

# Blue Iris Journal

## Kaoru Kurimoto, *The Leopard Mask*

Reviewed by

**Elizabeth K. Burton**



In 1979, Kaoru Kurimoto wrote the first of what was planned as a 100-episode fantasy series. Now, with 86 of those in print, the Guin Saga is a Japanese bestseller, and thanks to Vertical Publishing, American fans will be able to find out what the excitement is about.

Anyone partial to heroic sword-and-sorcery is a shoo-in to like ***The Leopard Mask***, the first of five books in the saga to be reprinted. However, there is a richness of both story and world-building that sets this book above simple action adventure and leaves the reader eager for the next installment.

Fourteen-year-old royal twins Rinda and Remus are hiding in a dangerous haunted marsh from the minions of the evil Vlad, Duke of Mongauli. Vlad has destroyed their own country and exterminated their family, but the valiant Rinda is determined she and her brother will one day regain what they've lost.

They are rescued from a patrol of Vlad's soldiers by a mysterious and powerful warrior whose head is eerily encased in a metal mask shaped like a leopard. Other than his name—Guin—he remembers nothing, not where he comes from or how he acquired the mask. When, despite his efforts, he and the twins become prisoners in Vlad's fortress, they discover there is a greater evil behind the savage warlord than they could ever have imagined.

One might describe this book as literary anime, for it contains many of the elements of both that and manga. It has the feisty young heroine, a thoroughly perverse villain and a mighty hero who vanquishes overwhelming odds despite his own troubles. The complex plot, which hints at difficulties to come, never goes beyond the boundaries of disbelief, and the dangers the twins and their protector face are as often psychological as physical.

There is nothing simplistic about the characters, either. Although her brother is the heir, it is Rinda who has all the mystical powers that are supposed to go with that position, and Remus is understandably jealous of that despite his clear devotion to her. Worse, he perceives his lack of ability as weakness, and shrinks from danger his sister confronts headlong.

As for Guin, he is no mindless mass of muscle. There are emotional depths to him that are barely skimmed in this first book but which are clear

nevertheless. It is the process of unearthing them, along with his missing history, that makes it difficult to wait for the second episode.

This same economy of revelation applies to the world Ms. Kurimoto has created, a richly modeled place full of demons and ghosts, gods and monsters, dark towers and hidden treasures. She implies an underlying complex mythology, tastes of which she doles out just often enough to whet the appetite.

Suitable for anyone old enough to read and appreciate a terrific imagination, ***The Leopard Mask*** is a marvelous introduction to a series that has swept Japan like Robert Jordan's Wheel of Time series has the United States—and for far better reason. This is basic storytelling at its finest, and could even give Harry Potter a run for his wand.

***The Leopard Mask***

Book 1 of The Guin Saga

by Kaoru Kurimoto

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