



Blood and Ash

Manuel Perez

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Themes of insecurity, regret, and redemption stand against the backdrop of high school and college life and will resonate with a younger crowd.

From the dorms of Cambridge to the pyramids of Egypt, the banks of the Seine, and the glitter and glitz of the Vegas strip, Manuel Perez's *Blood and Ash*, a modern-day fantasy with ancient roots, follows the misadventures and transformation of one unlikely champion in the ever-evolving and escalating battle between the forces of good and evil.

Ash Drake is a socially awkward MIT senior by day and an online elven mage by night, screen name "Rath10n." He slogs through life with little effort or enthusiasm. But the arrival of a mysterious package and a magical mentor and the induction into an alternate reality quickly and irrevocably change the course of his life forever. Ash must learn to control the rush of power from his newfound magic before it leads him down the slippery slope of corruption and instant gratification.

Blood and Ash introduces a cadre of compelling characters, from geeky Ash to the tragically beautiful Sarah Blake, a.k.a. Miss Murder. Flashbacks are rampant, although backstory details are feast or famine. Some profiles reach back into defining childhood moments, as they do with the lovable misfit and trouble magnet Fat Jack and his red-haired sidekick, Bruce. Others' stories are notably absent, as with "the Wizard," an Obi-Wan-like master to Ash's Padawan/initiate who doesn't even warrant a real name. The abundance of information surrounding otherwise minor characters gives the impression of a setup for more to come in Ash's world, although the story itself is complete as a stand-alone.

The classic good versus evil motif gets a bit murky as Ash, Sarah, and Jack all struggle to control their powers as descendants—legend has it, either "Blessed" by angels or "Touched" by demons. The Blessed, or good side, are ostensibly tasked with protecting the world from the "relentless and ever-present darkness," but they do not always behave admirably, and the "evil" side produces some heroes, adding layers and dimensions to the diverse personalities, but also some confusion as to what great evil is actually being fought. This complexity allows for some sympathetic villains and disappointing saviors, which adds to the richness of the cast and allows for some surprising plot twists and action sequences.

Themes of insecurity, regret, and redemption stand against the backdrop of high school and college life and will resonate with a younger crowd. Teenagers and young adults in particular will appreciate the temptation of using magic and precognition to ace chemistry tests, win at blackjack, and, naturally, attract the attention of love interests. With an equal balance of action and character growth, Manuel Perez's *Blood and Ash* has fresh appeal in the world of fantasy realism with, hopefully, more to come.

PALLAS GATES MCCORQUODALE (June 25, 2016)

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