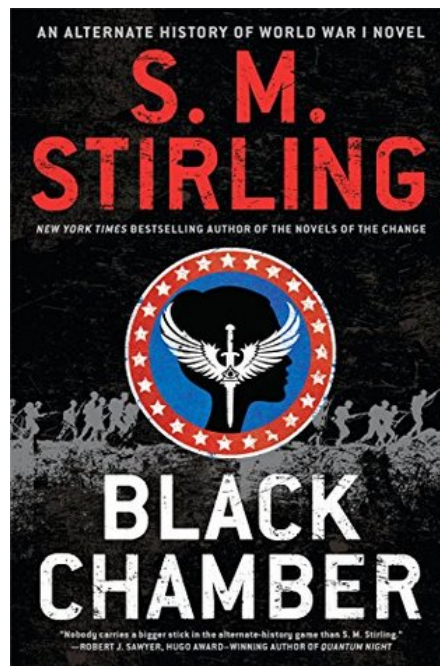




Black Chamber

S.M. Stirling

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The first novel in a brand-new alternate history series where Teddy Roosevelt is president for a second time right before WWI breaks out, and on his side is the Black Chamber, a secret spy network watching America's back.

In 1912, just months before the election, President Taft dies suddenly, and Teddy Roosevelt wastes no time in grabbing power as he wins another term as president. By force of will, he ushers the United States into a new, progressive era with the help of the Black Chamber the mysterious spy organization, watching his back.

Luz O'Malley--a brilliant, deadly, and young Cuban Irish American agent of the Black Chamber--heads to Germany. She's on a luxury airship swarming with agents of every power on earth, as well as conspirators from the Mexican Revolutionary Party and the sinister underground of the reborn Ku Klux Klan, yet none know her true identity.

Her anonymity will be essential as she strives to gain the secrets of Project Loki, an alarming German plan that Roosevelt fears will drag the U.S. into a world war. To gather this intelligence, Luz will have to deceive the handsome yet ruthless Baron Horst von Duckler. She, along with naive Irish-American Ciara Whelan, has to get this vital information back to the U.S.--or thousands of lives might be lost.

Black Chamber Details

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Author : S.M. Stirling

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From Reader Review Black Chamber for online ebook

Allen Adams says

<http://www.themaineedge.com/buzz/blac...>

My affection for the alternate history subgenre of speculative fiction is no secret. I've always been enamored of the answers to "what if?" questions that these sorts of stories can provide. The idea that one small difference can cause ripples that lead to larger and larger divergences – it makes for fascinating fiction.

S.M. Stirling is one of the foremost practitioners of alternate history; his latest is "Black Chamber," the first in a series about a World War I that was significantly different than our own, from the enemies being fought and the institutions doing the fighting. It's a strong introduction, one that hints at the many differences – large and small – between that history and this one.

The year is 1916. Teddy Roosevelt is the President of the United States, having made his way back to the White House after years away. His latest foray into the Oval Office has resulted in some bigger, bolder initiatives – both domestic and international – that are leading toward an America that is much more progressive in some respects, yet considerably more conservative in others.

In this world, rather than wait until WWII for a covert agency (i.e. the OSS/CIA) to spring up, Roosevelt created the Black Chamber, a secret organization devoted to espionage and other unsavory work that the powers that be would prefer to see confined to the shadows.

Luz is an agent of the Black Chamber, highly educated and highly skilled; she's one of the best they've got. Her assignment is to infiltrate the upper echelon of the German effort to wage war on Europe and beyond. Posing as a Mexican revolutionary with an anti-American bent, Luz uses all of her skills to with the confidence of a German agent code-named Imperial Sword; said agent has been in America for reasons that Luz's superiors would very much like to know.

But when Luz succeeds in gaining the necessary trust and proximity, the plot that is ultimately revealed to her far outstrips anything she could have anticipated. For in the remote mountains of Saxony, a plan is being set in motion to ensure that the United States will be unable to enter the looming conflict – a plan that has potentially horrifying consequences for not just Luz and her contemporaries, but possibly the entire nation. And she has to trust someone ... but who?

"Black Chamber" has a lot going for it. There's a richness of detail with regards to the world building that is quite nice; when it comes to this sort of thing, I tend to lean more toward the "less is more" attitude. That is, I'm not someone who needs exposition dumps – a handful of organically provided moments of specificity beats the hell out of text blocks of authorial hand-holding. Stirling trusts the story and trusts the reader, allowing for a feeling of discovery.

Granted, it only works because of a solid sense of characterization. Luz makes for a fine heroine – smart and capable while also flawed. She serves the foundation of the narrative without ever feeling like she's invulnerable; despite her status as the main character, she never feels 100 percent safe. That balance is VERY hard to pull off.

And of course, when you've got someone who knows how to put together a spy story doing the telling, it's tough not to be sucked in. It's tense and propulsive for the most part; there are a couple of stretches where the action lags just a bit, but the narrative rarely loses much steam. You've got the requisite sharp turns and

surprising developments – it's just a good espionage yarn.

Granted, there are a few things I would have wanted from "Black Chamber." I'd have liked a bit more Teddy Roosevelt – the flashes we get certainly whet the appetite. And it gets a little crowded and abrupt in the third act. But those are relatively minor criticisms – it's definitely a page-turner.

If "Black Chamber" is any indication, we can expect this newest series from S.M. Stirling to offer the same level of historical veracity and adventuresome storytelling that we've come to expect. It's a strong start – one whose continuation I anxiously await.

Randal White says

The first installment of a new series, Black Chamber is an alternative history novel of the period just prior to America's entry into World War 1.

In this timeline, Teddy Roosevelt is president, and has set America on his "Progressive" path. The book is the story of a secret agent, Luz, who is sent undercover to discover what Germany is planning. She discovers a plan for Germany to employ a truly deadly secret weapon against the United States.

I really enjoy some of Stirling's books. The "Island in the Sea of Time" series and the "Change" series are some of my favorite alternative history books. Stirling has set up the beginning of another intriguing series with this book.

However, there were some parts of the book that I had issues with. For one, the pacing of the book was sometimes challenging, and somewhat disappointing. For example, Stirling goes on and on for 12 pages describing the hero climbing a wall, while seeming to rush through more important parts. A second issue was that the premise of the beginning of Roosevelt's presidency were missing. For example, Stirling several times refers to a war with Mexico, and the rise of the "Black Chamber" spy agency, but he never tells the reader what happened. Perhaps he will explain in subsequent books, but it would have added greatly to the story if he had done it in the first.

All in all, I found this to be a fun read. I had a hard time putting it down. And I am looking forward to the next book.

Peter Tillman says

[they have discovered nerve gas, and are planning a large-scale attack on America's East Coast ports. (hide spoiler)]

Georgia says

Find more in Chill and read

"Black Chamber" is the first installment in an alternative history series positioned right before America's entry in the Great War. I really enjoyed it and I am looking forward to the next in line!

Theodore Roosevelt has been elected president in 1912 and he is still at the White House in 1916. He has brought a lot of progress in the States ever since and has created a Secret service called Black Chamber. His secret service agents have intelligence of a great weapon being built in Germany that is expected to attack

the States. Therefore he sends one of his best senior operatives to work it out.

Luz is a senior Black Chamber operative. She is a Cuban-American with friendly relations to President Roosevelt. She boards a flying vessel heading to Amsterdam with the task to portray as a Mexican revolutionario and cooperate with the Germans, in order to get more information on their plan. She gets in touch with the German contact and establishes her path there.

Stirling has done a great job creating an alternative Universe, where Kaiser Wilhelm is attacking both Europe and America with deadly weapons of mass distraction. The English and the French are really suffering under the Central Powers rage. It's only the Americans that can help, but they haven't yet engage in War.

Secret agent Luz is a marvelous character. She is a very capable woman. She is trained and strong and as good as any male operative would be. She is quite intelligent too. Luz can understand many things about a person based on their body language, their accent and their reactions to every situation.

The secondary characters are very well built as well. Ciara is a woman that understands mechanics and technology. She is quite rare for that period of time. Horst, on the other hand, is a very powerful man. He is strong and smart and very open minded. He admires the two ladies for their personalities and rare capabilities. That's very honourable of the author, as it was a man's world, as it still is in many cases.

Bill Powers says

Okay, I did something I rarely do. I put this book down. I plowed through to about 35% and had enough. I came across a review on Black Chamber by S. M. Stirling in the Wall Street Journal. It had some of my favorite interest – alternative history and Theodore Roosevelt. The premise is that during the 1912 US presidential election, President Taft dies, Teddy wins the Republican nomination and becomes President of the United States – again. Teddy is then POTUS during World War I. Excellent premise, right? Wrong! Teddy Roosevelt is barely in the storyline. He is name-dropped by one of the characters, incessantly. Unfortunately Black Chamber is a disappointment. It is “overwritten” with a heavy hand by the author using pretentious and pedantic dialog that is hard to slog through. It's as though the author is trying to show off how much knowledge he accumulated in his research and is determined to share all of it; to the point of getting in the way of the story. Characters are unlikable and come across as cardboard stereotypes. The protagonist, Luz, annoyingly switches between English and Spanish mid-sentence throughout the book, which pulls the reader off stride. After a while, I started to speed read just to plow through – not an enjoyable experience for a pleasure read, until I concluded this was a waste of my time. I don't know who the target audience reader is, but I'm not one. Black Chamber is supposed to be the first in a series. It is my last read of the series.

Dave says

I'm a big fan of alternate histories, particularly when they are done well, and Stirling creates an alternate universe in rather precise detail. It's World War I and a nearly victorious Germany is dominating continental Europe. Back in North America, Teddy Roosevelt has just been elected president again, tough, charming, knowledgeable. And, backed by a secret spy network known as the Black Chamber. Move over James Bond, the premier agent in this network is the stunningly beautiful Cuban-Irish American Luz O' Malley, who fights like Wonder Woman (without the magic bracelets). She's tough, clever, charming, and thoroughly

modern in outlook, Annie Oakley in a dress. The use of airships (zeppelins), including luxury cruise liners, almost gives this a steampunk feel. It is very detailed and thought out. The action when it occurs is first-rate, although some may find it slows its pace at points. Overall, quite a worthwhile read and the start of a new series.

Glen says

I won this book in a goodreads drawing.

An alternative history set in a world where Theodore Roosevelt won the election of 1912. The conditions to bring on World war One are in motion, and T.R. has inaugurated a proto-CIA to stop such shenanigans.

The heroine of the story, Luz O'Malley Arostegui, is a personal friend to TR, and the only female member of the spy group, The Black Chamber. She goes on assignment, and from there, you basically get a Modesty Blaize novel, only without Willy.

Pretty decent.

Erik Kendall says

"I received free books from Penguin Random House in exchange for this review." I have always liked alternate history books and this is now one of my favorites!

All Things Urban Fantasy says

Review courtesy of All Things Urban Fantasy

While I was happy to read an alternative history thriller as a change of pace, reading BLACK CHAMBER felt like a chore to work through with it's extensive detail about almost everything which slowed the plot way down or just confused me at times. I love a good world building effort and this book excels at that but getting into the minutia of every little detail became over whelming at points and parts that I wanted more explanation on were skimmed over leaving me guess as to why characters where doing things and what was going on generally.

Confusion and exhaustion aside, the alternative history aspect of the plot was fun to read. I enjoyed seeing what changes to history were made and the book had an exciting steampunk James Bond feel but with a female as the titular suave spy. I liked Luz though at times she does come off as too perfect, she's a wonderfully vibrant and tough lead character. The other characters were fun too and I enjoyed learning about the various alliances and more about the Black Chamber spy group.

BLACK CHAMBER is a well researched and thought out alternate history thriller set during WWI but I felt like I needed to know a lot more about the real WWI to understand everything that was happening in this alternate history. I enjoyed the thriller part and Luz fighting the bad guys on an airship was awesome. Since this is the first book, there is a lot of set up required so I'm hoping the next book in this series focuses more on the espionage and less on the details of this world and every characters' backgrounds.

John Purvis says

"Black Chamber" eBook was published in 2018 and was written by S. M. Stirling (<https://smstirling.com>). Mr. Stirling has published more than 50 novels.

I received an ARC of this novel through <https://www.netgalley.com> in return for a fair and honest review. I categorize this novel as 'R' because it contains scenes of Violence and some Mature Situations. The story is set during the World War I years, though in an alternate timeline. In this world, President Taft dies in office and Teddy Roosevelt becomes president again instead of Wilson. The result is a much more conservative US. A US that is primed to enter World War I against Germany.

The primary character of the story is Luz O'Malley Aróstegui, a young woman who is a spy for the Black Chamber, an American intelligence organization. She is sent on a secret mission to Europe posing as a Mexican revolutionary who is seeking Germany's assistance. She discovers that the Germans plan a secret attack against American cities to delay them from entering the war.

Aróstegui must use both her feminine wiles as well as her considerable skill to fool the Germans, obtain the information she has been sent for, and report her findings.

I thoroughly enjoyed the 13.5 hours I spent reading this 400 page alternate history thriller. The altered timeline is interesting and gives a foundation for some creative stories. I have read many of Mr. Stirling's novels and have found them all very entertaining. The chosen cover art is OK. I give this novel a 4.5 (rounded up to a 5) out of 5.

Further book reviews I have written can be accessed at <https://johnpurvis.wordpress.com/blog/>.

The Lit Bitch says

When this book came across my desk for review—I was stoked. I don't read a ton of alternative history, but this one sounded so so so good that I was eager to read it without question.

I sounded like alternative history mixed with some espionage and sci-fi so how could I pass? I couldn't!

OK so now I remember why I don't read alternative history. Having a masters in history makes alternative history hard. Like really hard to read. I kept getting confused—why was this happening? No that's not what happened, I would scream in my head! I literally kept reminding myself that this was a fictionalized account of history—essentially it was #fakehistory

Admittedly, it took me a long long long time to read this book mostly because I struggled with my own inner voice telling me that this wasn't how things happened. I couldn't just let my mind go and let the story happen.

How much of my own personal bias and struggles got factored into this review? Quite a bit if I am being honest. If I take out my own personal struggles with the historical piece, then I would say that this book was rather unique. I thought that Stirling did a great job writing a creative and memorable story for his readers. The premise of the story itself was really detailed and well thought out. Luz was my favorite character. She

wasn't your typical heroine and I really respected Stirling for creating this different and vibrant character.

This book is described by some readers as a James Bond-ish style novel and I would agree that this book had a lot of similarities with the infamous spy. Sophisticated, action packed and primarily driven by main characters rather than supporting characters. And I would completely agree with this! Stirling puts his energy into the main characters and I loved that.

So where does that leave me? If I was going on my own personal struggles I would say 2 stars but if I am looking at it from an objective perspective—I liked the writing and thought the story was full of creativity and strong characters so I would say based on writing—a 4 star rating. But I had to average them out and settled on 3 stars for this one.

This book is truly aimed at fans of alternative history, if you like that sort of thing then you will probably love this book. If you are me and like history to be more or less the same, then you might want to pass on this one. Though if you don't have a huge understanding of WWI then you might not even care about alternative history!

See my full review [here](#)

Alan says

I received an ARC from the publisher in exchange for posting an honest review, and after they see this review I may never receive another. If I could have given this book zero stars I would have, but that is not an option.

Because I could not even finish the book. I stopped at 100 pages, which was about 25% of the way through the book. I did not care about any of the characters, the story, the setting, and frankly the books in my TBR stack looked more and more inviting the longer I kept trying to read this.

Frankly it was becoming a hate read, and my time is too valuable for that sort of reading just to stubbornly finish a book. Even though I used to do that, but not any more.

I have learned, perhaps confirmed, Stirling's writing is not for me. My ex-wife had two of his books. I couldn't get interested enough to finish those either (they were both in his Draka series).

The basic premise is that through an extraordinary bit of luck Teddy Roosevelt's third party run for a third term as president in 1912 is successful. He establishes the Black Chamber an ultra secret intelligence agency as he continues with his plans for an American Empire (he was an imperialist as were many heads of state during that time, and in this book he has essentially annexed Mexico).

Now it's 1916 and the U.S. is on the brink of entering WWI. Enter Luz, an Irish Mexican-American orphan with the earmarks of a Jane Bond (more the 1960s movies Bond, not the Bond of the books). Confidence, gadgets and ultra competency galore, but very little character. Her job is to find out more about Germany's plans, which might include fomenting revolution in Ireland and Mexico.

But, the French and Germans are stereotypes, the alternate history not convincing enough for me, or exciting enough for me to suspend my disbelief. Reading this was becoming drudge work.

(note: this review was apparently deleted when I took the book off of my reading list. I'm re-posting this, in

part, because when the Amazon reviews open up I feel obligated to post the review as part of the contract for receiving the ARC).

Tim The Enchanter says

Posted to the Literary Lawyer

A Great Example of Indulgent Writing - 2 Stars

My first experience with S.M. Stirling may very well be my last. If you are looking for a novel in which you get to experience the author's fantasies and have the privilege of the author explaining to you the MANY topics he researched to write the book, this might be the book for you.

Synopsis

Ignore the canned synopses you will find scattered across the internet. Despite its claims, this is not what I would define an alternate history novel. Abandon any hope of a novel that features a larger than life Teddy Roosevelt and his exploits in some alternate time line. The story focuses on Luz, a female spy of the alternate history version of the Black Chamber, the forerunner of the NSA. She is tasked with getting close to a German Agent under the guise of a Mexican revolutionary fighter of whose identity she has stolen. In a series of serendipitous events, her life is saved by a stranger and she stumbles upon a secret that is far greater than anyone anticipated. On her wits alone, she crafts a mission to save the United States from the most diabolical attack they have ever faced.

Frustratingly Misleading

This is what I would define as lazy alternate history. This may stem from my own understanding of this type of the concept. It is my expectation that alternate history takes some events of history, changes the outcome and explores what might naturally occur as a result. (As an aside, I would suggest you watch *The Man in High Castle* for a great example. Maybe even read the book. I can't vouch for the original source material). In this novel the author allegedly uses Teddy Roosevelt serving a second term before WWII as the catalyst for the story. Honestly, I am not a student of American History. Maybe these events and the fictionalized Black Chamber would have been natural outcomes but more realistically, this was a massive stretch in an attempt to make the novel seem more interesting.

I Think I was supposed to be Impressed

There was detail in this book. A LOT of detail. From concepts ranging from electrical engineering, spy techniques, language, history, submarines, rockets and weapons. The author did a considerable amount of research on these topics. How do I know this? The author goes out of his way to have the characters spout off lots of facts and details related to each of these (and more) topics. My son loves a book series called *My Weird School*. One character loves to show off the fact that she read the dictionary. She does this by constantly using big words that no one else understands. This is basically what the author has done. Instead of using the research to craft detailed descriptions or show realistic working of weapons, submarines etc., we get pages devoted to detail and technical specifications. It wasn't impressive, it was irritating. To make it worse, the protagonist often speaks in Spanish, without any translation provided. My apologies for being fluent in only one language. This was a major irritant throughout the book.

On top of the author's indulgences, I found the novel contained a troubling love story that underlies the second half of the novel. It is suggested very early that the main female character is a lesbian or bi-sexual. This is not an issue. I only point this out because it is relevant. It is how the romance evolves that I found disconcerting. At one point in the novel, Luz and Ciara, the love interest/serendipitous partner have a discussion about H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*. In an apparent attempt to show he is aware of the representations of women in literature, the characters briefly discuss the trope of the Nubile Savage in *The Time Machine*. While the character shows some apparent awareness, the character proceeds to use a mix of "skilled but naïve" and "born sexy yesterday" tropes. Ciara is a rather brilliant and beautiful woman who is both naïve about the world as well as her as of yet unexplored sexuality. I could not help but feel uncomfortable though the novel as it felt that it was the innocence and naïveté (about life and her sexuality) that the main character found attractive and appealing. The characters pointed out how H.G. Wells created a love interest that was a "pet with a bosom" while at the same time creating a love interest that was a pet with a bosom that can also do tricks. While the love interest does well for herself in the end, a love story that resolves around an older experienced character falling for a naïve, younger character falling, largely because of those specific characteristics, is questionable in my mind. On top of what I wrote above, the romance was forged during intensely stressful circumstances in which the naïve character had to largely rely on the older experienced character. Regardless of your take, I find love stories that rely on the inequality of the parties to be troublesome.

Final Thoughts

Despite the attempt to market the book as something it is not, the story is written like an action adventure novel. This is not a problem if you are being honest about what you are writing. A James Rollins novel may not make it to Oprah's book club, but James Rollins never pretends he is writing anything but action adventure. While the story has the trappings of research, social consciousness and attention to detail, it nothing more than a façade covering an adequately written novel with a questionable plot and a misleading premise. Had the author not tried so hard to convince the reader that this story was something it was not, I would have likely been much kinder in my review.

Picky Virgo says

Stirling delivers a well-written tale (as usual), but that's all I can say about it. His painstaking descriptions of minutiae in both apparel and weaponry seemed to drag interminably. I found myself skipping entire pages, just to get to the end of an interlude whose outcome wasn't in question. If there's another volume in this saga, please count me out.

SS says

There's common advice, from librarians and others, that if you reach page 50 in a book and don't love it, you should set it aside and move on. I stuck with this book for more than three times that amount, and I don't love it. I think I could have loved it, but as it is, I don't.

The author can, from a technical view – spelling, punctuation, syntax, etc. - write. However, I think he's out of his comfort zone in this book. There's a story buried in the pages, somewhere, but it takes so much effort to try to find it. It's clear that the author knows "stuff", and he wants to share it, all of it. The story is told by the character of Luz, a young intelligence agent in 1916. She's on a mission to learn about what's happening in Germany during WWI. She gets herself into some touchy situations, but having joined with German

officer Horst, both romantically and on official duty, she manages to wiggle out of them. That sounds good, right? But Luz is constantly musing about unrelated things: philosophy, history, food, weather, combat techniques, castle building, womens' fashion, piano quality, violin quality, music, composers, Electrical Experimenter Magazine, the cost of things in 1916. It's exhausting reading. These constant non-sequiturs create so much distraction that the story gets lost in the muddle.

This is one of a very few books I haven't finished in many years, and I might have stuck with this one until the end if it wasn't taking such a toll on my patience. I want to yell, "Get to the point, already!" But it never does. Here's a sample from about page 150: Luz, her German cohorts, German high military commanders, and another woman are invited to witness a horrific event where hundreds of prisoners are killed in front of their eyes. Afterwards, the women retire to their room. They don't mention what they've just witnessed, despite the fact that it made the one woman violently sick to her stomach. Instead, they conveniently have a piano and violin in their room, so they begin to play a duet or two. I can see that they might do that to take their minds off of the terrible thing they just saw, but all along, Luz's musings wander all over the place, from topic to topic, none of which have anything to do with what has or will happen, or the fact that they are likely in danger. I understand that the author wants to show what a well-educated and smart young woman Luz is, but, as I said, it's distracting. At the same time, Luz, who's undercover, reveals her real identity and purpose to this woman she's just met, in a German colonel's office, and knows little to nothing about. It seems very unrealistic.

Also, while the summary for this book says:

In an alternative 1912, President Taft suddenly dies, and Teddy Roosevelt wastes no time in grabbing power as he wins another term as president.

So far, all I've seen of Teddy Roosevelt is in the prologue, a mere seven pages. Luz mentions him from time to time, but as far as I can tell, with more than 40% read, this book really doesn't seem to involve him.

One big suggestion if you're going to tackle this book is to know your WWI era history backward and forwards. If not, you'll be lost. Also, be prepared for some shocks, like Hawaii already being the forty-ninth state, with discussion of how it's possible that the Philippines and/or Puerto Rico could soon become states, too. There's no explanation about how Hawaii came to be a state at that time, or when, exactly, it did. Also be prepared to find yourself in the midst of a lot of Spanish words and phrases with no attempt at helping you understand their meaning. I spent a lot of time on my phone looking up translations as I read along. This, too, makes it hard to follow whatever story there is. Later in the book, the Spanish seems to ease off a little. In it's place, there are German phrases, but for these, explanations are worked in. I never understand why authors think it's a good idea to dump a lot of foreign language into a book written in English without any attempt to assist the reader in understanding the meaning. Also, I found the long chapter headings confusing. What do the little capital "B's in parenthesis mean? Why was it necessary to write them in two languages? I can only hope that some of this was corrected in final editing.

I find that each time I reach for the book, I hesitate to pick it up. I willfully start looking for something, anything, else to do instead of reading further. For me, that's a strong sign that I should move on. Maybe I'll come back and finish this story at some point, but it won't be soon. There are so many good books out there that are rewarding to read, I just can't justify wasting time reading something that feels like punishment.

I appreciate having won an ARC of this book through a Goodreads giveaway, but I just can't force myself to read any further.