The Darkness That Comes Before (The Prince of Nothing, Book 1) by R. Scott Bakker

A Deeply Rich And Rewarding Fantasy Reading Experience.

Many centuries ago, the world was nearly destroyed by the dark wizards of the Consult, and the High Kings family was wiped out—or so it seemed. Then from the wild, uncharted north comes a mysterious and extraordinarily powerful philosopher-warrior, Anasurimbor Kellhus, descendant of the ancient High Kings. But the return of the kings bloodline is little cause for rejoicing. For Kellhuss appearance may signal the overthrow of empires, the destruction of the sorcerous schools, the return of the Consult demons—and the end of the world. The Darkness that Comes Before is a strong, impressive, deeply imagined debut novel. However, this first book of an epic fantasy series is not accessible; it reads like a later volume of a complicated ongoing series. Author R. Scott Bakker has created a world that is very different from J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth, yet in depth of development comes closer than most high-fantasy worlds. In addition to providing five appendices, Bakker attempts to make
his complex world clear to readers by filling the prologue and opening chapters with the names of characters, gods, cities, tribes, nations, religions, factions, and sorcerous schools. For many readers, this approach will have the opposite effect of clarity. Its like demonstrating snowflake structure with a blizzard. --Cynthia Ward

Personal Review: The Darkness That Comes Before (The Prince of Nothing, Book 1) by R. Scott Bakker
There are very few books that are as ambitious as R. Scott Bakker's "The Darkness That Comes Before". Most authors would never attempt to create such a vast world with a deeply encompassing and vital intellectual history, and disparate races that have varying philosophical viewpoints and ways of perceiving the world. This novel, while a putative fantasy, is so remarkably well-conceived and executed that it feels more like a historical recollection of a lost world. In fact, Bakker liberally uses real Western civilization history and philosophy (with some aspects of Middle Eastern thought) and reshapes it especially for his world. The result is an absolutely brilliant fantasy novel that elevates the entire genre to a new level.

First, I will admit to being bias toward Bakker's novel. I studied philosophy both as an undergraduate and graduate student, so there is much here I recognize and appreciate from my studies. Let's just say, the complexity of Bakker's work is suited to my kind of academic geek, one who is deeply fascinated in the "why" of things, events and history. One who may be interested in Bakker's concept of the darkness that comes before, and what events result from that state of pre-rationality.

The novel is segmented into parts, each one following a different character and setting the scene for the second volume in the trilogy. Drusas Achamian is a Mandate sorcerer, plagued by the terrible and bloody dreams of his long dead predecessor. It is the Mandate school's mission to fight against the mysterious Consult, an organization whose existence has not been seen in decades. Achamian is commanded to uncover information about the plans of Maithanet, the Shriah of The Thousand Temples, the major religion of the region. Maithanet has recently declared the formation of a Holy War, a war that will take back the holy land of Shimeh. What Achamian discovers is a mystery that is potentially at the heart of this newly-declared Holy War.

Cnaiur is a Scylvendi barbarian, a survivor of the tremendous military defeat of his people at the hands of the martial prodigy, Ikurei Conphas. Soon, he meets Anasurimbor Kellhus, the son of Anasurimbor Moenghus, a man who, in the past, lead Cnaiur to terrible actions against his father that still torture his soul. Cnaiur and Kellhus make their way to Momemn to join the forces gathering for the Holy War, both with the agenda of finding Anasurimbor Moenghus.
Bakker writes with a depth to his characterization that is staggering. His characters are as complete intellectually, emotionally, and philosophically as you could possibly imagine. The world-building is unbelievable, as each region and race have their own history, reasoning, and stance to the events that unfold during the course of the novel. It is rather overwhelming and requires a great effort from the reader, but in the end, the effort pays off with a truly amazing fantasy experience.

It should be pointed out the majority of the novel is centered on setting the scene for the rest of the trilogy, to situate the reader in this finely imagined world. This setting up is, in a sense, the darkness that comes before, a pre-history that will be necessary to fully comprehend that which follows in the next two volumes. If R. Scott Bakker’s "The Darkness That Comes Before" is any indication, what follows may be the greatest fantasy trilogy ever.

Last Word:
An amazing experience that will challenge for one of the greatest fantasy novels ever released. Bakker creates an incredible world, and populates it full of characters with such reality and intellectual history as to be staggeringly fascinating. This is absolutely must read fantasy literature.

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