

House of Open Wounds

Adrian Tchaikovsky

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An engrossing, imaginative novel set around an experimental hospital unit, *House of Open Wounds* explores weighty questions about the scars upon those who heal others.

In a medical tent near the Pallesen battlefields, a dozen medics treat the gruesome casualties of a war waged by an aggressive nation that seeks “perfection in all things.” The medics—a diverse group that includes foreigners from conquered and allied nations—specialize in alchemy, necromancy, sympathetic healing, and other magical crafts. They are “up to their elbows in the injured, those that can be cut and wrapped and stitched and otherwise profitably put back together.”

The medical team reports to Prassel, a disciplined Pallesen commanding officer who is wont to savor a good cup of tea. Among them are Ollery, a gruff, brooding alchemist who leads the medical unit and must triage the wounded; Jack, a former Maric priest with a gift for healing and a rickety box that smells of “decaying leaf litter” in which he carries discarded gods; and Alv, fallen from the Divine City, who practices “sympathy healing” by absorbing others’ injuries into herself. Alv’s own balance is “husbanded...precariously against every sleight of fate.” Meanwhile, Masti, an orphan from Brachinta, grew up as a “familiar of the camp”; he strives to make himself useful.

As these and other medics salve the “bloody bustle,” they cope with prejudice, exhaustion, and pressure from the “tidiness of mind” of Pallesen inquirers, who prosecute infractions at an unrelenting rate. Their story focuses on the grueling and absurd challenges they face—as well as on their own complexities, which shine in the “protracted twilight before the dawn of global Perfection.”

House of Open Wounds is a gritty, powerful novel about the horrors of war and the sacrifices made by those who work to heal the injured.

KRISTEN RABE (March / April 2024)

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