

Clarion Review ★★★★☆

FANTASY

The Rock of Achill

Jim Sheehan

Newman Springs Publishing (Sep 14, 2020)

(346pp)

978-1-64801-453-6

*In the adventure novel *The Rock of Achill*, fantastic experiences change a young man, but cannot alter what makes him unique.*

In Jim Sheehan's epic novel *The Rock of Achill*, a young man who's accompanied by knights and rebels works to reclaim an ancient kingdom.

The island of Achill stands resolute off of the coast of Ireland. Achill is home to generations of herdsmen, and Donn belongs to the youngest generation. He often wanders instead of watching over his herd. But then he captures and subdues a magnificent black stallion, which belongs to an ancient bloodline. Its owner, Cathal, propositions Donn: if he can survive one voyage on Cathal's ship, he can retain the horse and earn the title of a guardian. Donn leaves behind a fledgling romance with a local girl, Bridget, and spends years battling pirates, faeries, witches, and other supernatural creatures.

Irish mythology influences each of the novel's scenes, from its poetic opening (in which Donn's father witnesses a battle between immortals and a spoken contract for the return of Ireland's champions) to later banshee attacks that beset Bridget on Achill. Cathal's ship and its eclectic crew face threats that are both ethereal and normal.

Donn—a warm, hearty lead—has wild adventures that span years and bring him to many strange locales, while at home Bridget deals with normal life, though her community is shifting toward modernity; the letters that Donn writes help to connect them, regardless of their very different experiences. Their relationship is touched by good humor, as when she mocks a simple gift in a way that leads to an affectionate nickname. Alternating chapters devote time to each of them, and their affection grows with each letter.

The story's developments are unrelenting, and engaging cliffhangers guide attention from section to section. Still, as the story progresses, the question of whether Donn and Bridget will still be compatible when they're brought back together looms. The farther that Donn ventures from home, the more the narrative becomes an epic adventure, rather than a romance. Donn's adventures are dramatic and harrowing, and Bridget's contemplative life at home balances out the action.

Conversations are marked by poetic flair and Celtic flourishes, bringing the sweet romance and hearty adventure to a head, and the narration is consistent throughout. As Donn turns back toward home at the end of his long odyssey, the promise of his reunion with Bridget is strong and satisfying.

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JOHN M. MURRAY (November 20, 2020)

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