

The Bright Path: An Anachronism

Benjamin M. Birney

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This fantasy epic has its own colorful aesthetic, and humor carries its central trio through their quest.

In Benjamin M. Birney's fantasy adventure, *The Bright Path*, a vast array of creatures collide, resulting in life or death battles and political unrest.

In a preindustrial society, Jonathan Miller descends from a long line of millers, but he doesn't want to be one. When a Cyrus Stoa, a strange professor, arrives in town on a quest for a book, Jonathan and his childhood friend and crush, Merrily, embark on an adventure to aid him in his search. Through a slippery slope of struggles, the quest for the book soon leads the trio into a vast fantastical world in which they must use their mismatched knowledge to fight, survive, and navigate the timeless conflicts buried deep in the cultures they encounter.

Along the way, the trio seeks help from—and struggles to survive with—hordes of fantasy creatures, ranging from goblins to fae. These creatures both aid and hinder the quest, and they are each shown to have their own structured cultures and languages.

The story moves slowly. Flowery descriptions of settings, characters, and action impede its pace and become repetitive, while side notes and citations about the creatures' cultural elements, and journal entries from side characters, distract from the quest. Exchanges are overloaded with dialogue tags and are difficult to follow. The quiet pace belies the tension of the book's action sequences and romantic subplots.

An omniscient narration reveals the close thoughts of multiple characters who come to sound the same despite their different backgrounds. Jonathan is uneducated, but his thoughts sound much like those of Professor Stoa. Merrily is an indistinct love interest. The cast blurs together, and no one character is particularly sympathetic.

Settings are rendered in clear and descriptive terms, and the book has its own colorful aesthetic. Images of weapons, blood, forestry, and the afterlife are vibrant. Illustrations begin each chapter; they depict characters and settings in even more detail. Strong and emotional tension builds around the characters' ultimate fates, and this carries the story line. Each fight has higher stakes than the last; eventually, lives and civilizations hang in the balance.

Still, some plot elements feel contrived. Merrily and Cyrus prove fluent in the creatures' bizarre languages despite little previous contact with them; characters with no medical training perform surgeries. Major injuries are shrugged off without much thought.

Despite the often dark elements of the plot, there's also a fair amount of comedy here. The text capitalizes on cynicism and clever wordplay. Some jokes toe the line between humor and absurdity, but they provide quick laughs and comedic relief.

The Bright Path is an emotionally substantial, if slow moving, fantasy adventure.

TIA SMITH (November 27, 2018)

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