

Hell's Faire

John Ringo

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With contemporary combat relatively fresh in memory, this futuristic war, set in Tennessee against alien invaders, is surrealistic, particularly since nuclear weapons are tossed around as if they were hand grenades. However, it can be satisfying to plunge through a book in which battle lines are clearly drawn, with everything in black and white and shades of heroism.

In this fourth volume of the author's Legacy of the Aldenata series, a group of soldiers, some very unlikely, uses high-tech weapons to battle an alien race of Posleen invaders that use humans for food. They've been at war for five years, and the humans are getting desperate. The Posleen have mostly conquered Earth, except for the Cumberland and Ohio basins, where fighting is now fierce.

Enter a group of soldiers pretty much written off as screw-ups, a general who's getting a second chance at command with this group as his raw material, and some regulars-Cally O'Neal and her relatives among them. What follows is a bravery-under-fire tale that just might snatch victory from the jaws of defeat, if only everyone lives long enough.

Readers who like a heavy dose of technology in their shoot-'em-ups will find it here in abundance. Ringo, a veteran of the 82nd Airborne, gives explanations of weapons systems that not only put the "science" into this science fiction, they drive the plot. Characters cope with radiation, plasma weapons, antimatter, regeneration, armored suits that enable them to perform superhuman tasks, and Bun-Bun-a SheVa weapon that superficially resembles a colossal tank but is capable of "[f]iring a single penetrator round, the weapon designed to destroy a Posleen lander ... the recoil equivalent of firing six standard battleship cannons." These guns use "electroplasma propellant, extended barrels and secondary firing chambers to accelerate a depleted uranium dart as thick as a tree trunk to twenty-five hundred meters per second."

There's no doubt about good guys versus bad guys in this book; the aliens are superficially depicted and not at all sympathetic, a race of lizard-like creatures with strengths that force the humans to greater resourcefulness to uncover their weaknesses. The humans, meanwhile, are pretty realistic. There's enough discussion about male/female roles in battle to annoy both sexes. The writing is a bit more uneven than in Ringo's previous books, with occasional inconsistencies in the action. However, there's heroism aplenty as even a child-Cally, a highly atypical thirteen-year-old-takes on the Posleen.

Despite a number of deus-ex-machina rescues, the book is a satisfying escape (though not too far) from reality into an alternate battle zone where technology, and people, can come through to accomplish amazing things.
MARLENE SATTER (November / December 2003)

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