



The Dark Blood

A. J. Smith

Head of Zeus (Dec 1, 2016)

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Suffering from *Game of Thrones* withdrawals? The latest book in A. J. Smith's twisted fantasy series, *The Dark Blood*, has enough renegade clerics, murderous assassins, and unholy pacts and feuds to soothe even the most passionate fan's fever. With nearly one corpse per page, Smith races through this installment of the Long War cycle, leaving a bloody, impenitent smear in his wake.

Smith's rule of thumb seems to be that "nothing is sacred," and from the first chapter, he's quick to start slitting throats. Rebellious religious sects, acting on behalf of the blighted, ancient gods, have divided into orders. They seek an albino Black cleric who threatens their order: Utha of Arnon, "pale-skinned, white-haired and terrifying." Assisted by a younger priest and a Dokkalfar, a forest giant, Utha seeks to clear his name.

In this world—part Dungeons and Dragons and part Guillermo Del Toro fantasy—magic and reality blend seamlessly. It's not surprising to learn how the world's races mix, or what powers each character has inherited from what spirit or ritual. If anything, Smith's cast is so diverse that it's unsettling to come across a character who is merely mortal, and good with a sword.

Smith's writing is dense and fast paced, and short on backstory. Although Smith spent twelve years in the world-building stage, there aren't many surprises in the plot department. Revenge, old scores, sexual rivalry—the old favorites work here, too. Smith seems to delight in creating fascinating and hideous new monsters to pit against one another. Strong description makes the graphic action scenes come to life, with pages in the proverbial splatter zone.

Whatever glitters, in Smith's world, is certainly not gold. He keeps it dark, and then blows out the torches, one by one.

CLAIRE RUDY FOSTER (March/April 2017)

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