

The Brazen Serpent Chronicles: The Caduceus

R. Dennis Baird

AuthorHouse (Jun 15, 2011)

Softcover \$15.49 (268pp)

978-1-4259-3988-5

In this second book of the fantasy series *The Brazen Serpent Chronicles*, R. Dennis Baird has created a landscape deeply rooted in the Western European fantasy tradition and added some tweaks to the standard recipe. Widsith is a young Dragon Master who, with his gifted wife, Annel, seeks the aid of the southern countries of Aelandra in a coming war between light and darkness. Forces of light are gathering and growing stronger, but so is the threat from their dark foes, and not all the inhabitants of Aelandra are interested in fighting another war.

The parallel stories of Deorc and Gulth, dragons of dark and light, respectively, provide a smooth method of giving the reader information about dragons in Aelandra without slowing down the pace. Dragons come in varying sizes and with different ethical beliefs, but Gulth and Deorc both display at least one trait that makes them three-dimensional characters instead of all good or all evil. The plotline surrounding the dragons finds its reflection in the stories of Rin and Marcus, young boys who must choose between dark and light, between power and peace. Again, neither boy is one-dimensional, resulting in two characters whose fates will be of intense interest to readers.

Baird has done some unusual things in his world of Aelandra. The dragons can transform into humanlike forms and are more in the center of the dragon range of personality than at the extremes—a rarity in fantasy novels featuring dragons. While no personality range is official, Baird's will be recognizable to dragon lovers: On one end is the dragon that obeys telepathic orders and has little else that connects it to human life; on the other end is the talking, wise-cracking dragon that is often too smart for its own good.

The Caduceus is high fantasy with a nuanced human side. While the text could have been improved by an experienced editor in order to remove some awkward constructions and redundant sentences, this novel has all the well-loved elements of fantasy and none of the dull ones.

J. G. STINSON (April 28, 2012)

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