

**Stormfront: Book One of the Stormsong Trilogy****Stephen Reger**

Outskirts Press

(452pp)

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*Stormfront is an alternative history novel in which the tumultuous Thirty Years' War is influenced by witches and powerful magic.*

In Stephen A. Reger's exciting alternative history novel *Stormfront*, Catholics and Protestants clash in a magic-infused version of seventeenth-century Germany.

During the late 1600s, the papal powers are supported, in secret, by the Stormsong family. The Stormsongs do the Church's dirty work, rooting out instances of witchcraft and going against the rising threat of Protestantism.

After a slow start that is punctuated by occasional violence and torture scenes, the novel establishes its stakes: its characters are more connected than first suggested, and the Stormsongs aren't precisely the faithful soldiers that Pope Paul V thinks they are. In secret, they work against the Holy Roman emperor, and they hope to replace the pope with one who better supports their plans. In foreboding castles complete with libraries full of forgotten lore, dark secrets are revealed—even as, outside of such walls, the nation's populace struggles against the plague and deprivations.

Meanwhile, Vanessa Stormsong, a raven-haired beauty, needs a husband. Stephen, a good knight and her childhood friend, is in love with her, but their differing stations mean that they can't be matched. When Vanessa spots Sarlatova, a fetching scarlet-haired witch, while she's out fighting Protestants, it's an opportunity for change; they form an intriguing connection with satisfying implications. Sarlatova, who works against Vanessa's family in a guerrilla-style campaign, begins to develop magical powers, generating fantastical interest that's furthered by a murderous monk and a scheming priest.

Midway through the novel, Stephen makes an intriguing discovery in a castle library, sending him off on an adventure of his own. Stephen's efforts lead to intrigue that feeds into the book's conclusion, where a mystery is revealed that has considerable implications for the Stormsong family.

But the prose is heavy-handed, undermined by a profusion of parenthetical remarks about history and language. These shares of information often break the narrative's flow, while a bevy of historical facts about the landscape and literature further clog its progression. Despite the exciting subject matter, the result is a novel that is often dry, with sections of trivia that read more like lectures than they fit as parts of the story's drama.

Setting the stage for further series entries, *Stormfront* is an alternative history novel in which the tumultuous Thirty Years' War is influenced by witches and powerful magic.

JEREMIAH ROOD (January 4, 2023)

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