

Shadows over Sheradan

Scott Barker

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Like a wizard weaving an enchanted tapestry, first-time author Scott Barker combines Old World charm with a touch of sorcery to produce his high-fantasy novel, *Shadows Over Sheradan*.

With abundant parallels to the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, *Shadows Over Sheradan* follows Star Prince Trigarius after he's appointed to track down and destroy Izzasha, the former queen who betrayed her kingdom by pursuing dark magic. Joining the prince's crew is Taeio, the violet-skinned ranger who serves as navigator when she's on the ship and as a skilled tracker when she's on land. Alistair Snowmantle is the white-haired, benevolent "archmage" who founded Krystalya with his own hands. When he joins forces with Trigarius and his crew, their combined skills are finally sufficient to wage war against Izzasha.

Although this is a fantasy novel full of tomes and spells, *Shadows over Sheradan* can claim unusual authenticity. First, the battle scenes aboard ship read like firsthand accounts, no doubt thanks to Barker's real-life experience as a captain in the Canadian Forces. That experience also transfers into Prince Trigarius's character development, creating a warm, determined person with regrets about the sacrifices he's had to make in chasing down Izzasha.

Setting is one of Barker's strengths. He details the shifting expanses between planets as a sort of celestial sea, complete with frozen asteroids, crystal dust storms, and electric tentacles of lightning. Life in Krystalya is just as ornate, with caverns below the city and a dreamy forest outside its limits. Barker's meticulous research about galleons, cogs, and brigantines shines through his fictional creations, resulting in believable magic-powered ships.

Despite the races and unusual appearances, the characters here are recognizably human, like Argoth, the former dragon who now lives in an indestructible metal body and feels the shame of abandoning his glorious dragon form. Barker also uses themes of diversity to demonstrate the remarkable ability of people in danger to overcome their prejudices in order to defeat a common enemy.

This book has a few flaws. The cover art is mediocre, although it makes a strong statement about the determined prince who travels from world to world in pursuit of justice. The overabundance of exclamation points (sometimes up to seven per page) can make the reader numb to actual excitement. And the redundant space between paragraphs when the paragraph has already been indented makes this book appear much longer than it actually is. On the other hand, with its action-packed pages and cliff-hanger chapters, a voracious reader should be able to devour this book in an afternoon. Readers will also appreciate the ink-wash sketches and pencil illustrations scattered throughout the novel, as well as the detailed map in the first chapter.

Fortunately, *Shadows Over Sheradan* is only the first book in *The Crystal Rings Saga*. Sailors, archers, historians, closet wizards, and anyone who enjoys a truly satisfactory ending to a well-written novel will enjoy *Shadows over Sheradan* and eagerly await its sequel.

EMILY ASAD (May 9, 2013)

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