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Terry Brooks Reviews The Red Wolf Conspiracy

Terry Brooks is the New York Times bestselling author of more than twenty-five books, including the Genesis of Shannara novel Armageddon’s Children; The Sword of Shannara; the High Druid of Shannara trilogy: Jarka Ruus, Tanequil, and Straken; and the nonfiction book Sometimes the Magic Works: Lessons from a Writing Life. His novels Running with the Demon and A Knight of the Word were selected by the Rocky Mountain News as two of the best science fiction/fantasy novels of the twentieth century. Read his guest review of The Red Wolf Conspiracy:

Robert V. S. Redick has accomplished something rather extraordinary in his new fantasy adventure novel, The Red Wolf Conspiracy, the first in what I predict will be an eagerly awaited series. His accomplishment is in crafting a story that is a throwback to the days of the European Adventure story writers—Stevenson, Dumas, Scott and the like—a tale that is a gripping page-turner accessible to all ages. I seek stories like this constantly and seldom find them. Here we have a good one. The characters are memorable and fully realized, from the lowly tarboy Pazel Pashkendle to the unwilling young bride Thasha to the half-mad captain Nilus Rose to the powerful sorcerer Ramachni. As the story proceeds, we come to know and care about all of them, the good and the bad, the high and the low. We want to know their fates, and we will follow the writer to wherever we need to go to learn what they are. It is a spirited and exciting journey. By crafting the bulk of the tale aboard the mega-ship Chathrand, the author has created what is essentially a seafaring tale that reminded me of every good seafaring tale from Moby Dick to Treasure Island to everything by Patrick O’Brian. All the necessary elements are there, and you can practically taste the salt water on your lips and feel the grit of it on the pages. I look for and expect a feeling of honesty and reality in my fiction choices, no less so in fantasy than in other forms, and I was not disappointed here. From the description of the ship and its component pieces to the intricate and dangerous relationships between the characters aboard her, it all rang true. I don’t find many books that I wish I had written, but every so often one comes along. I think the last one was Philip Pullmans The Golden Compass. Here is another. I admire this book for its scope and its power, its language and its imagery, and its fine tight-rope plotting. I could not put it down. I am betting a lot of other readers won’t be able to put it down either. So trust me on this one; you won’t be disappointed. Except, of course, like me you have to sit by patiently
waiting for the next book. The anticipation is akin to what I experienced growing up with chapter books, when it seemed that every single installment ended in a cliffhanger, and the characters and I were all left hanging together. In an effort to minimize the damage to our fingernails, I will use whatever magic I can conjure up to prod Mr. Redick onward towards completion of book two. You have my promise.—Terry Brooks

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I tend to like my fantasy with a healthy dose of ripetry. That's a sea-murth word that means both magic and language. What's a sea-murth? Why, it's a siren, only a little different, and it rolls off the tongue better: sea-murth.

The power of words to shape reality is driven home in The Red Wolf Conspiracy by the magical ability of its protagonist, Pazel Pathkendle: given a few moments with any language, he can understand and speak it. Given the number of strange species aboard the great ship Chatharand, this tends to be incredibly handy; the sentient rats, faeries, and giant anchor-lifting monsters each threaten someone's safety at some point, when really crisis could be averted if only somebody knew what they wanted. The fact that the somebody in question is a lowly tarboy from a conquered race means that despite his ability, Pazel often gets rough treatment, and the fate of empires rests on whether the stratified society of the novel can get over itself long enough to let Pazel do his thing.

I liked this book a lot, both for the sonorous use of language (Pathkendle, tarboy, sea-murth) and the memorable, likeable characters. The characters often fall into patterns familiar from other books, but each have a little something extra that makes them stand out. Thasha is your tomboy princess type, but has lingering guilt and feelings of inadequacy from her time at a hellish boarding school. Ramachni is your T.H. White Merlin figure, but the world-through-the-clock that he comes from gives the impression of more depth to his story than you can see. The captain is your fearsome hang-you-just-for-sneezing type, but spoiler spoiler. I think fantasy always treads the line between archetype and stereotype -- but I think that's part of the attraction. It's like how Umberto Eco said Casablanca was like a grand reunion of nostalgic cliches turned archetypes. The difference is in the details, and The Red Wolf Conspiracy pulls it off way better than, say, the original Star Wars, which I think we like for similar reasons. Some of the characters, like the maimed and pitiable talking rat Felthrup, aren't all that common as archetypes in fantasy, but they tug at the corner of your memory in a reassuring way, like maybe you always expected there to be a character like Felthrup -- the way people
shown permutations of a dot pattern will think they've seen the original ur-form already, even when they haven't.

My only complaint, and its a tiny one, is that the huge class stratification and brutality of the world that is Pazels bane through much of the book sort of disappears near the end; the badguys fought in the end aren't really the source of Pazels problems, even though they're threatening worldwide destruction, and to fight them while the social problems go on holiday seems like cheating. Ramachni, the Merlin character, seems to have this effect of mitigating the world grittiness especially; whenever hes around, the fare seems to shift from Victorian class struggle to YA-ish stuff in the style of T.H. White or C.S. Lewis. Its a wonder that the other characters dont grouse at him more when he delivers homilies about the importance of friendship. But then, he is from another world. (T.H. White world?) Regardless, I do like some of his moralizing, especially the anecdote about a man who spends his life looking for an escape to his cage, only to find himself in a larger cave with a woman there who says, Help me get out of this cage. And then when they find the exit to that one, theres still a bigger cage with some more people looking for the exit ... The moral, that youre never truly awakened, but always just freeing yourself from bigger cages, is pretty classy, and is worth a little meandering in tone.

Its the first book in a trilogy -- it does say this on the dust jacket, though its not obvious about it -- and the other books arent out yet. The book is sort of midway between a complete resolution and a just-stops-wait-for-the-next-one kind of resolution, with the conflict with the main baddies temporarily resolved but their plan still in motion -- you wont feel cheated of an ending, but by no means does it stand alone. On the bright side, I look forward to two more books of this quality.

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