



# Devil's Call

*J. Danielle Dorn*

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On a dark night in the winter of 1859, three men entered the home of Dr. Matthew Callahan and shot him dead in front of his pregnant wife. Unfortunately for them, his wife, Li Lian, hails from a long line of women gifted in the dark arts--the witches of the McPherson clan.

This diary, written to the child she carries, records her quest from the Nebraska Territory to Louisiana to the frozen shore of Lake Superior, to bring justice to the monsters responsible for shooting her husband in the back. Our long-rifled witch will stop at nothing?--?and risk everything?--?in her showdown with evil.

## Devil's Call Details

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Author : J. Danielle Dorn

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# From Reader Review Devil's Call for online ebook

## Lynn Williams says

Devil's Call is an excellent book that I can't recommend enough. My immediate thoughts were 'wow' and the TL:DR review is 'Just read it. Please.' Put basically, this is a story that, for me, works on many levels. I love the format the story is told in, the writing is persuasive and evocative, and the central character makes for compelling reading.

This is a story told by a character called Li Lian in the form of a diary to her unborn child. I love this form of storytelling and it's executed particularly well in Devil's Call. We pick up with Li Lian as she goes back to her earliest memories of being a child and she really does tell a remarkably interesting story. The McPherson women come from a long line of gifted women. Call it witchcraft or the dark arts if you will but all of them have abilities that come naturally. They're used to protecting themselves and disguising their abilities by keeping together in a close knit community where the women nurture the gifts that their children receive but at the same time learn to hide them from hostile eyes. Li Lian is from a young age more curious than some of her cousins. She wants to know more and shows less restraint often getting herself into trouble. As she grows this develops into a more rebellious streak that sees her running away from home in search of adventure. This is when she first meets her future husband and theirs is a relationship that grows into something so strong that it can withstand the tests of time, separation and cultural difference. The two eventually settle down together but the time they have is to be short lived. Three strangers come into their life one night and change it forever. Li Lian's husband is murdered and Li Lian herself becomes the chief suspect. With help from an unexpected source Li Lian manages to escape imprisonment and execution and sets out in pursuit of the murderers with vengeance on her mind.

Set in the mid 1800s the story travels around from Nebraska to Louisiana and has a wonderful western vibe. I just loved this aspect of the story. It's got a rough lawless feel, people carrying guns, saloons, dirty streets and towns that feel like they've shot up out of the dirt. There's something raw and basic about it and it really comes across strongly in Li Lian's tale. The story manages to walk that fine line of giving detail without an over abundance. You get a really good sense of place as Li Lian travels between towns, often caked in dust from the road, feeling hunger and cold alike, sleeping rough or in the back of a cart. It's just a level of gritty realism that adds to the feel of the story.

The characters. Well clearly the main character is Li Lian. She tells the story and her narration is simply compelling. She makes an unlikely ally in the form of Roger Hawking, a butcher and a drunk and Li Lian's unlikely saviour. He is with her the night her husband is shot but because of his predilection for alcohol his testimony provides no more credibility than Li Lian's. The two make an unlikely pairing but their story and dialogue make for excellent reading and Hawking's history gradually unfolds as the two move across the country. On top of this there is the main character that they're in pursuit of. I don't want to give away too much here as it's something that is best learnt as the story develops but there is something deeply unsettling and scary about this character. Li Lian steals the show completely of course. She's tenacious and resourceful and such a wonderful female character to read about. What I found really compelling was that she was believable. She has these magical abilities but they're not over the top fantasy elements. There's no electricity flying out of her fingers. The magic here is much more subtle, chants and incantations, concoctions and charms, nothing dramatic and flashy but the sort of ability that eventually leads to people whispering behind shut doors, hanging protective wards around their thresholds. The type of magic that could be little more than herb lore and a knowledge of healing but that eventually leads to superstition. Although, you are aware as a reader that Li Lian's magic is real and that things in this world exist that defy

explanation.

I just loved this. It has everything. Great characters, great setting, compelling story and this wonderful gritty realism that develops into something more. I will definitely read more by this author and I'm curious to know if more will be forthcoming from Li Lian.

I received a copy courtesy of the publisher, for which my thanks. The above is my own opinion.

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### Jane-Holly says

I read it in two sittings - Devil's Call is a dark, well paced thriller set in the old west. I love the first person narrative from Li Lian, a deeply flawed character who effortlessly carries the story forward as she seeks vengeance on the men who killed her husband and the father of her unborn child. The supporting characters are strong as well, all in all a terrific debut novel from J. Danielle Dorn!

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### Sarah Joint says

This isn't my usual kind of book, but I'm so glad I gave it a chance! It's relatively short and easy to read, but it'll keep you intrigued the whole time. **Full of strong women, determination, and magick.** It's written as a sort of diary or letter and set in the 1800's, and I was left wondering until the very end.

*"Girlhood is a magick all its own, and our girlhood was a shared one."*

Li Lian hails from a long line of gifted women. **They can track people or hex them. They can make things grow or make them die. They can protect, or they can harm.** Not only is Li Lian gifted, she's feisty. She doesn't take crap from anyone, even though her lineage comes with a certain danger if the wrong people find out about it. It's almost a surprise when she falls in love, but she does. He's a good man, and they move and begin a life together. They're happy for some time, and eventually she allows herself to become pregnant.

*"It's a hell of a thing, killing a man. You take away all he's got and all he's ever gonna have." —William Munny, Unforgiven*

They live together peacefully until three men arrive at their door and ruin everything. Her husband has been shot and killed, and she has no idea why. Blamed for the murder, she runs. Escape is necessary, and she can't do it on her own. She has Hawking for company, a town drunk who was injured by the very same men who took her husband from her and the only one on her side. **Despite her pregnancy, she's determined to get justice for her husband... but she may not be chasing ordinary men.**

Warning: if you are very sensitive to animal abuse, as I am, there may be a few paragraphs in the book you want to skip.

*I received an ARC of this book from Net Galley and Inkshares, thank you! My review is honest and unbiased.*

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## Kai says

It's difficult to classify Devil's Call within a single genre, and that is its greatest strength. A large portion of the book has the language and feel of a Western, filled with barren landscapes and crusty characters, but Westerns rarely feature spellcasting. Then again, its supernatural elements are so grounded (and, refreshingly, not over-explained in narrative) that it can in no way be called Fantasy. It does eventually earn its place in Horror with a heaping helping of truly unsettling gore in the second half of the novel, each instance more disturbing than the last. But all "True Grit with witches" elevator pitches aside, I can easily say I have never read anything like this novel.

This is the author's debut work, and most fair critiques of the novel can be attributed to that. For instance, the pace of the novel is breakneck; I found myself wishing on multiple pages that the ambience, symbolism, or emotion of a moment had more time to land before I was rushed onward. There were a few (rare) scenes where the environment or action was not detailed clearly enough for me to get a good picture of it in my mind. In some ways I think the first-person point of view held the author back from spending more time truly wringing out the meaning of the story, rather than focusing on recollecting events.

That said, I could not help myself throughout the novel from imagining what a filmmaker would do with some of the imagery, because it was so crisply and evocatively described. To bring up specific instances I would have to spoil some of my favorite bits, which I won't do here. Suffice it to say, you can see the mist rising off the lake. You can feel the desolation of the wilderness. You will feel dirty, and hungry, and sore, and alone, because the main character does. The author's style is immersive and ruthless.

As I said, the strongest thing going for this novel is its innovation, but a close second would be the main character, Li Lian. You won't want to have tea with her. You may not even like her. You certainly would never want to cross her. But every gut-punch she takes hurts, and you can feel the hits chipping away at her. And by god, you are going to be rooting for her, from the very beginning to the bitter, bitter end.

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## Ann (Little Bear) Murray says

*"Before what I knew what it was to be a witch, I knew what it was to be different."*

Li Lian – or Lilian, as many mistakenly call her – has never by any means lived an ordinary life. Since before she knew what she was, she could move objects with her mind. Where she walked without shoes, wildflowers grew. She comes from a female-only line of strong witches, long exiled by witch hunters from their homeland of Scotland. But her life is no fairy tale. In St. Louis in the mid 1800's, the MacPherson women cannot live and practice magic as freely as some of them may wish, especially young Lily.

So, when a young soldier and doctor named Matthew Callahan crosses her path, she quickly falls in love, desperate for a change, and follows him to Chicago and soon after to the territory of Nebraska. Here, he can practice medicine where it's needed, and she can practice magic without constantly worrying about drawing attention to making flowers and trees grow where they shouldn't.

In her new life, suddenly no longer feeling like a child in a cage, Lily practices her magic more freely, as well as becomes pregnant. Before their new, perfect life can truly blossom, Matthew is brutally murdered right before Lily's eyes. Without hesitation, she vows to go after his killers, alone if she has to, and will

travel as far as she has to – baby in her belly or not. The rest of the novel follows Lily and an unlikely companion across the wilderness of the yet young United States, up and down the vast Mississippi, through the unruly streets of New Orleans, and to the unforgiving landscape of the Badlands in the depths of winter.

The entire book is written in a letter to Lily's daughter. We do not, until the very end, know why Lily must leave her child behind, or why this is her only means of passing on to her both advice of magic and life, as well as the story of how she came to be. Though the tale she tells is perilous, she manages some humor, and does manage to give her daughter some solid advice, that, if Lily had followed herself, she would probably not be in the position that she is. ***“Be wild, but be wise, darling,”*** she tells her, someone hoping this will help prepare her child for a better life than her own. ***“What is what right is not always easy, my dear, but it makes the world a less repugnant place”.***

I can say without a doubt that I never read a book quite like this before. The genre blending of fantasy and Western felt incredibly fresh and exciting. Magic and witchy novels are perhaps my favorite genre, and the same setting and character types are repeated over and over. Never has there been a witch like Li Lian MacPherson. She is a fairly layered and interesting character. The love for her unborn daughter on her grueling journey to find her husband's killer is heart-warming, and Ms. Dorn does a great job expressing it ( ***"I cannot tell you what will happen after I set down this pen[...]But I can tell you I have loved you since before you were born, and I will love you until my bones are dust"*** ).

Lily's companion, Hawking, the village drunk, provides occasional comic relief (Lily continually pokes fun of his perpetual drunkenness, with quips like: ***“[The] only evidence you're gonna find there is the proof on the front of a dammed whiskey bottle”*** ). Every other character in the book however, including Matthew, we barely get to know before the either wind up dead or out of the picture.

At times, the writing seemed very rushed. I would have loved for it to have been longer. Learning more about Lily's childhood, her family background (which was unnecessarily complicated & confusing), and how she learned the magic that she used along her journey would have made it a lot more enjoyable for me. However, as the book is written as a letter, and as we eventually learn, in an extreme and time-sensitive manner, this makes a bit more sense. The conclusion of the novel also seemed anti-climactic. For a few hundred pages we are following this mysterious villain(s), and it all ended very quickly, with a lot of back & forth banter about whether or not the devil is real or not.

I would have been happy with 100-200 more pages, since Ms. Dorn is quite capable of providing the reader with imaginative details and lush language (some favorite examples: ***“the air was the ghost of violence”***, ***“my hex had left a stain in the air”*** ).

It just wasn't *quite* enough for me to give this novel a higher rating. I will hold out hope for a sequel, and that we can dive a bit deeper into the unique world of Lily MacPherson and the now three generations of witches in the wild west.

3.5/5 Stars

**\*\*Many thanks to Inkshares & Netgalley for my first ARC!\*\***

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**Charlie - A Reading Machine says**

The story being told is one of revenge most deserved served nice and fresh and to hell with waiting for it turn cold. A husband shot in the back and murdered by a man in black, a newly pregnant wife left full of rage and wicked thoughts and the history and skills of a coven at her back. It's been compared to True Grit with magic and The Revenant with witches.

"Before I leave you in this world, my dear, I aim to record what came to pass when your momma rode from the Nebraska Territory, to Louisiana, to the frozen Badlands, to bring to justice the monster who murdered your father."

Both descriptions are apt but I'm going with a Kill Bill meets Unforgiven because in the end the magic is not a dominate part of the story. There is plenty to enjoy in terms of spells, use of will and ingredients, certainly enough to provide the fantasy element but with things working very much as you'd expect there was no need to set about establishing a bunch of rules or creating a 'magic system' as it were. In a book of 240 pages this was a big strength and meant the pace never let up and the author was free to use her time doing more important things like fleshing out Li Lian and building a demonic reputation for the man in black.

Li Lian is a richly drawn character and a protagonist that readers will grow to respect and admire, helped by a healthy amount of backstory that establishes the fierceness of Li's love for her husband and the unique and intimate connections they share. Throughout her journey she must deal with the blatant and course racism of the time with phrases like 'half breed wench' being thrown her way where ever she goes. She's also a woman in a man's world, or more succinctly a world where a lot of the men are complete shit bags. Thankfully Li Lian's travelling companion could not be more different from her but represents the lone voice that believes her strange tale regarding the murder of her husband. Hawkins is the local butcher and a legendary drunk so sadly no one will believe him but he is an ally nonetheless. There is just enough time to take a detour into his past and gives as some clues as to his motivations which I was thankful for. Li Lian is a heavy and strong presence and the odd moment with another voice works well in allowing the reader a moment to breathe.

Devil's Call (cover) Devil's Call is also a bit of a road trip book as another character is the surrounding landscape, the iconic Civil War American frontier that is described in spare but effective detail. Dorn draws the reader into this world beautifully but always with some restraint. We're always aware that we're not here to see stop and smell the roses. Similarly the book itself has a deckle edge giving it the look of a journal and a scratched and worn cover design that gives the whole book a life of its own.

The voice of the protagonist is wonderful and had me thinking of Jennifer Jason Leigh in The Hateful Eight and Cherry Jones the actress. There is a wry but grim sense of humour at play, a voice that has age and experience behind it and a surety of constitution. It was at all times free of untruths and I trusted it implicitly which gave me great freedom to simply sit back and absorb the tale without second guessing any moment for lack of authenticity. For much of the book we are not quite sure where the narrator is speaking from and this raises some interesting questions in terms of her point of view. Is she dead and this represents her last testament, is she alive and happy raising her child or is she somewhere in between? These are the sort of questions that kept me reading all the way up to the spectacular finale.

Devil's Call is a quick and riveting tale of revenge and a very promising debut. It pushes all the right buttons and this top notch western delivers without compromise.

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## Emily Moore says

### Great idea with lackluster execution.

It's the genre meld that got me. A western with magic? Sold. It's a unique idea that I was really excited about. It's the 1800s in the Wild West, Li Lian is a witch just starting a family with her husband when they're attacked and her husband is brutally murdered in front of her. Li Lian with the help of the town drunk set off to find the devil responsible. Told in the form of a journal written to her daughter, the reader learns about the events from Li Lian's perspective and in her voice.

There were definitely some interesting aspects of this book. The way magic is treated is a lot less about spells and much more about feelings. We aren't shown long and elaborate enchantments, rather it's much more elemental which I thought fit well reinforcing the Western setting. At the same time, I would have loved to see more world building around her family, their community of witches and how it all works. In fact, I wish there was a lot more back story on the whole. We're given glimpses into Li Lian's past but never quite enough to make a strong connection with any of the characters. So much is glossed over and the writing is mostly recounting things that happened. By the end, so much was just skipped over to get to the conclusion and then so much happens all at once that the book fell a little flat.

It was, on the whole, fairly enjoyable but overall lackluster. The idea had a lot of promise to be something really interesting but ended up just being just an okay read for me. I would recommend this to people if they're really into books involving magic and enjoy seeing a spin on it.

*I'm providing this review in return for an ARC through Net Galley.*

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## Tammy says

**The nitty-gritty:** A bleak and violent story, made beautiful by exquisite writing and an irresistible female voice.

*I hope you grow up to be a wild one, that you learn to spit and curse and shoot a gun. This country is not kind to soft women.*

This book came out of nowhere, but when fellow blogger Mogsy raved about it, I knew I had to track it down and read it. Inkshares is a new-to-me publisher, but if *Devil's Call* is anything to go by, I'll certainly start paying more attention to them. This was a short, fast read, but not just because of the page count. I could NOT stop reading once I started! The story is a first person accounting of a woman's search for vengeance, written in the form of a letter to her baby daughter. The woman, a mixed race, fatherless girl named Li Lian, recounts the story of her life from childhood up to the present time, delving back into her family's rich history of witchcraft to tell the story of her fascinating—but bleak—life. Not only is this a story about witchcraft, but it's a western, set in the 1850s and moving from Chicago to the untamed Nebraska territory to New Orleans.



Li Lian's real adventure begins when she meets and falls in love with her future husband, an Army doctor named Matthew Callahan. They eventually marry and begin their lives together in the bustling but dangerous city of Chicago. Li Lian fears raising their children in the city, partly because she's of mixed race and her children will be too. Matthew is worried that someone will find out that his wife is a witch, and so they jump at the chance to move to Nebraska when Matthew is offered a job there.

Finally free to get pregnant and raise a family without fear of persecution, Li Lian sets about making a wonderful life for their growing family in the wide open spaces of the plains. But one night two strangers come to the door, begging for medical help. One of them has been shot, and it's Matthew's duty as a doctor to help. In an instant, things go terribly wrong, and Li Lian watches as her husband is shot and killed right in front of her. Full of rage and determination, Li Lian sets out to track down the men responsible for her husband's murder, accompanied by the town butcher, a man named Roger Hawking.

This book was so addictive, which is mostly due to the wonderful voice of Li Lian. Dorn's writing perfectly captures a strong woman who is trying to get by in a male dominated world, where violence, harsh weather, and other hardships are all obstacles that she faces on a daily basis. I have to admit I'm addicted to sweeping stories that encompass the entirety of a character's life. Li Lian's story begins with her ancestors the MacPhersons, a Scottish clan where the females are all gifted with magical abilities. But as cool as that sounds, the MacPherson women were harshly persecuted for practicing witchcraft—and even Li Lian and her mother, aunts and sisters must be careful to hide their abilities.

And there is something irresistible about a Western setting for me, especially when you combine that setting with magic. Dorn's imagery is spare and evocative, and I could practically feel the heat of the sun and the grit of the dusty plains as I was reading. And like the best Westerns, the characters are in constant danger. The violence often comes out of nowhere, shockingly sudden, and perfectly captures the lawlessness of the wild west.

I loved the magic of Li Lian's witchcraft, which enhances the story rather than taking it over. Li Lian can use her Will to make things happen, from moving small objects with her mind to affecting the way a person acts. She can also make vines bloom simply by touching them, and I loved the way her magic was elemental, earth magic. But every time she uses magic, there is a price, and so Li Lian must choose carefully when to use it.

*To kill a man with magick is no task to take on lightly. It is difficult enough to do good with it, and to kill a man takes something from the soul of the one who does the taking.*

While Li Lian is the driving force behind this story—and one of the best characters I've run across this year—I also adored Roger Hawking. Although the relationship between Hawking and Li Lian never crosses the line into a romantic one (hey, she just lost her husband!), I thought their banter was adorable. If *Devil's Call* is ever made into a movie, I know *exactly* who should play the part of Roger Hawking: Adam Baldwin, who played Jayne in *Firefly*. I could not read his dialog without imagining Jayne's sarcastic drawl!

The pacing is relentless, and so I was a little worried as I neared the end that Dorn was not going to be able to wrap things up. The ending did feel a little rushed to me, which is my only criticism of the story. A *lot* happens as Li Lian and Hawking get closer to their target, and within a span of a few pages everything

manages to come to a head. A twist that I didn't see coming ends the story with the possibility of a sequel, or maybe that's just me wishing really hard!

This was a fantastic surprise and an assured debut. I can't wait to see what J. Danielle Dorn does next.

**Big thanks to the publisher for supplying a review copy.** Quotes are taken from an uncorrected proof, and may differ in the final version of the book. This review originally appeared on Books, Bones & Buffy

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## Sarah says

I really enjoyed this one. It was much shorter than I'm used to. I can't tell you how many pages because my kindle only gave me location numbers, but I'd have to guess it was equal to about 200 paperback pages. It was enough to tell the story and anymore would have hurt rather than helped, and that's what matters.

I really loved the format it was written in. Our protagonist, Li Lian, who comes from a long line of witches, is writing a letter to her daughter. The blurb describes it as a diary, but it feels much more like a letter. It gave the whole book a feeling of impending doom. Why is Li Lian writing a letter to her daughter, and saying things like "Nana Cat will tell you when you're older?" Does she live? Or is something more sinister happening here? Is she still chasing the man who killed her husband? They are answers I needed to have and thus I read the whole book in one sitting. The conclusion did not disappoint and I didn't see it coming.

I found myself quite attached to the main characters, of which there were arguably two. This is hard to do in such a short story and I attribute it, once again, to the format it was told in. The author conveyed a mother's real sense of love for her husband and daughter and lineage and you just felt for her. It was very personal. The second main character, Hawkins, is a hot mess when you meet him, and he goes on being a hot mess for most of the book. He's a good man though, trying to atone for past sins, and you can see that from the first moment he becomes an important player in the book.

I loved the witchcraft and the way it was explained in the book. Each woman in the family seems capable of doing what the others can do, but they do it in their own way. One uses beauty. Li Lian uses fire. Her mother uses mirrors. They read tea leaves and palms and tarot cards. They cut locks of hair and recite incantations for hexes, they use ribbon and dust and objects to track people, they use water and mirrors to communicate, and they use stones for protection. It gave the book that little extra element that made it a more unique story of revenge.

The setting was fun. I don't read nearly enough westerns. Li Lian gets her start in a roadhouse in St. Louis, runs away to a cantina in Texas, tracks her target to New Orleans, and back again to the Badlands. Everything felt authentic and included the classic elements of a western, soldiers, cards, gambling, and whiskey.

The only thing that held this back from being a five star read was that I expected a little more horror. Perhaps I'm jaded from all the horror books I've previously read. You'll see body parts and murder aplenty, but I think true horror is more psychological than discarded body parts. I don't know what else Devil's Call might be labeled except maybe as paranormal, but it wasn't until the last few paragraphs that I felt truly chilled.

The conclusion is fantastic though and will leave you wondering, *but what happens next?* I would recommend this to anyone who enjoys a good supernatural story or witches or westerns.

Thank you to Inkshares and NetGalley for providing an ARC in exchange for an honest review!

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## **Rial says**

Epistolary style stories are difficult to realize, but extremely rewarding to read, and Devil's Call is no exception. I am extremely impressed with this effort from a first time author.

The story itself is not overly unique: A western revenge story like many others we've experienced. I would say the protagonist is different from others, and faces unique challenges. The writing style is at once sparse, and wandering; the author very capably weaves supporting stories into the primary plot thrust in a very conversational manner. It feels like an intimate letter (which it is). The tropey nature of the set up is not a detraction here: It serves well to ground us in what might otherwise be a bit too outside of a person's experience.

As befitting a solipsistic point of view, non-protagonists are rather flat, but it works. The protagonist is able to fully articulate what those people mean to her without fear of what that interrogation means to the reader, and I think it's well served. The love story between the protagonist and her beau is beautifully rendered, but isn't overly weighty. It feels authentic.

That's probably a large portion to the success of this book: Authenticity, which is odd given the subject matter. She doesn't attempt to define her magic; it just is. The people involved are true to themselves and thrive or suffer under those circumstances.

## **SPOILERS Below:**

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I did find the ending rushed, and the antagonist somewhat lacking for my tastes. His commanded mutilation of the girl in New Orleans a bit too random compared to his otherwise meticulous planning. Granted, some of that is due to George Dalton's nature, but a large part of it seemed to be more of a "George Dalton is the worst person, see?" narrative. It's important to know and fuel a motivation, but I felt we already had sufficient reason to dislike the man, and the New Orleans detour felt very much like filler, doubly so with Roger Hawking's story.

Li Lian's possession at the end is perhaps a bit heavy handed in terms of message "before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves". I don't know if that's what the author was trying to convey, but it seemed to be a theme. Now she's likely doomed to perpetrate more atrocities. The opening is perhaps important for franchise purposes, but it's hard to say.

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## **Tal M. Klein says**

A brilliantly authored hybrid Western Fantasy novel that will have its spell on you from the very first sentence. DEVIL's CALL is an incredibly fresh approach to witchcraft lore. The protagonist's thirst for vengeance had me gritting my teeth from page to page. Dorn's voice is raw, authentic, and gripping. I know it sounds like a cliché, but I seriously could not put this book down. I've read it cover to cover several times

and continue to love it.

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## Mogsy (MMOGC) says

5 of 5 stars at The BiblioSanctum <https://bibliosanctum.com/2017/07/13/...>

From the moment I started reading *Devil's Call*, I was rapt. J. Danielle Dorn masterfully draws the reader in with her incredible debut, a horror-fantasy western featuring an emotional and gritty tale of revenge.

Written in the form of a letter from the narrator to her unborn child, the novel chronicles the life of Li Lian MacPherson, also known as Lily, a mixed-race witch who hails from a long line of magically gifted women. It is the mid-1800s when most of America is still wild, unsettled country. Lily was raised by her mother and her coven of aunts and cousins in a roadhouse in St. Louis, but youthful wanderlust soon led to her Texas where she first met Matthew Callahan. Even though she was a runaway and the young soldier was tasked to bring her home, the two of them ultimately bonded and fell in love, got married, and moved out to build a new life together on the Nebraskan frontier. Soon, the couple was expecting a baby.

But that was when the horror came. On a dark winter night, three men entered their home and murdered Matthew in cold blood before riding off without a trace, leaving Lily alone and pregnant in a world that believes her to be responsible for her husband's death. Turning her grief into rage, Lily sets out on a quest for vengeance, using her magic to follow the killers across hundreds of miles of untamed land. *Devil's Call* is our protagonist's record of this journey, written so that the daughter growing inside of her will one day know the story of her parents and understand why her mother took all the risks she did. Lily also knows there's a good chance she will not survive to tell her tale in person, for eventually it becomes clear that the mysterious enemy she seeks may not even be natural or human.

Anyone who follows my reviews probably also knows that I have a predilection for western-flavored fantasy, and *Devil's Call* is easily the best I've read in years. First and foremost I loved Li Lian, a unique heroine who is as fierce in her pride of her magical heritage as she is in her devotion to those she loves. She felt like a genuine character from the start, her words in this journal ringing true to the depths of her experiences and emotions. So moonstruck was I by the tale of how she and Matthew met and fell in love that when his eventual killers arrived and shot him dead right in front of her, the scene and its repercussions damn near broke my heart. Then there is her unborn child, whom Lily frequently addresses in her writing. Every confession and heartfelt piece of advice leaves no question as to her love for her baby, but as more is revealed about the three men she is chasing, it becomes clear why her quest is leaving her torn. Still, everything about her character exudes strength, independence, and a will to fight on. Lily is likeable, believable, and she drives the story in such a way that every page and every step of the way had me cheering her on.

There's also no way I can talk about excellent characterization without giving mention to Roger Hawking. A butcher with a shady past who ends up allying with our protagonist and lending her support, Hawk became a major character in his own right when the anticipation of learning more about his backstory became nearly as strong as needing to find out how everything will end. The scenes between him and Lily feature some truly excellent dialogue, and the great banter between them while they traveled kept things entertaining, though in truth the plot hardly needed any help in that department; this was a fast-paced story that never had a dull moment.

And of course, I adored the setting. It probably goes without saying, but atmosphere has a lot to do with what makes a good western, and it's one of the main reasons why I love the genre. I'm also very particular when it comes to what I enjoy. Generally, fantasy mashups are allowed a lot more leeway, but there are still a number of essential elements that I have come to expect—which this novel delivered marvelously, I might add. It stresses the harshness of Lily's world, where violence and death are always lurking around the corner. And despite the raucous saloons and busy telegraph stations, what we get to see here is a lot more wilderness than civilization. Picture all this and wrap it all up in a light veil of magic, and this should give you a sense of what to expect from Devil's Call.

All told, this book was a poignant and riveting experience that took me by surprise. Westerns are always fun, and westerns with revenge plots are even better, especially when the struggle between good and evil is portrayed in such a heart-wrenchingly personal and visceral way. Even before I had a chance to start Devil's Call, I had a strong feeling that I was going to love it—I just didn't expect how much. So far, it is one of the best novels I've read this year, and I can't recommend it highly enough. It had everything I wanted, from a strong and compelling heroine to a mesmerizing fast-paced plot that is guaranteed to engage, captivate and leave you breathless.

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### **Cynthia says**

The absence of stereotypes is refreshing in Devil's Call. It's set in the old west in Missouri and the Nebraska territory and is told from Li Lian's diary which she's writing for the benefit of her unborn child. Li Lian is from along line of witches and fears she won't outrun one particularly vicious foe. I loved bond between the women and the pragmatic way Dorn describes their rituals.

At the heart of the book is Lilly's love for her mother and her husband and her child to be. I felt the evilness of the central villain was overdone but the attitudes of the townsfolk rang true. The family's backstory out of Scotland and how they fled there hoping for more freedom of religion in the new world. There's an abundance of gore in Devil's Call but it's merited. I felt Lilly's ample use of 'my dears' in her diary was overdone though I understand Dorn wanted to remind us this was a love letter to the child Lilly feared she'd never get the chance to raise.

Thank you to the publisher for providing an advance reader's copy.

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### **Chandra Claypool (wherethereadergrows) says**

Fantasy, western horror? Say whaaaaaaa? Li Lian has been a witch her entire life - it's the only thing she knows and though she knows she needs to keep her abilities hidden, she becomes reckless... especially when it comes to protecting her family. When a premonition from her mother comes true, she finds her husband shot in the back, dying on the floor. The man in black smirks as he mounts his horse and takes off. With no proof, and people who talk too much, she gets put in jail for his murder - but upon releasing herself, she swears to go after her husband's killers, all while carrying her daughter.

Told as a story/letter to her daughter, we see her journey from childhood, to meeting her husband, to his death and her determination to not be hanged for it and lose her daughter in the process. Hell NO! Ain't no thing like a woman scorned... and when she's a witch as well, everybody better watch out! With some comic

relief sprinkled throughout, Definitely a unique perspective and blend of genres. At a little bit over 250 pages, it's a quick read and I do wish I had more background on Li Lian - there were definitely areas of the book I wish had been expanded on. I just needed more! I would a hundred percent like to see a follow up book with some more background on the now three generations of witches in a wild western.

Want a unique genre blend of (very light) horror, fantasy and western told as a story from mother to daughter? Take the Devil's Call.

3.5 stars for me.

Huge thanks to Inkshares for my copy in return for my honest review.

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## **Jessica says**

When I was sent a copy of DEVIL'S CALL by J. Danielle Dorn, all I knew was that it was considered a 'Western Horror' - color me intrigued. Taking place in rural America just before the Civil War, we are brought on Li Lian's journey to avenge her husband. Told to us in the pages of her diary for her unborn child we follow her from Nebraska to New Orleans to St Louis to find the man that murdered her husband.

Li Lian, or Lily, is from a long line of powerful women. She is gifted in a way that scares most around her, she is a part of the MacPherson clan of witches. Growing up she needed to learn quickly that she needed to have control over herself and her urges to will things with her mind. One day, Lily meets a young soldier, Matthew Callahan, and a romance blossoms while he's away at war. She moves to Illinois with him so he can attend medical school, which then brings him out to Nebraska to be De Soto's doctor (small town).

One night, Lily receives a warning from her mother of three highwaymen coming for her, she did not take heed to her warnings. Two men show up one night to their front door and one is badly injured. When Lily goes to get the local butcher Roger Hawking (to help her husband amputate a leg), she returns with Hawking to see her husband's murder. From that night on, she and Hawking go on a journey to track down the three highwaymen to seek vengeance.

The story is told through the pages of Li Lian's diary to her unborn child. The accounts of what happened and why she will grow up not knowing her father. I really enjoyed the story being told this way. It was like sitting down to hear a story from your parents or grandparents. Dorn was very true to the time period - the language used, descriptions, and everything else were spot on for the pre-Civil War era.

If you want a good period horror story with the occult, then I'd highly recommend this one. At just under 300 pages, this was a very quick read! If you aren't a fan of Westerns or that time period, then you may not enjoy this one as much.

I give this 4/5 stars!

A big thanks to Inkshares for the advanced copy in exchange for my honest review.

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