

Clarion Review ★★★★★

GENERAL FICTION

The Berwick Chronicles

Victor Simpson

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This is an entertaining, dark novel about the lengths that those in power will go to in order to remain in power.

An engrossing depiction of parallel worlds—one ruled by wizardry, the other by science—and the Oxford graduate students who traverse them, *The Berwick Chronicles* is a potent combination of medieval fantasy, dystopian adventure, and mystery. Victor Simpson presents a fish-out-of-water tale that raises troubling questions about human behavior.

Jonathan is a theoretical physicist and the easily influenced narrator of the novel who, along with his colleagues, experiences a time travel accident. After the group lands in another dimension of their own town in 2020, they join forces with Angus and Robina, a slave and witch who lead them on dangerous escapades. Necessity turns the academics into warriors as they attempt to return to their previous lives. An action-based plot depicts the gradual alliance between believers in magic and the technologically savvy. Together, they seek to fulfill a prophecy foretold in the titular Berwick Chronicles.

Robina utters one of the book's major themes: "In this world, you can do the impossible and follow those inner drives that your world wouldn't allow you to do. You're free to express your true nature." Moments like these become signposts in a savage narrative. Jonathan also notes how easily violence arises once he and his friends find themselves strangers in a strange land, but the reflection is a passing observation. Harsh details—including beheading and several eviscerations—demonstrate the ruthless nature of the magical world. The effect is a biting, implicit commentary on isolationism; Jonathan's group, tellingly referred to as Outlanders, present a fearsome intrusion.

Enchanted weapons and the swift acquisition of magical skills equip Jonathan's group with the necessary skills to fight against the wizards who pursue them. When they showcase their own talents—such as a scene where they construct a getaway balloon—it gives them greater capability in an otherwise overwhelming environment that asks them to accept a prophecy without question.

The details of the prophecy are sparingly revealed, creating a tense plot marked by secrets. Occasionally peculiar intrusions—including the sudden appearance of a ninja—widen the scope of the fantasy world and provide quick solutions for Jonathan's plights. The book's intrigue lies in Jonathan's transformation from a fearful young adult to a high-ranking leader. That it happens out of inevitability is less crucial than the overall message: fate may dictate the outcome of a life, but there's plenty of room left for surprises.

The Berwick Chronicles is an entertaining, dark novel about the lengths that those in power will go to in order to remain in power, and about loyalties forged in crisis.

KAREN RIGBY (March 28, 2016)

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