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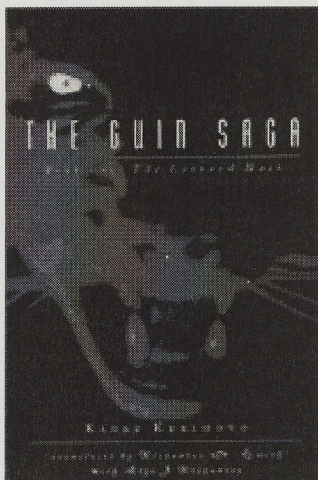
Reviews

[Search](#)
[Home](#)
[Contents](#)
[Site Index](#)

The Leopard Mask: The Guin Saga, Book 1

Kaoru Kurimoto, translated by Alexander O. Smith with Elye J. Alexander
Vertical Inc., 284 pages

A review by [Georges T. Dodds](#)



Kaoru Kurimoto
Kaoru Kurimoto (a pseudonym) began her career as a literary critic and has composed musicals based on episodes from *The Guin Saga*. She lives in Tokyo, Japan. When, in late 70s, she announced she would produce a one hundred volume fantasy epic, many were incredulous. Eighty-nine books later, *The Guin Saga* has sold twenty-five million copies. New installments, up to about 90 all told at this point, routinely make the

Notwithstanding where the later episodes in the *Guin Saga* may have taken the [series](#), if **The Leopard Mask** is at all representative of what's to come, you'll either want to learn to read Japanese real quick, or haunt your bookstore's new releases rack. This is the sort of stuff that gives one some hope that multi-volume Heroic Fantasy isn't just an excuse to recycle old growth forests into doorstops. [This has it all](#), a powerful but mysterious fate-driven hero, a nasty plague-bearing villain who is actually more (or less depending on how you see it) than what he first appears, a forest plagued with spirits, demons and worse, a pair of twin heirs to a kingdom with undeveloped paranormal capabilities, and [action, action, action!](#)

Reading **The Leopard Mask** brought me back to my days of immersion in Robert E. Howard's *Conan*, Michael Moorcock's *Elric* and Jane Gaskell's *Cija/Atlantis* tales. For the first time in a long time I was intrigued where the author was going to take the story, and how she was going to do it, which is a lot to say for one as jaded of heroic fantasy as I am.

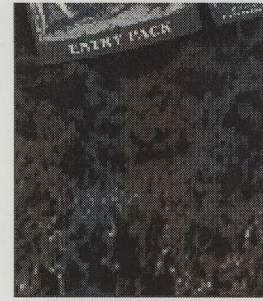
While some of this material and style, and particularly the cultural slant of the material may be old hat to the anime aficionado or Shinto scholar, it reads as [remarkably fresh and original](#) to me. A very fast read, with a vocabulary easily accessible to even young

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bestseller list in Japan. Later books in the series have moved away from heroic fantasy into the Gay-Slash genre.

readers, Kurimoto, or at least her translator A.O. Smith, manages to tell an exciting and very intriguing story without sinking into either sesquipedalian prose or pulp sensationalism.



[Vertical, Inc. - Guin Saga I](#)
[Vertical, Inc. - Guin Saga II](#)
[and III](#)
[Synopsis of full series](#)

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This isn't to say that **The Leopard Mask** leaves one entirely satisfied, it is clearly an episode rather than a stand-alone novel, and a number of plot twists and characters are left very much unresolved. The book is nominally about a pair of young twins, heirs to the kingdom of Parros, and hunted by the militaristic regime of Mongaul which has conquered Parros. They are saved from a Mongaul patrol by Guin, a huge warrior whose face is covered by an unremovable feline mask, only to be later captured by another patrol and imprisoned in a Mongaul border fort, overseen by a evil warlord consumed by a deadly pestilence. Then again it is only part one of 100 projected episodes, and one of 5 episodes slated for translation and making up the "Marches Episode." Given the plot and character diversity of the first book, it isn't clear that this synopsis of the book would give much away as to the events in the second and third installments: **Warrior in the Wilderness** and **The Battle of Nospheru**.

So if you want something that draws something intriguing and exciting from the old tropes of epic fantasy, you've found the right stuff in *The Guin Saga*. However, if for some unfathomable reason **The Leopard Mask** isn't to your taste, there's plenty of publishers out there who'll be all too happy to supply you thousands of pages of uninspired Tolkien-lite.

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Georges Dodds is a research scientist in vegetable crop physiology, who for close to 25 years has read and collected close to 2000 titles of predominantly pre-1950 science-fiction and fantasy, both in English and French. He writes columns on early imaginative literature for WARP, the newsletter/fanzine of the [Montreal Science Fiction and Fantasy Association](#) and maintains a [site](#) reflecting his tastes in imaginative literature.

[Search](#)

[Contents](#)

[Site Index](#)

[Contact Us](#)

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