



The Cipher

Diana Pharaoh Francis

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Distant member of the royal Rampling family, Lucy Trenton's ability to detect majick has embroiled her in a dangerous intrigue that threatens her very life. Her only hope lies in her most persistent suitor, ship captain Marten Thorpe, but Lucy isn't sure she can trust him...

The Cipher Details

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Author : Diana Pharaoh Francis

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From Reader Review *The Cipher* for online ebook

Berls says

This Review Appeared First at Fantasy is More Fun

4.5 stars

Note: *The Cipher* was recently re-released with some changes. This review is of the version released June 30, 2014

My Initial Reaction...

It's been a little bit since I read Diana Pharaoh Francis and I'd sort of forgotten her incredible ability to weave fantasy worlds that blow my mind with their originality, to torture her characters in ways that make me cringe in pain and despair of hope, all while enticing me to not let the book go. *The Cipher* delivered all that and reminded me why she's one of my favorite authors.

The Characters...

The characters in *The Cipher* are beautifully complex and flawed. *The Cipher* is told from the point of view of the two main characters - Lucy Trenton and Marten Thorpe.

I loved everything about Lucy. She's a customs inspector - sounds boring, right? Nope! In this world - which I will gush about thoroughly in the next section - it's anything but boring. It's a position of authority and, as we see right away, requiring some serious cojones! She has to deal with consequences of this serious magical storm that not only wrecks pretty much every ship trying to make its way to her port, but devours - Yes DEVOURS - the people on board and transforms them into dangerous, hideous scary creatures. In just the first few chapters my stomach dropped out numerous times at these horrific descriptions, but Lucy not only had to deal with it - she had to take command of it. And she did so in an admirable way. Sure she has nightmares about it later, but who wouldn't?

So Lucy's kick ass. She's also got quite a mouth on her, refuses to be made into the proper lady her mother wishes she'd be, has no qualms about taking a lover, and tells it how it is - even when talking about herself. She repeatedly says she's rude, insensitive, and not very beautiful - but not in the "feel sorry for me" way. Nope, she takes ownership of who she is and makes no apology. Except on one major issue. She's been committing a serious offense - the kind that will take down not just her but everyone she knows - and in *The Cipher* it's about to catch up to her. And that's when we saw the other part about her I loved - she owns her mistakes, is willing to face them dead on and take responsibility for them, all while trying to protect others from the possible fall out. And did I mention she won't go down without a fight? Yeah, I seriously love this girl.

And then there's Marten. Oh man I just got so frustrated with him, felt so sorry for him, and fell in love with him - in a pretty fluid circle. Marten's got this really great heart deep down, but he has one major flaw. He's a gambler. Not a "I like to gamble from time to time" kind of gambler. A "I'm going to ruin my life because I can't live without it" kind of gambler. Watching him try to deal with the draw and repercussions of that addiction was painful and brutal in a way only Diana Pharaoh Francis can write. And when his gambling tangles him up with Lucy - things get really messy, he starts to have some serious crises of conscience, and things get really messy again. Marten Thorpe is the walking disaster you can't help but love.

There are some seriously brilliant secondary characters in *The Cipher* as well. I've gone on and on already though, so I'll just say that from good guy to bad guy, they're all marvelously written and complex.

The Story...

Oh gosh, this review is already so long and I have so much to say about the world in *The Cipher*! If you've read Diana Pharaoh Francis you know she's incredibly creative and knows how to build a world. I knew all that going in and still *The Cipher*'s world building blew me away. We've got this island world that felt a bit like Victorian England - strong sea kingdom, corsets, balls, wash basins, quarters within the city, etc - and yet was nothing like it. For one, it's clear that men and women aren't divided along ridiculous gender lines - entire ship crews are made up of men or women, women own businesses, women and men have similar sexual freedoms, etc. She changes all these little details too - not even the same units of measurement for time. Days of the week aren't Monday, Tuesday, etc - they have different names that fit a sea culture. They measure time by the glass. It's different and yet familiar enough that you understand it.

And then there's the magic! I have to admit, this was the one area I would have liked things better explained. Like most high fantasy, in *The Cipher* you get all these new words that you aren't familiar with and sometimes I got confused about what meant what. But on the whole, it was still brilliant. You've got this whole class of people who practice magic and there supposed to be registered when they have that ability. They are generally healers but they also create magical objects and there's even this magical forcefield (for lack of a better world) protecting the kingdom.

I was gripped by the world & characters from the start - and then the plot was equally awesome. Lucy's being blackmailed and you just know shit's going to hit the fan. Except your really hope it won't. And the beautiful agony of waiting to see what would happen and never being able to know just how far Diana Pharaoh Francis is going to torture these poor people just kept me glued to *The Cipher*.

Concluding Sentiments...

If you can handle some serious pain and chilling descriptions and a bit of agony for your characters, I seriously recommend *The Cipher*!

I received this book for free from NetGalley in exchange for an honest review. This does not affect my opinion of the book or the content of my review.

Blodeuedd Finland says

I am a cruel cruel mistress. My poor books. This one, sure it was good I guess (not for me though.) I was bored, I could not get into it, and I could not care less

Anna Wick says

I can't find documentation, but I think I've read this. So making note

Mary B. Grove says

a strong story

Starts with a bang and doesn't let up. I like Lucy, the female lead. She's bright, abrasive, lacks confidence in

unexpected ways, but she's also strong, loyal and determined to fix her mistakes. Marten was harder to like, as he began the book as a self-indulgent whiner blaming other people for his mistakes and getting people hurt because he wanted to believe nothing bad would happen to anyone from his doing a very bad thing. The worldbuilding was fascinating, as was the magic system, and I hope later books say more about Crosspointe, its founders and why things work there the way they do. The politics are also interesting, given the royal line is caught up in a Chancery suit that means they have to work to feed themselves. Unlike some other readers, I had no issue with the motivations of the Crosspointe villain. He was just looking out for himself, enjoyed amassing wealth, power over other people, and hurting anyone he felt like. It's a classic villain personality, there are people just like that, and I didn't need him to have a stronger or "more believable somehow" motivation or for making the choices he did. The writing was sharp, the plot flowed and the story wrapped up with a real ending and threads to carry on into the next book—which I'm buying now.

Jacey says

Lucy Trenton is a member of Crosspointe's Royal Family, but that doesn't mean she gets a free ride. They all have to work for a living. Lucy is a customs officer and a damn good one, but she has a secret; she can feel the presence of magic. Which is a bit unfortunate because Crosspointe runs on small magics made from the raw magic of the dangerous sylveth which infests the sea, contaminating and changing anything it touches into living monsters, infectious and dangerous. In the wrong place at the wrong time, Lucy is the officer on watch when a magical knucklebone reef rises, wrecking ships outside the magic-protected harbour bar. At great psychological cost Lucy heads the crew responsible for dragging the salvage on shore, making it safe and dutifully killing the human horrors changed by the sylveth. In this she's helped by two captains, her childhood friend, Jordan, and the rakish Marten Thorpe, a good captain, but a notorious gambler when not at sea, whom she doesn't trust but is attracted to. Amongst the salvage is a true cypher – an illegal magical artifact – which fastens on to Lucy. Convinced that it will kill her very soon she allows herself some comfort in Marten, and from then on her troubles multiply.

This is nicely written, fast-paced and the characters are well-rounded. There's a satisfying ending while leaving some loose ends for future books. Recommended.

Jessica ❀ ➤➤ Silverbow ➤➤ ❀ Rabid Reads-no-more says

RTC.

Kim Fraser says

I feel like I should really like this book, but I just can't get into it. I don't know if it's because the characters are flat or the world isn't explained well enough. I just find it very dull. Maybe I'll come back to it another time and I'll like it better.

Mara says

<4

A great beginning:

There were some days that deserved to be be drowned at birth and everyone sent back to bed with a hot brandy, a box of chocolates and a warm, energetic companion. Today was without question one of those days.

The Cipher is a fantasy book with a strong romance thread. It's set in a word of Georgian or Victorian resonance (before the Industrial Revolution).

It has an absolutely great world-building, and an unrelenting tension until the very end.

The world-building was well integrated in the story, and we learn about it watching the story unfold. (We are never showered with info dumps :D.)

I loved the way magic takes its toll on its users. The way we see ignorance shapes people (who fear what they don't know or understand). The utter normalcy of evil.

The plot deals with treason and betrayal and it's a never-relenting run against apparently unstoppable enemies. Personally I found this run was at time dragged by an over descriptive narrative, but it may be a purely personal peeve.

There were a multitude of "main" characters, but we get the Pov of two "heroes". The really great thing is that they are flawed, so human in their hypocrisy and fallacy. The very bad thing is that they are flawed... :) I had quite a few difficult moments with the hero's pov. It's really unpleasant, as the life of people with addiction often is. They lie, they cheat, they deny their responsibility. And this is what he did to the very end. His final choice wasn't enough to save him in my eyes. (view spoiler) On the other end, the heroine was competent and strong, and her mistakes only made her more relatable.

Things that did not resonate with me.

-Why create a society that recalls Georgian/Victorian times (with balls, "Ton"-like society, marriage market and corsets) and then make it "modern-like" in mores.

This is in no way the only books that chooses this path and it always confuses me a bit. A working society (male and female alike) can't mesh with a non working one easily. [If I'm a custom officer, I work for a living, I invest my money in a shop, why wouldn't I have other "freedoms"?]

-We are never really explained how the "bad" guy succeeded in his plot to ensnare her. And the two-pronged evil, while really good, was at times too shallow (not that well integrated maybe?)

DRC courtesy of the publisher via NetGalley

Eero says

What I liked:

Story begins interestingly, custom inspection, strange magic creatures and blackmail plot especially
Premise of book has potential, world has good renaissance vibe, there is interesting magic and magical artifacts.

what I didn't like:

main characters were too gullible, which was used as plot device to make story's villains plot work, but still writer insist that main character are clever, even best on their field of work, which both need people who aren't easily cheated or lied.

Crosspoint's justice system seems to be designed to be easily rounded and especially it feels like it support framing people on crimes what they haven't committed as even suspicion of committing crime gets you and all you friends and family to be sent on exile and as people is exiled such place where they can't survive it's same as death sentence. This would be ok except that system is described as just and even people screwed by it want some reason protect it and demand that others will follow it.

And in end both main characters get super powers which make it possible that they can save the day. And of course main character end in happy couple even that male lead has cheated and otherwise screwed female leads life even causing her best friend, father and two brothers to be sold in slavery, but of course such things don't matter as he is just so dashing and he apologized and tried to help, but in end gets one of their friends killed and ensure sentencing of the female lead and her family, so romance plot of this book was just idiotic in my eyes.

But book is readable and don't cause feeling that you need to throw it on the wall.

Denise says

Customs inspector and member of the royal family Lucy Trenton has a dangerous secret hobby: She collects true ciphers, rare and powerful magickal artifacts that tend to have painful and mostly lethal effects on targets they attach to. Lucy has always been careful, but now her luck has run out. The newest true cipher she has found has attached itself to her, with unpredictable and increasingly dangerous consequences, and a blackmailer has found out about her forbidden collection and gets her embroiled in a web of intrigue threatening her family and friends and all of Crosspointe.

An intriguing fantasy world and a plot filled with mystery and conspiracy are generally ingredients that guarantee I'll enjoy a book. This one took me some time to get into (I wasn't overly fond of the romance subplot), but by the last quarter, I was very thoroughly hooked. Looking forward to returning to this world.

Carol (StarAngel's Reviews) Allen says

Hmmmm? It was a bit confusing and I did find that the author did waste a bit of writing on in depth descriptions that really didn't build the world or give any credit to the story. But overall, it was an enjoyable

read once the action started ---- especially the last 30% of the book where the adventure was non-stop!

Jim says

Lucy Trenton's special gift is the ability to sense magick, a useful trick in the town of Crosspointe, where enchanted sylveth can surge in with the tides, transforming and destroying every creature it touches. Lucy is a good, law-abiding citizen with one flaw: she collects true ciphers, magically cursed objects created centuries ago by a magician named Errol Cipher. Lucy must fight a sylveth tide, fight a cipher which has bonded to her arm, and deal with a blackmailer who knows her secret. And then things start to get really dangerous.

Within the first few pages, you can tell Francis has serious worldbuilding skills. Crosspointe is a well-realized port city, full of the rich detail that most fantasies gloss over. And Lucy is a fun, stubbornly determined hero. It took a chapter or two to draw me in, but then I was hooked.

No book is perfect, of course. I was a bit uncomfortable with the description of the Jutras, the savage empire that threatens Crosspointe. Basically, they come across as pure, irredeemable evil. They're merciless, their magic is savage and bloody, and they're all-around bad guys, to the point of appearing inhuman. The way the inhabitants of Crosspointe talk about the Jutras evoked some racially-tinged discomfort as I was reading. But it sounds like we'll be learning more about the Jutras and their empire in book two.

The other thing that bugged me was the ending. Lucy is a strong, determined character. She spends most of the book fighting for what she believes and accepting the consequences. Those consequences catch up with her about 80% of the way through the book, but then she receives ... let's call it a gift. I don't want to spoil the ending, so I'm not going to say much more. It wasn't a deus ex machina, but that one part of the story felt too easy, especially compared with everything else she had fought for.

Francis writes very honestly. Characters and relationships are flawed. Victory comes with a cost. Magic is powerful, but it's a raw, poorly understood power, one that's difficult to control. Nor is Lucy invulnerable to her own magic. When she creates fire, she too is burned. It's a wonderful example of the price of magic, and I cheered the writer even as I gritted my teeth at Lucy's pain.

Overall, I'd strongly recommend the book, and I'm looking forward to *The Black Ship*.

Margaret says

Welcome to Crosspointe. Where if you don't control the majick, it may control you...

What I liked

I think the strongest elements in Francis' writing are her terrific world-building and her characters.

The world-building is rich and complex. Francis uses a lot of her own words within the story, which may sometimes get confusing. But they are well-placed in context. The visual descriptions are very well done. I had no trouble visualizing the scenes—places, people, and action—as I was reading. I particularly liked the

complex majick and how it is both used and feared by the society in general and our characters in specific.

I genuinely liked the narrative voices of both Lucy and Marten, the two POV characters, despite the fact that these are both flawed people—more antihero than hero. Lucy starts off kind of stand-offish and selfish, although I liked that she was a strong, dedicated professional woman. Marten's a would-be hero with a gambling addiction that leads to his ruin and contributes to Lucy's and many other people's difficulties (even deaths).

Francis writes them in such a way that I *wanted* them to overcome their many obstacles. I *wanted* them to succeed in their quest, and I wanted them to work things out together. They both grow throughout their journey. There's a touching reunion with a friend near the end of the novel that highlights this point.

I liked many of the secondary characters as well, and they had enough to do in the story that I felt like I got to know them through the eyes of the main POVs. The villains were sufficiently nasty, if sometimes one-dimensional, and Francis did an excellent job with Marten's conflicted relationship with his brother.

What I didn't like

The storytelling bogged down in places, but never enough to make me really give up. It was a combination of too much description and not enough action or forward momentum. But overall, I enjoyed the narrative language and the storytelling very much.

I wasn't entirely satisfied with the ending. Pretty much *everything* happens in the last three or four chapters, so it felt too abrupt at times, after so much struggle to get there. And the actual ending felt limp after the tension of the dramatic action right up to it. I appreciate the circular nature of the beginning and ending, but it made me wrinkle my nose nonetheless.

The foreign Jutras were given very vivid physical descriptions, and Lucy even has sympathy for some of them at times. But we don't get to interact with them at all, to see them as real and complex characters in their own right. Their final scene is pretty horrific, and it will be a challenge for Francis to build any reader connection with them in future books. I hope she will do so, and give us a more fully realized culture to provide a context for their actions in *The Cipher*.

Caveats (potential triggers)

There is some sex, some threatening sexual language, and fairly detailed graphic violence.

Summary

I found this book on NetGalley and requested a review copy. I enjoyed the story very much and plan to continue Francis' series of Crosspointe novels. I give it four out of five stars.

roxi Net says

Unfortunately, while this book had great promise, it just didn't deliver to me. I tried very hard to find something about the characters I liked and couldn't get there. While I hadn't been engaged in the beginning, I tried to wade through it, and found it too easy to put down in favor of other novels that brought you in

through the imagery and characters right off the bat.

Ann says

This novel begins with the best opening lines I've read in a long while:

There were some days that deserved to be be drowned at birth and everyone sent back to bed with a hot brandy, a box of chocolates and a warm, energetic companion. Today was without question one of those days.

It's actually what made me pick up the book. Francis does a good job at keeping the tension high enough that you keep turning the pages. Lucy starts out having a bad day, and it just gets worse.

I do have to say... the cover states that Martin Thorpe is a "dashing and mysterious ship captain," but he's really not that mysterious. More of a rogue... Lucy knows of him and his reputation precedes him. He's a notorious gambler, addicted to chance, and that turns Lucy off right away. So there's much tension there.

Lucy is an interesting character, a member of the royal family, but because the royal family is in the middle of legal proceedings that have been going on for ages... she has no access to the wealth that comes from it. She has to work for a living. She's a customs inspector and takes her job very seriously. She's also a stickler for the rules, which is why Martin's gambling bothers her so much.

Except she also breaks the rules when it suits her, making her hypocritical. The good thing is that she realizes this. She is attracted to dangerous magical devices called ciphers, specifically true ciphers made by Errol Cipher. Quite often they are cursed object that attach to a victim and torment them until they die. Possessing them is illegal. Lucy has managed to collect several, and during a salvage operation when Crosspointe's port is blocked by knucklebones (a kind of moving reef, if a reef were made out of unbreakable material that rip ships apart), Lucy discovers another true cipher. It bursts out of its box and wraps itself around Lucy's arm.

Thus, Lucy's no good, very bad day goes even further downhill.

She also discovers that she's about to be blackmailed by someone who knows she collects true ciphers.

Much much worse.

I admired that about the book, that the tension kept notching up. Well, up until Lucy and Martin ended up with uber-powers. It dips a bit there.

But that happens near the end of the book, and even with that, Lucy has to face a band of all-powerful evil sorcerers that have put the King and the court in danger (as they're about to sacrifice them to their evil gods).

Yes, she saves the day and ends up becoming a very powerful majick user, but not everything in the story turns out fine in the end. Yes, she ends up with lots of power, but she also literally loses pretty much all her friends and family, as they have been shipped off to be slaves, in punishment for crimes for which she was accused. She is forbidden by the King to save them as he needs her in Crosspointe to help stabilize the

political situation there.

It clipped her wings, but it didn't quite seem believable.

I enjoyed the magic system, even as I hated that it was spelled majick. Hated. It jumped off the page at me every time I read it. I don't understand why authors do that to perfectly good words... on purpose. (I butcher words, but that's because I can't spell.)

I also liked that Francis resisted the urge to explain her world completely. We learn about the different things in her world by watching Lucy live her life. We learn about how majick works, the odd phenomena in the sea, what *sylveth* does (though not really what it is, but I get the sense that they don't really know that either). Sylveth is a magical... well, kind of a magical gel that floats on the oceans. It changes anything it touches, living or not, into hideous versions of whatever it was. Hideous and dangerous creatures. However, the same stuff can be worked, to some extent, by majicars. These fantastic elements are accepted as normal... horrifying at times, dangerous always, but not as strange things. It's not a portal story, but one of immersion. We're not given a travel guide to see us through.

The story is told in third person from the POV of Lucy most of the time, and from Martin's POV for the rest. Francis achieves a fairly deep POV on occasion, crawling into both Lucy and Martin's minds well, which I think is necessary since these two characters are our only window into the world.

I did have a problem with how easy Lucy fell into her roll as uber-majicar (and every time I see that, I read it as maji-car, some kind of vehicle). Basically, boom. She's Errol Cipher's heir. The most powerful Majicar Evah! And she can use her powers flawlessly. For anything. Really? It doesn't even phase her.

The other thing that really bothered me is that the bad guys are dark-skinned and scarred, like tribal warriors. That really bothered me. Yes, their actions are very bad, but why couldn't they have been white people doing very bad things? If the people of Crosspointe had also been dark-skinned, yeah, maybe it would have flown. And perhaps later in the series we'll discover that they're not all bad, but the whole "dark person=bad people come to take over our lands" really doesn't sit well with me.

Three out of five stars for me. Good world-building. Great tension to a point, but the struggle to overcome was pretty much missing, which made the ending too easy to achieve. And while she's held back by the King and her loyalty, that's all that's holding her back. She could just as easily gone off and rescued her friends and family. And then there are the overtones of racism. I'm giving the author the benefit of the doubt on that one, but it does make me wary.
