

mythPRINT



The Monthly Bulletin of the Mythopoeic Society
VOL.49 NO.4/5 APRIL/MAY 2012 WHOLE NO.357/358

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Mythprint is the monthly bulletin of the Mythopoeic Society, a nonprofit educational organization devoted to the study, discussion, and enjoyment of myth and fantasy literature, especially the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Charles Williams. To promote these interests, the Society publishes three magazines, maintains a World Wide Web site, and sponsors the annual Mythopoeic Conference and awards for fiction and scholarship, as well as local discussion groups.

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Robert E. Howard. *The Bloody Crown of Conan*. The Fully Illustrated Robert E. Howard Library. Del Rey, 2003. 368 pp., \$16.95. Reviewed by Harley J. Sims.

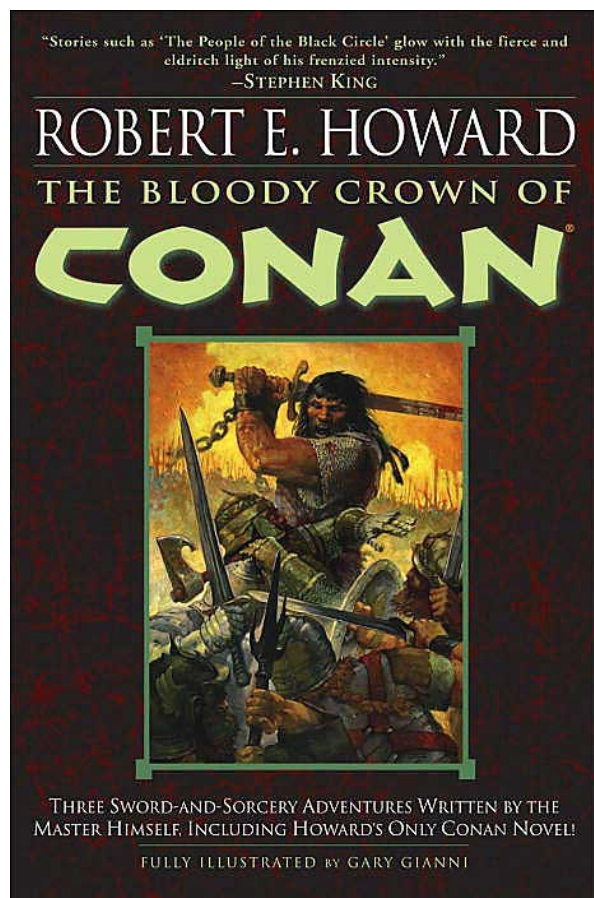
The *Bloody Crown of Conan* is the second of three collections of Conan stories, edited by Patrice Louinet, in the acclaimed Fully Illustrated Robert E. Howard Library—currently numbering eleven volumes—edited by Rusty Burke. It collects three of Howard’s longest Conan tales, comprising “The People of the Black Circle,” the 75,000-word Conan ‘novel’ *The Hour of the Dragon*, and “A Witch Shall Be Born.” All were published serially in *Weird Tales* between late-1934 and mid-1936, and stand among the last handful of Howard’s original Conan stories. After late 1934, only four others were published in the remaining year-and-a-half of Howard’s lifetime, which ended on June 11, 1936. These titles (some renamed) are included in Volume Three of this series, *The Conquering Sword of Conan*, whose review is forthcoming. As with the other volumes of the Library, *The Bloody Crown of Conan* gives its Foreword to its illustrator(s)—here Gary Gianni, who also illustrated the Solomon Kane and Bran Mak Morn volumes—followed by a very thoughtful Introduction by series editor Rusty Burke. Supporting the three texts are just under forty pages of drafts, notes, and syn-

opses exemplifying Howard’s creative process, as well as a continuation of editor Patrice Louinet’s chronological essay “Hyborean Genesis,” begun in *The Coming of Conan the Cimmerian* (reviewed in *Mythprint* #353). Technical notes on the typescripts and original texts complete the volume.

Thoroughly entertaining and an excellent specimen of Howard’s most celebrated character and literary style, this particular volume can be assessed in a number of ways. One is as a sort of fulcrum for the titular protagonist. In his biography of Howard, *Blood & Thunder* (2006), Mark Finn argues that Conan had perhaps become wearisome

to his creator by 1934, a suggestion corroborated by Howard’s publishing history. If this is so, however, these stories don’t show it. If anything, they consummate the character—in the case of “A Witch Shall be Born,” they seem to amount to an apotheosis. As compared to the preceding and following volumes in the series, with their thirteen and five stories respectively, *The Bloody Crown of Conan* presents a relatively consistent experience of its eponymous figure. Though Conan is found in a number of shady roles in *The Coming of Conan* and *The Conquering Sword*

of Conan, he is throughout this volume an official leader—though nonetheless an outsider—appearing as an Afghuli tribal chief in “The People of the Black Circle,” King of



Aquilonia in *The Hour of the Dragon*, and captain of the Khaurani guard in “A Witch Shall Be Born.” Within these authoritative roles, Conan’s primal nature and the profound advantage it grants over civilized peoples remain, but it is a temper more often reawakened at need than lived by—apparently suppressed by the sociopolitical acumen required to retain office, so to speak. The title of the collection is therefore well chosen.

“The People of the Black Circle” takes place in Vendhya and Afghulistan, the Hyborian Age equivalents of India and Afghanistan. They are especially far-eastern lands in Howard’s world, and show the extent of Conan’s travels and cultural experience. He is a remarkably cosmopolitan barbarian. The story nevertheless portrays Conan in what has become his most attributed scenario—rescuing a highborn woman from a serpentine magician (elements of which have been involved in all three box-office *Conan* films). The title of the story refers to the Black Seers of Yimsha, a mysterious order of necromancers who attempt and fail to trap the soul of the Vendhyan king. The princess Yasmeena, who becomes Queen of Vendhya after the death of her father, is rather fortunately abducted by Conan, who then becomes embroiled in the magicians’ dispute with the Vendhyan royal. The story is distinctive among Conan stories for its heavy involvement of magic, in particular the description of some its laws, its perception by outsiders, and some of the grisliest effects Howard ever contrives (at one point, the Master of the Black Seers extracts a man’s heart from a distance). Even for an evil lair, the tower of the Black Seers is a disturbing, otherworldly place, wherein Conan alone among his band survives due only to a magical girdle given him by a dying apostate of the order. “The People of the Black Circle” is also one of only a few Conan stories to present, in Queen Yasmeena, a

strong-willed leading lady. In the end, each helps the other to regain a seat of power, even as they promise, however good natured, to battle each other should they meet again.

The Hour of the Dragon, as recounted in Louinet’s “Hyborian Genesis, Part II,” was originally written in mid-1934 for a British publishing house whose editor all but promised to purchase it before Howard had even begun. Intended to be Howard’s entry into the British market, the story was written at breakneck pace (75,000 words in less than two months), and to the exclusion of all other projects, only to be returned when the publishing house went into receivership. It was therefore serialized among five issues of *Weird Tales*, between December of 1935 and April of 1936, the last appearing a month or so before Howard’s death. The novel, in part a pastiche of many previous Conan stories, sees King Conan lose the throne of Aquilonia to a group of conspirators, who resurrect the Acheronian necromancer Xaltotun to aid them. *The Hour of the Dragon*, which refers to the banner of Nemedra, contains no actual dragon (though it does have the trademark Conan opponent—a giant snake). Most of the narrative follows Conan’s hunt for the Heart of Ahri-man, a magical phylactery-like jewel capable of weakening the near-invincible wizard who caused his overthrow. Throughout, we become deeply acquainted with Conan the statesman, a ruler tolerant and generous, and whose methods have won admirers and allies wherever he goes. As he proclaims when it is suggested he forget Aquilonia and conquer a new kingdom,

“[I]et others dream imperial dreams. I but wish to hold what is mine. I have no desire to rule an empire held together by blood and fire. It’s one thing to seize a throne with the aid of its subjects and rule them with their

consent. It's another to subjugate a foreign realm and rule it by fear." (168)

And yet there is a resignation to contentment in this statement, one which makes *The Hour of the Dragon*—though not the last of Howard's Conan stories—a sort of pre-empted epilogue to his whole, boisterous saga. Conan is mature now, settled down, and he clearly sees the lifestyle and persona for which we best know him as something of the past. He is heading out on his final quest,

[a]nd more looking the part, he felt the part; the awakening of old memories, the resurge of the wild, mad, glorious days of old before his feet were set on the imperial path when he was a wandering mercenary, roistering, brawling, guzzling, adventuring, with no thought for the morrow, and no desire save sparkling ale, red lips, and a keen sword to swing on all the battlefields of the world. (171)

Conan's commitment to Aquilonia defies both his reason and his instincts, but "[h]e did not turn aside; he rode onward, following a quest that grew dimmer and dimmer as he advanced, until sometimes it seemed that he pursued a dream that never was" (172). Despite this psychological about-face, *The Hour of the Dragon* is one of the most rewarding Conan stories one can read, and bursting with the energy of what we can assume was Howard's push to see his barbarian invade English soil.

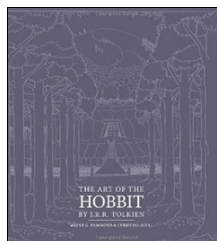
As Patrice Louinet recalls, *Weird Tales* editor Farnsworth Wright called "A Witch Shall Be Born" the best of the Conan stories. In terms of narrative structure, it is certainly the most unorthodox, ranging among several characters, chronological perspectives, and formats, including a portion of one chapter that is epistolary (a letter

from the travelling savant Astreas to the Ne-median philosopher Alcemides [277]). The story sees the virtuous and beloved Queen Taramis of Khauran secretly replaced by her evil, long-lost twin. Only Conan and a handful of others suspect this duplicity, and must work to overthrow the usurpers before they destroy the kingdom. Though frequently mentioned, and no doubt pivotal to the plot, Conan himself appears but rarely; this promotion-by-association suggests how iconic the character has become. Fittingly, "A Witch Shall Be Born" also boasts a crucifixion scene which unavoidably suggests Conan's deification; the episode is, of course, greatly elaborated in the original *Conan the Barbarian* film (1981). As its illustrations make clear, "A Witch Shall Be Born" also has the distinction of being one of the sauciest original Conan stories, which are usually much tamer than later fiction and illustrations suggest.

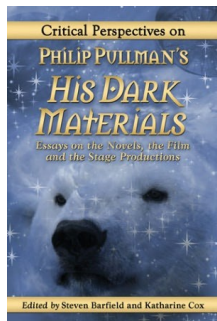
The Bloody Crown of Conan continues its series as an excellent tribute to both Howard and Conan, its apparatus rounded out with insightful commentary, several drafts and outlines, and the many dozens of Gianni's superb black-and-white illustrations. It is above all heartening to see the original, cunning and panther-like Conan resurface among the decades of savage and steroid-drenched stereotypes, and readers who wish to be acquainted or reacquainted with the character are encouraged to take advantage of this coherent trio of stories. ≡



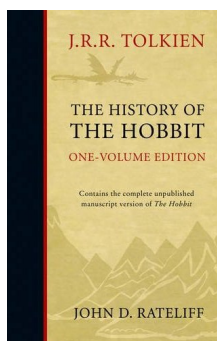
NEW AND FORTHCOMING BOOKS



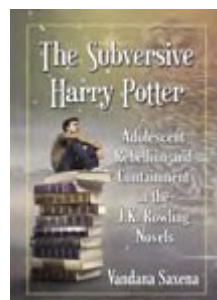
Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull. *The Art of The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien. Harper-Collins. 128 pp. £25 (hardcover). ISBN 978-0007440818. October, 2011.



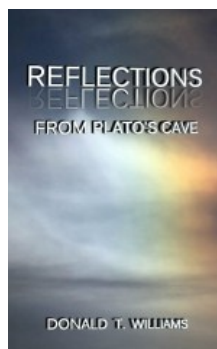
Steven Barfield and Katharine Cox, eds. *Critical Perspectives on Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials: Essays on the Novels, the Film and the Stage Productions*. McFarland. 288 pp. \$40 (softcover). ISBN 978-0786440306. September, 2011.



John D. Rateliff. *The History of the Hobbit* (newly revised, one-volume edition). HarperCollins. 960 pp. £35 (hardcover). ISBN 978-0007440825. October, 2011.



Vandana Saxena. *The Subversive Harry Potter: Adolescent Rebellion and Containment in the J.K. Rowling Novels*. McFarland, \$40 (softcover). ISBN 978-0786466740. July, 2012.



Donald T. Williams. *Reflections from Plato's Cave: Essays in Evangelical Philosophy*. Lantern Hollow Press, \$14.95 (softcover). ISBN 978-0615589107. January, 2012.

The Hunger Games. Directed by Gary Ross. Lionsgate, 2012. Based on the novel by Suzanne Collins. Film reviewed by Donald T. Williams.

— SPOILER ALERT —

I have not read the books, so this is only about the movie. When I saw the trailers, I thought, “Why would anyone want to expose himself to two straight hours of ‘Reality TV?’ I can’t even stand thirty minutes of it.” But then I noticed that people I respect were crazy about the books, so I decided to give it a shot.

It was a good decision.

Every single element in *The Hunger Games* is derivative, but the combination manages to be original. It is *Survivor* meets *The Fifth Element* meets “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” meets a medieval morality play meets *1984*. Surprisingly, it works.

Some Christian reviewers have complained about the violence or about the inherently compromising morality of the premise: our heroine is in a game where the only way to survive is to murder other people. But the violence is not glorified and the immoral premise is not praised; rather a society that accepts the murder of children as (a) entertainment and (b) the price of peace is held up to critique. You get a nice opportunity to ponder the shallow manipulations of media while you’re at it.

Ironically, the moral ambiguity of the ending is the very thing that makes the story disturbing (in a potentially productive way) and profound. Katniss and her friend from District 12 are the last two combatants left. They have managed to do their necessary killing in self-defense, and they have wanted somehow to make it through the games with their integrity intact—not to be turned into someone else by the experience. Now one of them must kill the other, but this they refuse

to do. So they make a mutual suicide pact: they will eat poisoned berries and both die rather than give the media circus they have been part of the winner (on its own terms) that it desperately wants. It would have been a striking act of protest against the immorality of the whole affair. But at the last minute, the judges decide to accept two winners: they both get to live! Stunned, they accept this offer before they realize what it means. And that is what makes the story more than just another violent action flick.



questions to which it may not have answers. But they are questions that desperately need to be asked, and especially by contemporary Americans. What do you do when you dwell in a society that lives by the murder of innocents? How do you maintain your integrity in a society whose major mode of operation is the manipulation of images? If *The Hunger Games* just makes you less comfortable with living without the answers, it will have performed a very useful service. ≡

Here's the problem: they have been given life, but by accepting it, they have put themselves in the position of having to live it on the game's terms. Words are put in their mouths by the slick announcer who interviews them afterwards. Instead of making the suicide pact because they refused to murder a friend, they are portrayed as having made it because they were in love and could not face life without each other. They are confused and dazzled by what has happened to them. They hardly realize that they are probably going to live to wish they had eaten those berries. They are just kids who were offered life in a moment of sudden choice. Who could blame them for taking it? Yet by doing so they have suffered the very fate they had wanted to avoid: loss of identity. Their lives will now be scripted according to the roles created for them by the media. When they smile at the crowd and raised their hands together, I suffered a chill I have not felt since Winston realizes at last that he loves Big Brother.

This is a story, not a sermon. It raises

Sharon Shinn. *Troubled Waters*. New York: Ace Books, 2010, hardback, 392 pages, \$24.95, ISBN 978-0-441-01923-6. Reviewed by David Emerson.

This book was a finalist for the 2011 Mythopoeic Awards, which is why I picked it up in the first place. I had never heard of Sharon Shinn, much less read any of her works. When the novel started out set in a rural village of the kind that might appear in countless generic pseudo-medieval fantasy stories, I started to prepare myself for disappointment. However, I was pleasantly surprised. The world Shinn has built for this novel is distinctive. Even though certain elements can be seen to have obvious influences and predecessors, the way she has combined them is fresh enough to warrant the reader's attention.

For one thing, the historical period in which the story is set seems to be closer to our Victorian age than to any pre-industrial era; although descriptions of any industry

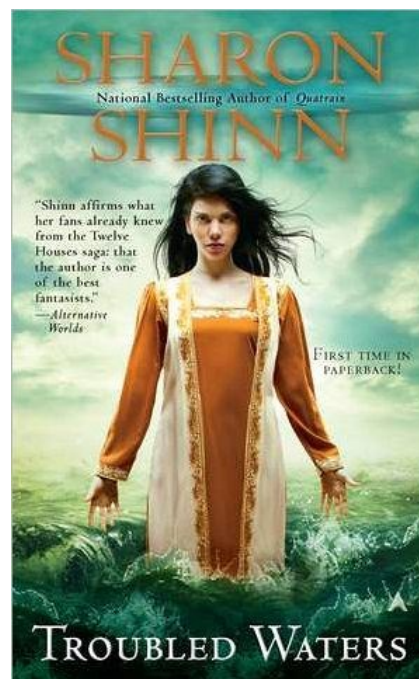
are slight and implicit, there are some machines, notably a kind of motorcar run by compressed gasses rather than by internal combustion. Thus, Shinn avoids the fairy-tale/epic fantasy stereotype while stopping just short of steampunk. For another, this is not really a world where magic *per se* exists; rather, the fantasy of this world is that it seems to be governed by five "elements" – earth, air, fire, water, wood. People are born with personalities associated with one element or another; events of people's lives are described in terms of the elements; even the calendar year is divided into five seasons, each of which correlates to one of the elements. And society is dominated by five aristocratic families, each of which is even more tightly bound to one of the elements, so much so that the head of each family has a mastery of communication with and control over that element (e.g., the head of the air-related family can summon winds).

The plot centers around Zoe Ardelay, a 23-year-old woman recently bereft of her father, the only family she has known since fleeing with him into exile when she was a girl. Her life in the bucolic village is upended by the arrival of a motorized vehicle from the capital city, bearing a stern emissary who has come to take her to the palace of the king. Going from a rural peasant environment to a bustling city and the upper ranks of society is just one major life change in store for Zoe. But Shinn takes her there gradually, allowing Zoe to live a simple life in the city for a while before getting caught up in palace intrigue and political maneuverings among the movers and shakers of the country. This also allows the reader to get to know Zoe in more-or-less fa-

miliar surroundings, and to learn more of this land and its society so that we are prepared for the full impact of later events.

Sharon Shinn has an easy prose style, nicely balanced between description, action, exposition, dialogue, and inner thoughts, all suffused with a distinct warmth. Her plot has plenty of twists and turns, without seeming too contrived or convoluted. One of the strengths of her writing is that when the extraordinary gifts of element-based powers are being used, she describes what it feels like to the character using them, giving such scenes much more immediacy than simple wand-waving and spell-uttering. Another strength is her ability to create likeable characters; Zoe herself, of course, plus her friends and many of the people she meets. Even the schemers in the palace have their good points as well as bad. In fact, if I could point out a flaw in the book, it would be that perhaps too many characters are decent and good-hearted, especially in a big city and in the corridors of power. The only real villains are a few rarely-seen characters from a different country, whose ways seem decadent and immoral to the citizens of Welce.

Shinn has managed to weave together many different kinds of story into this one book. There is mystery, political drama, romance, coming-of-age, class-conscious social commentary, and a bit of magic. The world she has built is engaging enough for me to want to return to it. Although she has written several series (the Samaria series, the "Twelve Houses" series, etc.), *Troubled Waters* is, at least so far, a stand-alone novel. I wish she would write more in this fascinating setting. ≡



Eden Phillpotts. *The Flint Heart: A Fairy Story*. E.P. Dutton & Co., 1910. Made available by Nabu Public Domain Reprints; and

Katherine Paterson and John Paterson. *The Flint Heart*, Freely Abridged from Eden Phillpotts' 1910 Fantasy. Illustrated by John Rocco. Candlewick, 2011.

Reviewed by Pauline J. Alama.

Eden Phillpotts's 1910 fairy tale *The Flint Heart* takes as its starting point a fantasy of the Stone Age that holds almost eerie resonance with our own hyper-competitive age. Among the prehistoric tribes of Dartmoor in England, a warrior wanted power and position so badly that he paid a shaman to make him a charm to harden his heart. With the dubious blessing of the Thunder Spirit, the Flint Heart was created: a charm that made the bearer so ruthless that none could withstand him. After securing the warrior's success and ruining his character, the charm was buried with its owner. For ages it did no harm, until a farmer unwittingly dug it up and fell under its spell.

The *Flint Heart* itself is a brilliant concept. Unfortunately, the story goes downhill from there, with one-dimensional, overly sweet child heroes and endless passages about cute little fairies dressed in flower petals—perhaps an example of what Tolkien, in his essay “On Fairy-stories,” called the “flower-fairies and fluttering sprites with antennae that I so disliked as a child, and which my children in their turn detested.” The plot of *The Flint Heart* is repetitious, and the solution to the problem could have been much more interesting if it forced the child protagonists to grapple with the problems of power and ambition that the talisman represents.

In their “freely abridged” version, Katherine and John Paterson perform the valua-

ble service of both reviving a forgotten fable and clearing away some of the brush of bombastic verbiage, forgettable poetry, and overlong descriptions of fairyland delights that make the original version slow reading.

However, I regret their decision to trim away much of the sense of place from the original work. Phillpotts was evidently keenly interested in Dartmoor: its wildlife, its geography, its legends, and especially its prehistoric monuments, which I imagine may have provided the original spark for the story. In setting the stage for his story, Phillpotts described these monuments irreverently but in loving detail, giving credit to the purpose and workmanship of the stone age people:

They lived in the New Stone Age, and if you think that sounds dull, you never made a bigger mistake in your life. . . . (Phillpotts 11-12)

[W]hen you go to Dartmoor you will see what they left behind them in the shape of hundreds and hundreds of other stones. Some stand in circles, and some stand in rows, and some stand all alone; but you will mark in a moment, if your eyes are worth calling eyes, that these stones never happened by chance. They are very different from the tors and “clitters” and rock masses which are flung about all over Dartmoor. . . . (Phillpotts 12)

If you had seen the Moor when the New Stoners lived on it, you would have noticed strange little villages of very quaint-looking round huts, like giant beehives in clusters. And about them stood walls, and little folds for cattle, and circles of stones dotted in rings, where perhaps the Houses of Parliament met to fling more stones

at each other. You will see also long rows of stones stretching far away to lonely spots on distant tors, where the great warriors and chiefs were buried. (Phillpotts 12-13)

The Patersons reduce Phillpotts' description in a way that makes the story start more quickly, but loses the richness of the setting and conveys a dismissive attitude toward the Stone Age builders:

They raised the biggest stones in circles and lines and squares and all sorts of formations that nobody today quite understands the meaning of, and maybe they didn't either. (Paterson 1-2)

But in many ways, the most remarkable thing about the Patersons' "freely abridged" version is how little it employs the freedom to alter this public domain text. Other than modernizing a few expressions (by no means as many as they might have), the Patersons do not noticeably add anything to the story. It is puzzling that the publisher chose to name the Patersons, not Eden Phillpotts, as authors, and even the mini-biographies of the "Creators" at the end of the book profile the Patersons and the illustrator but not Phillpotts.

As long as contemporary writers set out to "freely" abridge an old story, I wish they'd been bolder. I would be interested in seeing *The Flint Heart* thoroughly made new for the twenty-first century: take the original stone age incident more or less unchanged, but have the Flint Heart rediscovered by a modern middle manager or small-town

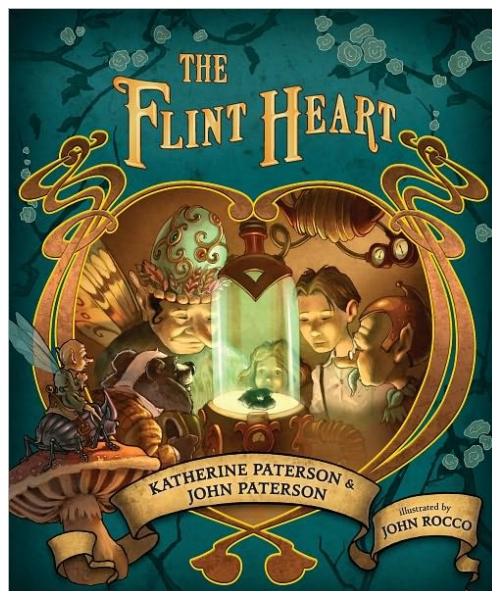
official and show how hard-heartedness and ruthless ambition play out in contemporary society. If the scenery of Dartmoor no longer inspires, then transplant the story to another location and use its geography and archaeology to root the story in a well-developed setting.

In his 1910 fairy story, Phillpotts sometimes seemed to play for laughs by juxtaposing exotic elements among the fairies or the Stone Age primitives with familiar, banal items from the everyday lives of his audience, like a discarded hot-water bottle made in Germany, or the subjects Edwardian children studied in school. There also seem to be references to contemporary events aimed over children's heads at their parents, such as a villain's campaign slogan, "Down With the Veto."

Today, these once-familiar touches feel even more distant to a contemporary audience than fairyland or the Stone Age. In these passages, I wish that the Patersons' version were either more scholarly or more of a wholesale retelling of the story.

A scholarly version would explain cultural references in footnotes: What politician was satirized when the Jacky Toad protests, "Down with the Veto!?" Why is it important to mention repeatedly that the hot-water bottle was made in Germany?

On the other hand, a thorough retelling of *The Flint Heart* could have replaced outdated modernisms with new ones, using what translators call "dynamic equivalence" — recreating the effect instead of the form. It would have been a much bigger project, of course, but such a creative reimagining of the Edwardian fairy tale might have made the old work speak to a new age. ≡



Terry Brooks. *Legends of Shannara: Bearers of the Black Staff*. New York: Del Rey, 2010. 448 pp., \$27.00 (hardcover).

Terry Brooks. *Legends of Shannara: The Measure of the Magic*. New York: Del Rey, 2011. 400 pp., \$27.00 (hardcover).

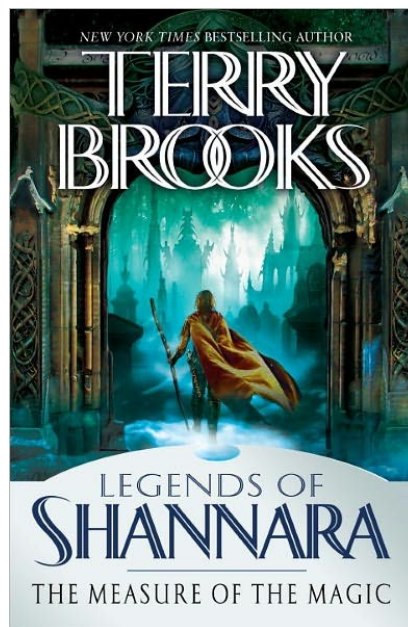
Reviewed by Daniel Baird.

These two books continue to tie together the modern world found in Brooks' *Word and Void* series with his later (at least chronologically) Shannara fantasy world. *Bearers of the Black Staff* is set 500 years after events of his previous book and long after the end of the world as we know it. The magical barrier created by Hawk in the *Genesis of Shannara* trilogy is failing. The last remaining bearer of the black staff, Sider Ament, has to find a way to bring together once again Elves and Men to protect themselves from what lies out the barrier—evils that include all sorts of nightmarish creatures. And of course there are schemes among both Elves and Men to keep Sider Ament from fulfilling this goal.

In these new books Brooks moves away from the science and technology that dominated the *Genesis of Shannara* trilogy. Yet magic is still not well understood, too long forgotten by the Elves. Hence we watch the characters struggle to understand both technology and magic as they face their challenges. Joining Sider Ament in his struggle are various Elves from the city of Arborlon (which you will recognize from earlier books) and Men from the neighboring city of Glensk Wood. Elven Princess Phryne Amarantyne follows a Brooks' standard plot: daughter does not get along with father and runs away for adventure. Helping her are the two humans Panterra Qu and Prue Liss as well as a small cast of minor characters. Add terrible trolls and a demon who hunts bearers of the black staff to the mix and you get murder, intrigue, confusion—with the stage being set for our main characters' heroic acts.

In reading the books I found that knowledge of the earlier trilogy, *Genesis of Shannara*, was useful but not absolutely necessary as certain characters and events were referenced occasionally but usually explained. Compared to Brooks' other books I found *Bearers of the Black Staff* plods along a bit. I was surprised to find myself halfway through the book still waiting for major events to come together. The book and the its sequel really seem to read like one book rather than 2 separate books. *The Measure of Magic* picks up the events immediately where *Bearers of the Black Staff* left them and continues to the conclusion. The ending was interesting and, although it brought events to a close, it did leave wiggle room for the author to write another book to make a trilogy without encroaching on the events from the book, *First King of Shannara*.

If you like your men strong and silent then you will like Sider Ament who is very much a Brooks' stereotype familiar from his other works. Panterra Qu was well developed as a character, his female friend Prue Liss less so, but it was enjoyable to follow them into adventures. Certain deaths of characters seemed superfluous—a problem I have had with other books by the author. I confess I looked forward to reading these books because I did not like the prior trilogy: *Genesis of Shannara*. Although the Genesis trilogy did fulfill the role of explaining why the world as we know it—one of technology and science—came to be the world of Shannara, it was too dark and violent compared to other works by Brooks. The return to more standard fare I enjoyed and if I found some of the stereotypical characters and plot elements a bit worn there were still a few surprises along the way as well. Since these books assume you are already familiar with his fantasy world, if you are new to Terry Brooks definitely start elsewhere such as with the *Sword of Shannara*. If you are a die-hard fan or grew up reading Brooks like I did these two novels will provide some nice reading. ≡



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