Clarion Review

Fantasy

A Great Red Bow
Monica Ponder
CreateSpace
978-1-4515-1453-7
Four Stars (out of Five)

A title like *A Great Red Bow* leaves much to the imagination, and author Monica Ponder is thorough in her munificent gift. Second in her Cel'mystry Diaries trilogy, the epic fantasy novel delivers a first-person view into the life of Rheeanna, Priestess of the Woman, and a menagerie of characters whom she joins on a caravan along the Lower Belt Trade Route between the towns of Twilight and Longlearning. Their quest is to gather information concerning the Ogre King Rapine and discover what evil he secretly harbors against the land of Cel'mystry.

"She [the Woman] told me that getting the things that happen in my life out of my head and onto parchment will help me to face them down," Rheeanna writes in her journal. This creates a dominant theme about overcoming the cruelties of life. The issues that plague and haunt the mage and former slave Lodestone, the Master Bard, the strange, silent Redbow, and others, include torture, abuse, murder, and bondage. This is especially true for the protagonist, whose hometown of Twilight harvests a powerful medicine called "Dreamweed," which "produces a craving for pleasure that cannot be denied." The drug is so powerful and so ruinous that it is used to enslave people.

The caravan party, consisting of elves, humans, and "Newbloods" (half elf and half human), are in constant conflict because they hold completely different outlooks on life: the elves, who can speak to animals, and may even take animal shapes, take offense to any subjugating attitudes; the humans, despite their civil demeanor, place a market value on everything and tend to view their companions objectively. The magical elves of the wilderness often pose threatening challenges to their human counterparts, adding entertaining nuances to the suspenseful encounters along this frolicsome ride.

The novel is thoroughly detailed, including a map inside the jacket cover, but contains some typographical errors and redundancy in the banter between characters, especially

concerning the “mating” of two in particular. But togetherness is emphasized for a reason and provides a cute and subtle double entendre for the title.

Monica Ponder, an “avid reader of fantasy,” is a registered nurse and former elementary school teacher. She has also written the novel *A Bard’s Eye View*. The third book in the trilogy is forthcoming.

A Great Red Bow is unique for tackling difficult social issues through flawed, untidy heroes and heroines, rather than projecting them solely onto the antagonists. The novel is worthwhile for readers of fantasy.

Derek Cram