



## First Test

*Tamora Pierce*

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In the medieval and fantastic realm of Tortall, Keladry of Mindelan is the first girl to take advantage of the decree that permits females to train for knighthood. Up against the traditional hazing of pages and a grueling schedule, Kel faces only one real roadblock: Lord Wyldon, the training master of pages and squires. He is absolutely against girls becoming knights. So while he is forced to train her, Wyldon puts her on probation for one year. It is a trial period that no male page has ever had to endure and one that separates the good natured Kel even more from her fellow trainees during the tough first year. But Kel is not a girl to underestimate, as everyone is about to find out...

## First Test Details

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# From Reader Review First Test for online ebook

## Kogiopsis says

I am going to save my reminiscing about this series for the third book. Or at least I'm going to try. Some might creep in unnoticed.

First off:

I HATE SPIDRENS I HATE SPIDRENS I HATE SPIDRENS I HATE SPIDRENS.

Spidrens were, actually, the first Immortals I ever read about, because I went straight from the Lioness Quartet to this series. So in the first chapter or so, when Kel finds a spidren *biting the heads off kittens*, I was deeply disturbed. I still am. What I love about that scene is Kel's reaction. She wades across a river, gathers a handful of stones, and goes after the monster with only rocks for ammunition. Seriously, this girl is the most badass ten year-old EVER. She's awesome. And she's got a great attitude, to boot: chock full of determination and not about to let traditionalists keep her from becoming a knight. Her motivation to seek knighthood, too, is wonderful; she has a powerful, idealistic belief in chivalry and cannot ignore injustice. This is the kind of pure good straight-up heroine that it's always great to come back to, because you never doubt her; she works for her goals and keeps them always in mind. You know the quip about how a woman has to work twice as hard to be considered half as good as a man? That's the situation Kel is in, and she handles it admirably, right down to making sure everyone remembers that YES, tradition has been broken and there is a girl in their midst by wearing dresses to dinner every night. She is so mature, so confident at such a young age - it's awesome. Rarely does she doubt herself, and she's never ashamed of her gender despite the disadvantage it places her at and the cruelty some of the other pages subject her to because of it.

Of course, Kel doesn't do this alone. She gains an excellent group of friends over the course of her year on probation, and that's what helps this series be more than just an Alanna Redux. As Raoul says in *Squire*, there are several kinds of knights; Alanna is the lone hero type, and Kel is the leader type. It makes sense, then, that while Alanna's story was really focused on her and her adventures, Kel's has a wider supporting cast and they're given plenty of development. (This is, of course, building towards the moment when she needs all of them in *Lady Knight*.) From quirky Nealan of Queenscove, who's the oldest of the pages and Kel's sponsor, to Kel's year-mate Merric of Hollyrose, they're all great characters and people I would want to be friends with, especially in Kel's position. And they care about her, as evidenced when Neal calls her out for roaming the halls looking for wrongs to set right. It's wonderful to see a tight-knit, realistic group like this portrayed in YA. Kel is no Bella Swan-esque moping loner, and it makes her a far richer character.

I'm not really sure where this review is going, or for that matter where it's been. (It's a bit messy up there, I think.) A lot of what I want to say about this series I'm saving for the later books, so for now: If you're new to *Tortall*, you can start here easily; if you're familiar with the world, this entry in its history is not to be missed. Kel is a heroine to root for and look up to, and if I had my way young girls everywhere would be reading about her adventures instead of about sparklepires and the like.

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## Connor says

Every time I reread this book, I find myself loving it even more. From Kel and Neal's unlikely friendship to her stalwart, solid sense of loyalty and justice, I could probably reread this series every month and not grow tired of it.

Plus, nothing sends me to tears quicker than Kel peeling into a hallway shouting to her friends that she can stay for the rest of their training.

edit from Nov. 2016: I have apparently reached the "read Kel's books twice a year" stage. I... needed the encouragement after the election, and Kel (and Tammy) came through. What a beautiful picture of resilience and determination--as well as of friendship and hope and hard work.

update from June 2017: Keladry and Neal remain the best and yes, I still cried after reading the ending. For the twentieth or whatever time this is.

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## **Lola says**

This is my first book/series from Tamora Pierce, meaning that I did not read her Song of the Lioness series prior. However, although Alanna, and as I discovered, multiple other characters from the author's other books in the same world are mentioned, I did not feel as though there was something I was missing to enjoy this particular story.

Actually, because Alanna was mentioned so many times, I now feel very interested in picking Pierce's Song of the Lioness up. Though it's true there are some spoilers in this series, so I would say read it after Song of the Lioness, or before, if it's not that problematic for you. It wasn't for me.

This is the story of a girl who wants to become a knight. For that to happen, Kel must be trained by the King's trainer, who dislikes her. Unfortunately, even if girls are technically allowed to become knights now, because of Alanna, they are not exactly welcomed to pursue a path that is believed to be reserved for men by many.

But Kel is ready to face the prejudices. She feels it in her bones that this is what she is meant to do. Kel couldn't have been a better heroine. She is strong, ready to prove to everyone how wrong they are about her. But the best part is, she doesn't dismiss her feminine side, so as to look "tougher" or "manly". Indeed, she wears dresses from time to time and shows sympathy towards both humans and animals.

Because everyone has, at one point or another, been misjudged, underestimated and perhaps bullied or discriminated against, it's easy for the reader to connect with Kel and invest themselves in the story.

I want to point out that Kel is ten years old, but that this is more Young Adult than Middle Grade. It is serious and complex, plus the characters she interacts with are usually much older.

Really enjoyed. Eager to read the rest of the series.

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## Lucy Ralston says

This book changed my childhood. I had read stories about lady knights before--about women dressing as men, fighting the odds, and changing the world. But this story is different. Kel doesn't dress in drag, she doesn't hide herself, she doesn't try to change the world. She just wants to be a knight, and will do whatever it takes to achieve her goal. She is my number one female character in a YA novel, and that has not changed in a long long time.

I highly recommend this book to anyone and everyone. To people who want to feel better about humanity, people who want female characters who are realistic and soulful, or just people who love knighthood, battles, and magic.

A+++

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## Arielle Walker says

One of my favourite books from my childhood, along with the Lioness quartet. Will review properly later when I don't have a detailed essay (on the use of moving image/film as an art form to explore social media and psychosis) to conclude.

Came across my 2003 school reading log, and I think my ten-year-old self actually describes this book best. In my own ten-year-old words: "Excellent, I like the idea that girls are at least as good as boys, if not better!"

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## Kay says

I've read this book (this series) over a dozen times over the last decade and a half. Kel has been my rock (stone), and Tamora Pierce has been my strength. The **Protector of the Small** series has taught me feminism and fairness and strength and how to overcome it all.

Tortall is one of my happy places, and I'm so happy to return and find it unchanged after all these years.

Tamora Pierce is a FANTASTIC writer, a great world-builder, and a master of character development.

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## Emily says

[ I rolled my eyes for the entire ending - the idea that the elit

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## Cassandra says

I recommend this book to two (not mutually exclusive) groups of people: kids who love Harry Potter and are

looking for something to read next, and girls looking for a heroine who is not just a badass, but an Interesting Person to boot.

Review of entire series:

I read this series so many times in my teenage years, I nearly wore out the library copy. I was never over-impressed with Pierce's writing, but Keladry's quiet strength got under my skin and fascinated me. So many literary heroines are more after the Alanna the Lioness mold: hot-tempered, outgoing, feisty. So as a quiet bookish girl, a heroine who was soft-spoken and even-tempered, and who was also an iron-willed warrior, was delightfully refreshing.

Other stories may have done more to spark my imagination, but Keladry gave me something even my beloved Tolkien couldn't: an example of female strength, not just in fighting monsters or finding "true love," but in more difficult obstacles like prejudice and unfair disadvantages. She taught me that a girl doesn't have to be a fiery redhead with a temper to be brave, or disguise herself as a boy to prove herself as good as one. Quiet determination and a clear head can be even more effective.

I know there are better examples of great women in literature, but this is the one who was there for me, so I'm grateful to her.

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## **Belinda says**

4,75 stars - Audiobook - I have dyslexia -

Girls try to be knight, a theme brought up many times before. The heroine of this book puts it to another level. Keladry of Mindalan's first year at the school for knights is described with trouble, wisdom, hardship, and humor in this book. Next to the battle against good and evil. Adventure spatter of the pages. But this heroine also honors her former teachers. Afraid of hightech but not of combat. A special girl indeed. One point was a bit too much.... the way of thinking from Kell was a little bit too much at times, is in this first book only ten.

- Well done Lady page. -

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## **Kat says**

I started this series with the thought that it was going to be a do over of Pierce's previous, successful Alanna the Lioness Quartet, which followed a girl (named Alanna, of course) who dressed like a boy and took her twin brother's place in page training while he took her place in magic school (not dressed as a girl). The four books of that quartet follow her progress from page, to squire, to knight and king's champion--with her sex being discovered along the way. I was pleasantly surprised to find that not only does Pierce give Keladry her own unique strong personality and story, but also that in some ways I enjoyed Keladry's story more than Alanna's.

Keladry's struggle to be the first openly female page in Tortall strikes me as being braver than Alanna's secret struggles. Being openly female Keladry has to deal with all the aggression and contempt of the males who don't want her to succeed, as well as a blatant double standard (even though the law since Alanna's time says that girls can train as pages, Keladry is put on probation for her first term).

On top of that, where Alanna has the help of her magical powers and the Mother Goddess of her universe, Keladry works through her problems on her own.

Definitely a girl empowering story!

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### **Jackie B. - Death by Tsundoku says**

Ten years after Alanna becomes King's Champion, a female of Tortall finally wants to become a page-- and eventually a knight of the realm. What sounds at first as a repeat of the Song of the Lioness quartet is quickly revealed to be much more. While our protagonist, Kelandry of Mindalen, is following the same path as Alanna, the road she walks is completely different. Tamora Pierce takes what could have been a copycat novel and turns a parallel story into something refreshing and new.

From the start, we can see many parallels between Kel and Alanna's story. Both want to prove themselves, both are training to become knights, both have a quartet of books that follow progress from page to squire to knight, heck, both even have a member of the royal family on their side. Yet their stories are very different. Alanna hid her sex, was blessed by the Goddess, and has magical powers. Kel merely wants to protect her country and has little more going for her.

Infuriatingly, because of her sex, Kel is forced to undergo a "probationary period", which makes her more of a pariah with her fellow pages than she was going to be just by being a girl. In fact, Alanna was hoping to protect and train Kel as the first openly female page-- but she is forbidden. From the start, we know Kel will be subject to incredible sexism and abuse. Her journey, in many ways, is much harder than the one Alanna traveled. Kel must rely on her own strength, self-confidence, and determination to prove herself on this journey.

In many ways, *First Test* is a much stronger feminist statement than *Alanna: The First Adventure*. It was written over a decade later, after all. I look forward to seeing how Alanna's sacrifices paved the way for the next generation of female warriors. After all, in reality gaining the right to vote didn't establish equality. I know Kel has a long way to go. I'll be with her all the way.

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### **Allison says**

Recently I decided to reread all of Tamora Pierce's books, because, well, it's been too long since I read them. For her *Lioness Quartet*, *Circle of Magic* books, and *The Immortals* series, I was refreshing my memory, but with the *Protector of the Small* series, it was almost like reading them for the first time. I read this series only once, when I was a preteen, and I had honestly forgotten just how much I love Kel.

At first glance, the story of Keladry of Mindalen seems like a rewrite of Tamora Pierce's first series, *The Lioness Quartet*, which features a spunky girl named Alanna who dresses as a boy in order to train as a knight. When I read the books years ago, I loved them, and saw Alanna as a hero, but now, as a college freshman, I see her character a little differently. In my opinion, Alanna chooses to be a knight as an alternative to learning to be a lady. Although she is a tomboy, she does not choose Knighthood because she loves to fight and longs to protect her country- she does it in an attempt to escape. From the start she is

helped by the heir to the throne, her manservant (a trained knight in his own right), and the goddess herself. Although she has honor, Alanna is spiteful with a terrible temper, and is able to use her magical gift to help her through the worst of times.

In contrast, we have Keladry of Mindalen, who is allowed to apply as a page without concealing her gender. But by being honest about her sex, Keladry makes herself vulnerable to all sorts of sexism and abuse. Because she is a girl, Kel is forced to undergo a one year "probationary period" (which is not required of boy pages) so that she may prove herself. During this first year, Kel is constantly bullied and experiences hazing and abuse the likes of which Alanna never saw. However, Kel quickly proves, against all odds, that she is as good, if not better, than the boys.

Unlike Alanna, Kel knows that she wants to fight. She doesn't want glory, thanks or praise, but rather, seeks her shield so that she may protect those who cannot protect themselves. Kel has no real help from her idol, Alanna, no manservant to help her through, and no magical gift to fall back on. Instead, she uses her strength and determination to prove herself to even the most skeptical trainers.

After reading this book I realized, with a start, that I absolutely adore Kel. Although some reviews may disagree, I believe that Tamora Pierce has improved upon her Lioness Quartet with the Protector of the Small Series.

Hooray for Kel!

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### **Dichotomy Girl says**

3rd Read: 12/16/2016

Edit: Raised this up to 5 Stars, because after discussing it with Rachel E. Carter, I've decided that yes, Kel is the awesomest. :)

I had forgotten how good this series is. It's hard to decide which is my favorite, this one or Alanna.

2nd Read: 7/20/2015

Original Read: 11/11/2012

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### **Kirsty (Amethyst Bookwurm) says**

This and my other reviews can be found at <http://amethystbookwurm.blogspot.co.uk/>

First Test is about Keladry of Mindelan, the first girl who wishes to become a knight since Lady Alanna. She has been accepted for knight training, however, unlike the boys she will study and train beside, she has been given a First Test, one year to prove to the conservative training master that she is able to withstand the rigors of page training.

The storyline of this book progresses in a very good yet predictable way. There are boys who try to force Keladry to leave through bullying her, and there are her staunch and stalwart friends. She also befriends the animals, which have become smart since Daine came to live at the palace in the Immortals series.



I like this book because it gives you the opportunity to see characters we have grown to love, from previous series, as they are when they have grown up.

I would recommend *First Test* to anyone who likes the rest of Tamora Pierce's books, or well written fantasy books.

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## **Beth says**

Alanna clenched her fists. What was going on? Was Jonathan inclined to give way to the man who'd saved his children?

And with that, possibly the stupidest line Pierce has ever written, Kel's story begins. I'm big on details lately, and the introduction is shaky on them. Here are more places the writing is less than precise:

The training master absently rubbed the arm in its linen sling. At last he bowed in his chair.  
"May we compromise, sire?"

Maybe that first line is here to show Wyldon's hesitation before answering Jonathan with the probation proposal. The problem is that his gesture calls to mind the *reason* for the sling ("hey, remember when my arm was raked by a hurrok while I was saving your kids?") which makes the gesture - not quite absent.

And then Alanna stalks out, while:

The men stared at the door. Each of them was trying to remember if Alanna the Lioness had ever spoken to Jonathan in that tone before.

1. Why would Wyldon care?
2. Seriously, this is Alanna. I understand this line is for impact, but it's blunted quite a lot when it's centered on a character who gets mad at people for breakfast.

And now, finally, we meet Kel. Here's the thing: I gave this book three stars a few years ago, and I'm going to stick to that, if only so I can illustrate how the series gets progressively better. (Expect four stars for *Page*, and (gasp) five stars for *Squire*.) But there are also some reasons three stars are warranted. *First Test* very much sets the stage. There are a lot of ideas initially laid out without being fully developed, along with the imprecise writing. That starts right away, with Kel's dream.

"The short sword is the sword of law. Without it, we are only animals. The long sword is the sword of duty. It is a terrible sword, the killing sword." Her words struck a chord in Kel that left the little girl breathless. She liked the idea that duty was a killing sword.

This is an idea Pierce reaches for, but I don't think she ever gets there. Though it would be fascinating if she did, a sort of justification of the violence of this world.

Anyway, Kel decides to go even though she'll have to be on probation. I'm tempted to say "Obviously, or there would be no story," but there's a certain worth to stories that baldly lay out sexism and then show how baseless it is. It drives home a point, yes, it's message-oriented, yes; but it also drives Kel as a character because it gives her something to fight, which means it's an important motivation - and we're not so far off from having women in the real world face exactly the same situation, which means it stands as a reminder

historically of what things used to be like, in the not-so-distant past.

In general, Kel fighting for equal opportunity (much more so than Alanna, who had to hide her identity) means this fantasy world doesn't feel set so long ago. It modernizes this medieval setting. It's an interesting approach.

So she marches in and no one will sponsor her. Until Joren steps up, which leads to more sloppy writing. Why would Wyldon refuse Joren as Kel's sponsor? Joren is Wyldon's prize page! And he's okay with *Neal*? I've read this part three times and it still makes no sense to me. It's too contrived.

More importantly, though: NEAL. Neal is so great. Here's where Pierce's best skill, dialogue, really shines:

Wyldon's eyebrows snapped together. "You have been told to mind your manners, Page Nealan. I will have an apology for your insolence."

Nealan bowed deeply. "An apology for general insolence, your lordship, or some particular offense?"

"One week scrubbing pots," ordered Lord Wyldon. "Be silent."

Nealan threw out an arm like a player making a dramatic statement. "How can I be silent and yet apologize?"

HUMOR: THE SPICE OF LIFE. Neal is funny from the first moment he's introduced, and not only is that entertaining, but it comes to form a cornerstone of his character, and it's consistent, and it's *great*. (Later on, Duke Baird is said to wear constant mourning for the two sons he lost. If Pierce could've said why, and how, and how that affected Neal, instead of that remaining a throwaway detail...)

Alright, onward: Neal takes Kel to the touristy parts of the palace, including the portrait gallery, where Kel gets to see a painting of Jon and Thayet, and Neal gets to introduce the current political situation and position Wyldon as the cranky conservative, angry at Thayet's Kmiri notions (teaching women to fight, teaching everyone to read). How *does* the guy work for Jon, who not only agrees with Thayet, but also covered for one of the most respected knights in the land while she worked earn her shield and prove that women can fight?

The setup in this novel creaks sometimes.

(Tangent for a moment: Jon wanting women to train - he sent out heralds ten years before! - clashing with the conservative training master he can't afford to lose, is such a good way of showing the constraints of kingship for a country that's not an absolute dictatorship. That's something this series gets very right: even the best of intentions don't always translate practically.)

Kel comes in pretty upset at Jon, because she *doesn't* know about any of this political jockeying, and she's still awed by his speech after dinner the first day:

"Each one of you is a gem, all the more precious because we lost so many. Combined, you are the treasure of the kingdom. Treat yourselves as such... Build your stores of learning. Do it not for yourselves or your teachers or your monarchs. Do it for the kingdom. Do it for us all." He looked over them one last time, nodded briskly, then strode out of the hall. He was gone before any of them remembered to bow.

Whewwww. Always loved that part. Jon relies on charisma, sure. But he also shows up and makes them realize they're seen and valued. Kel - grudgingly - recognizes why people are so loyal to him, even calm, pragmatic people like her father. (Incidentally, I'd love to hear more about that.) (Later, Wyldon apparently doesn't know why they have a treaty with the Yamanis - Wyldon, YOU LIVE IN THE PALACE. Why are you allowed to be stupid whenever it's convenient for the plot?)

So Kel gets in, gets a sponsor, and goes to her first day of classes, where she almost throws the instructor by mistake. The instructor, by the way, recognizes the throw immediately as one of Nariko's. Hurray for not living in a vacuum! Especially since they're Shang, and they're supposed to, you know, *travel*. Sometimes the "Tortall is the bestest" stuff, which is really heavy-handed in the Daine series, feels too piled on. There's a better balance here.

Kel's story is strongest when it isn't told in isolation, when relevant details from Tortall's past series are brought in to give greater scope to the work. Kel saying she fell down rather than that she got into a fight, for example - "I don't believe falling down is an offense for which I can be expelled." Seriously, lol. And it's so clever to extend the lie like that. It's a perfect excuse.

It's a little stupid that only Kel recognizes how violent and stupid the bullying is, by the way. It undermines everyone else's brains. "Tradition!" everyone says. Sure, Neal's Mr. Tradition. That's why he's a first-year page at fifteen. Come on. Neal's my favorite, though, so I don't like when his brains are discounted. He tells Kel, when Kel mentions Daine and Numair, "He's too old for her, you know." YOU TELL 'EM, NEAL.

He also tells Kel about Numair turning the Scanran into a tree "just two years ago, at Fief Dunlath" - can someone explain the timeline of the Tortall books to me?? And while you're explaining: why are the servants allowed to break up the pages' fights? Usually they don't mix in at all. And there's a lot of brouhaha about nobles' rights.

BUT BACK TO NEAL.

"How dare they say the Lioness cheated!" growled Kel. "Great Goddess, she fights ogres and spidrens and armies all the time -"

"You really look up to her, don't you?" Neal asked.

"She's a hero. She's proved it over and over."

"And will go on doing so until the day she dies," he said evenly. "You can smack some people in the face with a haddock and they'll still call it a mouse if a mouse is what they want to see."

That's - that's timeless, you know? I've thought about that line for over a decade now, ever since I first read this book.

I like when Neal demonstrates he's been to a university, too, and that he's older than Kel. Though maybe it's a little strange he's friends with a ten-year-old? Maybe I'm obsessing over age differences, but it's because Pierce has conditioned me to do so. That's what happens when you pair a sixteen-year-old and her teacher. TOUGH.

One more thing Pierce does here: she shows the sexism Kel faces, when she openly goes where no woman has gone before - and she shows the sexism Alanna faces as an adult knight, even after she's proven her heroism, because people latch onto any little thing they can to discount Alanna entirely. Different causes,

same effect. I like that.

I like that Kel has a lot to learn, and that she's shown learning. Tilting, and swordwork - she humiliates herself sometimes, especially in front of Lord Raoul, which is a great moment.

I *don't* like that Kel gets to be Daine-without-Wild-magic, though. Like, you can just be nice to the animals now, and they'll lead you to monsters? Without being able to reach you through magic? That's having your cake and eating it, too. I'm not a fan.

Overall, though? This, warts and all, sets up a series I've enjoyed for a long time. And I can't wait to read further.

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## **Dorothea says**

(re-read on May 26, 2013, the occasion of this review)

May I say first that whoever thought this cover (trendily cropped photograph of a conventionally beautiful young woman with her lips parted and wearing some sort of floating veil) was an improvement over this cover (painting of a ten-year-old child with an androgynous haircut, looking out optimistically at the world through her black eye, holding a kitten and surrounded by little birds) should be smacked with their own portfolio?

Thank you.

All right, despite the two-star rating I'm still awfully fond of Kel. Previously I've read all four books in a blur. I hope that if I read the rest again, I'll enjoy the series overall as much as I have before -- but I wasn't awfully impressed by *First Test* by itself.

Maybe it was just too simplistic for me? Which is a silly problem to have with a short book about a ten-year-old.

Kel has to deal with really nasty bullying, sexism from her peers and authority figures, separation from her family, uncertainty about her future, an exhausting daily schedule that would give me a nervous breakdown, and actual peril to her life. She survives all of these triumphantly, thanks to her stubborn determination, unusual skills learned earlier in her childhood, and the right friends.

When I put it that way, *First Test* sounds like a really good book, and yeah, that's why we all read Tamora Pierce to begin with, right?

Kel has a *much* easier time dealing with all of these things than I can imagine myself having. She's also, overall, better at everything than her peers. This makes sense in a lot of ways. Kel wants this life and is well suited for it (unlike imaginary-me-in-Tortall), and the first [x] person to successfully make it through a difficult program that was previously limited to [y] usually does have to be extra amazing at everything.

But Kel's extra-amazing advantages distract a lot from what I'd like this book to be. Kel is learning to be a page and I wanted to read about her learning. *First Test* seems really to be about how Kel is already more than worthy to be a page and how some of the gatekeepers just don't see how special she is.

My favorite parts are when we do see Kel learning and applying what she's learned, like when she gets better at (view spoiler). But there are a lot of times when she overcomes an obstacle with the unique attributes she began with -- when she (view spoiler), or when (view spoiler).

There's another criticism I feel less ambivalent in making -- Pierce could have done a much better job with characters of color.

Did she have to make the the Yamanis instantly recognizable as East Asian stand-ins by means of so many stereotypes? Why did she decide to give Kel so many advantages from growing up in Yamani society, yet make her a white Tortallan instead of actually a Yamani girl? It's not that children of other nationalities can't train as pages in Tortall, because there's another page who's a Bazhir boy. And that was another missed opportunity. Doesn't that kid also feel isolated because of his differences from the other pages? Wouldn't that make him a good friend for Kel? Instead, Pierce decided at some point that her Bazhir characters would share in this world's American stereotype of Middle Eastern men being extra specially sexist. So this character is one of the bullies, and in *First Test* at least, he has no depth to his character and no redeeming qualities at all.

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### **Wealththeow says**

After King Jonathan took the throne, he decreed that women could train as knights as well. But more than a decade has passed since Alanna was unveiled as a female knight, and still no other female member of a noble house has come forth to be trained. No one--until Keladry. The daughter of ambassadors, Kel spent her childhood in lands where women were trained warriors, and intends to become one herself. Jonathon's hide-bound nobles aren't pleased with this change of tradition, and to placate them, Jonathan agrees that Kel will be merely a *probationary* page, subject to being tossed out at her first failure.

Kel, however, is too damn awesome for that crap. She's the kind of person who, when she discovers her lance has been unfairly weighted with lead, keeps training with the weighted lance in order to become stronger. No matter what they throw at her, she rises to the challenge.

This book was so much fun to read! Energizing and inspiring and thrilling--altogether my favorite kind of wish-fulfillment fantasy.

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### **Bridget Mckinney says**

Before starting to read the Protector of the Small quartet, I read that Kel was just another Alanna and that the books are basically Song of the Lioness all over again. I was actually okay with that going into this series, since I *love* Alanna and think that there are far worse things Kel could have been than just like her. I'm happy to report, however, that although there are similarities between Alanna and Kel, their experiences are extremely different and Kel's story expands upon and continues a lot of the themes that were present in Song of the Lioness.

I wrote about this a little bit already, but I have to reiterate it here because it makes me so happy. Kel has a

lot more support than Alanna did, from her family as well as from people she meets when she goes into page training, but at the same time Kel faces a lot more active and targeted sexist bullying than Alanna did. Alanna disguised herself as a boy, which meant she had to live in constant fear of discovery, but Kel faces danger because she *isn't* hiding.

Something that I find interesting about the contrast between these two different situations is the ways in which their coping mechanisms and strategies overlap and diverge. Both Alanna and Kel find women who are friendly to them, although Kel and Alanna are denied each others company so far, which makes me *rage*. Both girls deal with bullies as pages; however, Alanna's bully was personal while the bullying Kel faces is sexist and institutional. Both girls make friends among the other pages, finding older boys willing to help mentor them.

Something I especially loved was that, while Alanna hid her gender successfully for years, Kel makes a point of wearing dresses when she can as a way to never let the boys and men she is surrounded by forget that she is a girl. I love this little bit of recognition that gender is a performance and that the choices we make about how to perform are intensely personal AND political. In some ways, Kel is even more of a trailblazer than Alanna, simply because she is trying to become a knight openly. Alanna may have opened the door a crack for Kel, but Kel is the first girl to try and go through that door *as a girl*.

In a lot of ways, I think that *First Test* is a lot more successful as a feminist work than *Alanna: The First Adventure* was, although I think both books should be required reading for girls (and boys, ideally). I think that Kel's experiences are closer to the real life ways in which girls experience sexism, and that's a valuable thing for young people to read about.

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## **Rachel E. Carter says**

**No review I could ever write would do this book (or series) justice.**

This series to me is the pinnacle of Tamora Pierce's career. She had many wonderful books but the emotional and physical turmoil her protagonist Kel goes through to earn her knighthood is nothing that I have ever experienced in another YA book. Kel perseveres against every trial imaginable, and while at times she can seem a bit too mature (she's only 10 in this one!), she is unique and refreshing in a world of cliché. She is what every female warrior should be. And what's more? For once an author cast a tomboy who wasn't secretly some beautiful girl -she was normal, plain, a "Lump."

*"You won't ask it, but I'll do it anyway, she thought stubbornly. You'll see. I'm as good as any boy. I'm*

*better."*

And how about that awesome battle scene:

*"Kel promptly forgot her staff lessons. Holding the spear as she would her glaive, she cut with it in a sidelong arc. The weapon's slim razor point sliced through the spidren's chest and arm, releasing a dark spray of blood. Kel reversed the spear and cut back, dragging the blade down. It bit into the spidren at the neck and stuck there as crossbow bolts riddled the immortal."*

I'm sorry, how is that not epic? And can I remind you she is only 10 YEARS OLD in this book!

Now, let's talk about Neal.

Her best friend Neal stands out as my *favorite* side character/best friend in *any* book I have *ever* read, and as my Goodreads BFF Monica (who is doing the buddy read with me) pointed out, every single line he says is quotable. He is like Buffy & Kenji & Veronica Mars & an over-dramatizing girlfriend combined, in guy best friend form. Sarcasm & drama to perfection. And he has her back at every turn.

There is no romance between them in this first book (view spoiler) But this was still me every time he showed up:

Oh, and Joren? This is what needs to happen. Now. You are worse than bloody Malfoy & Joffrey combined. You prat.

Last, but not least, Lord Wyldon. Training master from hell. (view spoiler)

*"You will climb this tree every day. If we cannot cure you of fear, you must learn to work despite it, understand?"*

If you love YA fantasy read this book now. Tamora Pierce set the standard for strong female warriors in YA. You cannot go wrong. The trials and tribulations Kel faces coupled with the excellent array of characters sets up for an amazing series debut. And since this is a reread I can assure the next books *only get better*.

*Side note: this first book is 100% romance free but it is still impossible to put down -and as someone who lives off romance that is a hard feat to accomplish.*

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**Fafa's Book Corner says**

Mini review:

Trigger warning: Animal abuse

Minor spoilers ahead!

DNF

Tamora Pierce is an author I have heard of. On a whim I decided to try one of her books. Unfortunately this book didn't work for me.

In the beginning (the first chapter) Kel stops these boys from drowning kittens. While attempting to rescue the kittens a monster comes. And starts to eat them. I couldn't make myself read anymore. I felt sick to my stomach.

I do still recommend it. As Kel's a very strong character and I have a feeling others will enjoy this more.

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