Glory Road by Robert A. Heinlein

Glory Road Is Definitely A Road Worth Taking

E. C. Scar Gordon was on the French Riviera recovering from a tour of combat in Southeast Asia, but he hadn't given up his habit of scanning the Personals in the newspaper. One ad in particular leapt out at him:

ARE YOU A COWARD? This is not for you. We badly need a brave man. He must be 23 to 25 years old, in perfect health, at least six feet tall, weigh about 190 pounds, fluent English, with some French, proficient in all weapons, some knowledge of engineering and mathematics essential, willing to travel, no family or emotional ties, indomitably courageous and handsome of face and figure. Permanent employment, very high pay, glorious adventure, great danger. You must apply in person, rue Dante, Nice, 2me étage, apt. D.

How could you not answer an ad like that, especially when it seemed to describe you perfectly? Well, except maybe for the handsome part, but that was in the eye of the beholder anyway. So he went to that apartment and was greeted by the most beautiful woman he'd ever met. She seemed to have many names, but agreed he could call her Star. A pretty appropriate name, as it turned out, for the empress of twenty universes.

Robert A. Heinlein's one true fantasy novel, Glory Road is as much fun today as when he wrote it after Stranger in a Strange Land. Heinlein proves himself as adept with sword and sorcery as with rockets and slide rules and the result is exciting, satirical, fast-paced, funny and tremendously readable -- a favorite of all who have read it. Glory Road is a masterpiece of escapist entertainment with a typically Heinleinian sting in
Heinlein did not write very many fantasy works, but when he did, the result was usually a rather different and fun romp. Glory Road is probably his best work in this genre, and it makes most other sword-and-sorcery stories pale in comparison.

Oscar, our hero, is a Vietnam veteran idling away his time on the Isle du Levant, a small island off the coast of France known for its lack of haute couture (or clothing of any style), when his eye is caught by the most beautiful woman he has ever seen, sleekly muscled and with regal bearing. When she offers him a job with `great adventure and great risk he blindly accepts, little realizing just what an incredible jaunt he has let himself in for. A journey that will travel through some of the 20 universes that Star is Empress of, on a quest to retrieve the stolen Great Egg. Along the way you will be treated to a sword/bow and arrow fight with a very real set of dragons (with a rather amusing fight strategy), a hand to hand fight with a very dirty (and smelly) giant, pentagrams and spells for magical flight. All of the incidents along this trip are treated with a fair dollop of humor and satire (and at least a partial parody of other sword & sorcery epics such as Conan the Barbarian), while at the same time Heinlein manages to present some pseudo-scientific explanations for the `magical incidents, something he did in just about all of his fantasy works, so that it is somewhat problematic to call this a `fantasy.

The climatic sword battle with the `Eater of Souls is very different from the standard hack-and-slash portrayal of sword fights in all too many movies and novels. Heinlein was a member of the fencing team during his time at Annapolis (for some possible reasons for why he took up this sport, see the Lazy Man portion of Time Enough for Love), and this experience and knowledge is directly transposed to the battle descriptions of this book, making for a very fascinating and exciting read.

But there is more to this book than just a fun trip down the yellow brick road of swash-buckling heroes and dragons. Oscar is not your typical mighty-thewed simple-minded adventurer, but is rather a man who thinks about his actions, who has a strong sense of moral responsibility, who can (at least intellectually) comprehend that customs change with different cultures, a true hero who understands the need for noblesse oblige. Nor is Star a simpering damsel-in-distress, but rather a hard, practical, self-reliant, intelligent and rather commanding woman. The interaction between these two strong characters forms the starting point for Heinleins exploration of how relations between the sexes is defined by cultural biases and expectations, the individuals own sense of self-worth, the ability to communicate and compromise, and the problems that married couples face. This philosophical type of discourse occupies a good portion of the last third of the novel, and may not seem at first glance to be well integrated with the first two-thirds emphasis on action. But on reflection, the last third forms the completion of the thematic structure of the work,
whose groundwork is well laid in the first portion, and provides a level of
meaning that is not common in fantasy works.
Of course, this being a Heinlein novel, expect to find some sharp remarks
about the IRS and taxes, how to fight (and not fight) a war, status symbols,
horse racing and lotteries, laws about carrying greater than six inch blades
in public, veterans benefits, Congressional methods of making laws, the
bizarre workings of military organizations, the relative strengths and
weaknesses of democracy versus monarchies and feudal structures, and
under-the-table tactics for motivating an individual. As always, Heinlein will
make you think about and question your own opinions and assumptions on
these things, even if you dont agree with his expressed viewpoint, as he
always makes his viewpoint at least sound logical and correct.
Read this one for the fun and humor. Then let it soak in and expand your
sense of the possible, the correct, the moral, and the reason for living.

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