

A Foreign Shore: Clothes Make a Man

Forrest Johnson

Liz Clarke, Illustrator

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Intricate world-building makes this complex fantasy a fun and rewarding undertaking.

Members of a medieval royal family and their followers encounter more than they bargained for when their invasion of a distant province unearths deadly, ancient secrets in *A Foreign Shore*, Forrest Johnson's intricately plotted military fantasy.

When allied forces led by Prince Krion of Akaddia and his brother, Prince Clenas, are unexpectedly repelled on the coast of Chatmakstan by a well-prepared cavalry, it's clear that someone betrayed them by leaking news of the impending invasion. The intrigue deepens when peasants and others long-oppressed by Chatmakstan's tyrannical Amir Qilij join forces with the invaders.

Among the turncoats is Raeesha, the brash, sixteen-year-old daughter of a sheikh, who has stolen away dressed as a boy to escape her impending arranged marriage to Amir Qilij. Raeesha and others are ultimately sent on a mission into a desolate wasteland, where they discover a slumbering force that, if destabilized, could destroy them all.

There's a lot going on in *A Foreign Shore*—multilayered military infrastructure and maneuvering; gory battlefield scenes and nasty torture; friendly and malevolent demons summoned from other dimensions; witches, sorcerers, ghosts, and ghastly monsters; ancient lore, enchantments, and potions; and love triangles and betrayals. There's also great heroism and treachery, desolate winding roads, throats to slit, towering cliffs to scale, and crumbling ruins to explore.

The scene setting and character development are both skillful and diverse. Vividly interwoven details bring lands alive. The main characters have depth that makes them interesting—they speak different languages and their backgrounds are culturally and socioeconomically varied, from merchants to seamen, princes to commoners.

In all, nearly a hundred characters are listed in an end-of-book index; dozens of those play significant roles. Keeping everyone straight can be a challenge. The index of names, organized by their alliances and families, is a vital aid. The inclusion of frequent italicized musings lending insight into thoughts also helps distinguish characters.

Lack of focus, continuity, and clarity are sometimes issues. It's never completely evident, for instance, why the foreigners invaded in the first place. Later, there are several divergent outcomes of their campaign; which one, in the end, is the most compelling and consequential is difficult to determine.

The inclusion of about thirty wonderfully emotive, finely drawn illustrations and an appealing cover provide key visuals to help understand what's going on. Frequent infusions of wit keep the story light, lending incentive to wade through the novel's complexities.

A Foreign Shore gets better on a second reading, when its various plot threads, characters, and nuances are more

familiar and thus better understood. This is a novel for fans of medieval quests, who appreciate intricate webs of details with some romance and shenanigans on the side.

KARYN SAEMANN (March 11, 2016)

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