bloomsbury Caravel have now rescued it from obscurity and republished it.

The book certainly deserves that second chance, for at least two reasons.

First, we are endlessly told that women writing SFF, or SFF that features female or POC or LGBT protagonists, is a recent development (and, a certain sort of SFF fan implies, an unwelcome one which means sacrificing plot to diversity).

It shouldn't need saying, but both assertions are rubbish, and A Matter of Oaths is one data point that shows that argument up for what it is.

Secondly, it's simply a rattling good story, the sort that would capture the imagination of any space opera aficionado.

Prepare for a galaxy where endless war is fought between two immortal Emperors who have divided it between them; for modified humans ("webbers") who can mesh with their spaceships and who provide the forces who fight for both Emperors as part of a semi-independent Guild; a mysterious officer whose memory was wiped (a disgraceful thing, as it suggests he broke his Oath); Outsiders who menace the Empire's Convoys (and a very well realised escort sequence which made me recall CS Forrester's Hornblower novel - surely the original inspiration for this whole genre?); and real, credible human interactions between the ship's company.

Prepare to meet Rallya, Commander of the patrolship Bhattya, currently assigned to convoy escort duties, and her officers Vidar and Joshim. Rallya is a celebrated Commander, renowned for her abilities as a webber, but now ageing rather and facing the decay of those abilities. So she's apprehensive about her future, just as Joshim is facing up to the need to manage her replacement. As the story opens, though, these three are more concerned about filling their vacancy for a First Officer. A candidate presents himself - but it soon becomes clear that Rafe has something of a Past...

The plot is very much driven by the interaction between the four officers, and by the gradual unravelling of Rafe's memory-wipe. There's a background of high honour, as the title suggests: the Oaths sworn by the webbers, their Guild and by the two Emperors. For any to break these would put them outside the pale: but as becomes clear, that leaves plenty of scope for mischief (in which regard, I was reminded rather of the murky status of Asimov's Laws of Robotics).

Wright is especially good at taking her weird, hypothetical technologies and describing them so that they sound utterly unexceptional, part of everyday life. Of course a ship can't Jump when it's in the "mass shadow" of a space station or fleet. That just seems obvious. Of course the webbers would interact with the hardware using code systems such as "the standard fives used upon the cargoships, the eights of a surveyship, the extended tens of a patrolship". Just look at the passages where Rafe finds, commissions and explores an ancient web system ("He sent [Magnify] with a pointer to the area of the diagram and watched it reform on a larger scale, spanning four of his input matrices. he thought he would go crazy, shifting them from their old relationship to the new upside-down back-to-front world...") or where the team are engaged in combat with an Outsider raider.

I don't think I've seen such a convincing description of an invented technology since Terry Pratchett's history monks and their time cylinders (complete with load shedding). (I note from the biography on the Bloomsbury website that Wright worked "in a wide variety of Information Technology roles in the electricity generation and supply industry". Pratchett was at one time press officer in the Central Electricity Generating Board... I wonder if that industry spawned other first class SFF writers in the 1980s...)

She also makes the story seem vividly part of a larger whole, of being in media res, as though it's the middle volume of a trilogy - there is a central plot against the Empire which is partly, but not wholly resolved, leaving everything set up for a sequel; that ancient web which points to some previous story (plus the whole epic that's hinted at of the Empires being divided); Rallya's regrets over what happened thirty five years ago (no details are given) or Rafe's whole backstory.

Despite being nearly thirty years old, the story doesn't seem particularly dated (though of course the dominant technology being "The Web" made me smile) except perhaps that were this book written now it would probably be twice as long; there is little delay here between the ship setting out on a journey and it arriving. But that's not necessarily a bad thing!

To sum up, an engaging story that definitely has that stay-up-till-midnight, just-one-more-chapter vibe, that features a blazingly diverse cast of characters and that plays exuberantly in a convincing and feature-rich universe.

I wish I could read more about Rallya, Rafe & co.

K.J. Charles says

What a fabulous read. A space opera with a twisty SF based plot and loads of heart. Exciting and engaging--the worldbuilding isn't spoon fed so it takes a bit of time to get to grips but all becomes clear soon enough.

It's the cast that does it for me. The three MCs are two men in a queer relationship, one of them bi, and the commander who is not only a woman of colour but pushing retirement age with a dodgy hip. Fffff. When the hell do you see that in a MC? *And* she isn't a Wise Mentor character. She is stropky and flawed and makes mistakes as well as getting things right. I love her.

An older WOC as main character is gold dust in SF. A positive loving queer relationship with no homophobia still isn't as common as it should be. And this book was written in the 80s. The 80s. I could have been reading this instead of a million Whitey McHetWhite identiheroes. Gah.

Loved it, big rec.

Vicky says

An interesting book, this. First published in 1988, it's gained a sort of cult status amongst fans as a book that champions the best of science fiction: LGBT relationships, excitement, a fair dollop of invention and innovation, and a gripping lot. And space.

It doesn't pull its punches, though, dropping you straight into the story without any explanation, leaving you to struggle and pick up the pieces as you go along- especially when it comes to getting to grips with the concepts and slang at hand. The story is set in the Twin Empires, ruled by two immortal beings, and populated by hundreds of planets- and the Guild, who control space travel everywhere. In one of these Empires, Rallya, captain of the patrol ship Bhattya, hires Rafe, a mind-wiped Oath breaker as their new First Officer. But Rafe's past will quickly come back to haunt them all, as the ship and crew become entangled in a web of deception, empires and murder.

So, apart from the initial confusion in the story, I loved the inventiveness on display- from the complex telepathic 'webs', through which the crews control their ships, to the complex politics that characterise the

relationships between the Empire and the Guilds. The book never lets up for a moment, and it probably merits a re-reading, because I was definitely lost in the complex tangle of plot points and unfamiliar lingo more than once.

The characters are intriguing, too: Rallya is likeable, stubborn and with a character arc over the course of the novel that you can really understand. And while Rafe remains a mystery for most of the book, he's skillfully described and we get a clear sense of his character within the first few lines or so. The relationship that Rafe strikes up with Joshim, his webmaster, is also lovely: it's always great to see LGBT representation at the forefront of a novel, and whilst theirs is the only romance in the novel, it's also really sweet. Wright's universe is one where gender doesn't matter, which makes for a refreshing change.

The only place the novel falls down, I'd say, is with the plot. Though it's interesting, it very quickly gets complicated, and by the end I was struggling to understand what was going on, whose motivations were driving which kidnapping, and what Rafe had to do with the two Empires. Last minute characters are introduced and revelations are made, that sometimes feel thrown in for the sake of it, and doesn't exactly leave you engaged with the action, or the characters.

Overall, though, this was an enjoyable space romp that was served up a refreshing dollop of Star Wars-esque inventiveness. I'd recommend reading it twice, though.

Katherine Hunter says

I am disappointed that this is the only science fiction that Ms. Wright wrote. You are not spoon fed everything. There is background that needs to be inferred. Great world-building. It is the story of Rafe and his struggle to recall his life before a mind-wipe and why others want to make sure he never remembers. He finds a place for himself and works to build his life. There are solid supporting characters and realistic relationships. I thought it was a great book and would have been delighted to read more by this author.

imyril says

In theory I've read this before; in practice I only remembered one detail so I came to it fairly fresh... and I enjoyed every minute. Well-paced cyberpunk space opera driven by characters and emotions. I enjoy grouchy old Commander Rallya enormously (it took me most of the book to realise she reminds me of Avasarala, only without the swearing) and warm-hearted, conscientious cinnamon rolls Joshim and Rafe.

I'd really love to see a sequel. But really really.

Full review

I have both a free review copy from the publisher and a fully paid up previous edition.

Nadine says

A Matter of Oaths captured my attention for two reasons. One, it was described as a diverse space opera. The story features a gay person of colour and an older woman as Commander. And two, Becky Chambers wrote the introduction.

A Matter of Oaths has a lot going for it, but the writing style and poor world building kept me from fully

engaging in the story.

The best way to describe the writing style is vague. It feels as if there's a glass barrier between the story and the reader. This barrier lets the reader know they're reading a story, so it impedes readers from fully immersing themselves in the world Wright has created.

The world building is poor. The guild, the emperors, and the concept of the web are not clearly explained. The poor world building compounded with the vague writing style makes for a story that isn't easy to engage with fully.

The main character, Rafe, as I mentioned previously is gay and has a romantic relationship throughout the novel. It was refreshing to read a story with a non-heterosexual relationship as the main romantic relationship. Unfortunately, there was no spark or chemistry between the characters making it felt clinical and abrupt.

Overall, I was expecting something along the lines of Becky Chambers' work, but was disappointed to say the least. If you enjoyed *The Long Way to a Small, Angry Planet* I would hesitantly recommend *A Matter of Oaths* only because it has a similar tone, but I would be cautious.

***I received an ARC from the publisher via NetGalley in exchange for an honest review.

Megan says

Ok, first: IGNORE THE COVER. No, seriously just ignore that nonsensical, awful, whitewashed abomination, (unless the default art goodreads displays at some point gets swapped to the 2018 cover, which is actually quite nice and you can feel free to not ignore it).

Now that that's out of the way, I can tell you that this is a tremendously entertaining book. It was a quick read, and surprisingly easy too. One of those books you gulp down in a few sittings. There's a patrolship and it needs a new webber, "webbers" being the people who are trained to enter the "web" and control spaceships by kinda fusing their brains with them. This book takes the 'giving you just enough detail so you can kinda picture it,' approach to its science, which means you're not going to be confused about stuff but you'll also never be one hundred percent solid on what it all means either.

Anyway, so they need a new webber. Enter Rafe (who, sidebar, is such a Mary Sue, but who even cares we all need a little Mary Sue in our lives sometimes), a talented webber who has also had all his memories wiped for oath-breaking a few years ago. It means he's not exactly in demand, but the patrolship is desperate so they take him aboard anyway. And then they have to deal with the mess when people keep trying to MURDER HIM for MYSTERIOUS REASONS. It took me almost the whole book to figure out what the oath-breaking crime actually was, as this book is hella stingy with its worldbuilding. Which is a shame, because what we do see of the world is really, really cool. Made me think of Yoon Ha Lee mixed with Anne Leckie. Two immortal emperors, a universe divided between them, and an endless war.

It's not just the worldbuilding I wanted to see more of. Everything was just a little too shallow, a little too skimmed over. If it could have been longer, spent more time showing instead of telling... Like, Rafe and his superior start sleeping together after one minute (which is no big deal in this book, it has a very refreshing approach towards sex) and we are told that they are IN LOVE but we don't really see it, and this holds true for all the character relationships. This book could have been something I loved completely, instead of something I just really liked. Seems a petty thing to complain about, but it was frustrating, encountering all these plot twists and revelations that should have floored me but instead didn't really have much impact.

So yeah I guess my main complaint is that it was really good but not, like, really really good. Hardly damning praise. I'm really glad this book was reissued and brought to my attention, and I hope it's the start of a trend of digging up all the forgotten stories published by women over the years. You would never guess this book was published first in 1988, everything about it, from the sexuality to the world building, speaks directly to what's hot right now. Well, everything about it except that cover.

Sineala says

I found this book on a recommendations list for people who like space opera in the manner of Bujold or Cherryh, and downloaded it immediately when I found out it was available on the author's website for free. I am really, really happy I found it.

It's a space opera set in a future where two empires are locked in war. Their ships, though, are piloted by the same people -- all members of the Guild. The Guild members are loyal to each other and the Guild above all else, and that includes imperial loyalty. If it so happens that you should be captured by the other side, you are required to serve them. If you refuse, you are branded an Oathbreaker -- and then you get mindwiped, so you serve them anyway.

The crew of the Bhattya is short one officer, and they take on the only person they find, who happens to be an Oathbreaker. His name's Rafe. And the thing is, Rafe's really good at this navigation thing. He's a lot better than he should be, and he knows a lot of things he probably shouldn't know -- but of course he doesn't know how he learned them, or who he used to be. And then it turns out people are trying to kill him. And then everyone on the Bhattya has to figure out who they want to trust and how much their Oaths matter.

The plot is exciting -- though there are a few really improbable coincidences toward the end -- and I loved the worldbuilding and the characters (strong women! queer characters! characters of color!), especially Rallya, Rafe, and Joshim. I should probably also mention that Rafe is queer and that his developing romance with Joshim, though it is not the focus of the book, is clearly very important to both of them. I love when gay characters get to have awesome SF adventures just like everyone else! I didn't know they were going to get together, so when it happened (fairly early on) it was a pleasant surprise; I had been really enjoying their dynamic before that. Rallya was also really interesting -- strong, commanding, competent, and still hanging in there even though they all know she's going to have to retire from active space duty soon.

Basically, I liked this book a whole lot and you should read it. Yeah. I wish I wrote better reviews, but trust me, it's good. It's totally the best space opera you've never heard of.

Innailana says

I thought this book was wonderful: well-written, interesting and suspenseful. The only reason I did not give it a five is because the world-building isn't done well enough at the beginning that it isn't ridiculously confusing exactly what is going on and what being an "oath breaker" means. And why the emperors are immortal.

Dearbhla says

The patrolship Bhattya is looking for a new member of staff, and Rafe appears to be the man for the job. But then rumour reaches them that he has been mind-wiped for Oath-breaking. A terrible crime, because the Oaths between the Emperors and the Guild are all that holds some measure of peace and stability in place.

But Commander Rallya is persuaded to take him on after he demonstrates his extraordinary skill at “webbing”, which is a sort of virtual reality way of running a spaceship. And once he is crew she is determined to keep him as such, despite a myriad of enemies that seem to appear.

I picked this one up because I had literally just finished reading a book when Sandstone tweeted out some SFF recommendations on twitter. The first one being for this book and as I was on the ‘puter at the time I figured I’d give it a try.

It is a great fun read, fast paced and with some great characters. It also a gay couple, and a racially diverse team of characters. All of whom are characters, not just box-ticking in an attempt to be politically correct. And this from a book first published in the ’80s! Something we are still looking for in many many books published today.

So yes, I really enjoyed it, however it does have its flaws. I found it a bit confusing at start, with the Oaths and the Emperors and the Guild, as Wright doesn’t do any info-dumps you have to figure everything out as you read. I think I got it all straight in the end, although I’d still like to know why the Emperors are emperors, is it just that they are immortal? And why are they immortal?

But the flaws aren’t enough to prevent me from also recommending this book to anyone who likes more personal stories in their space opera.
