ForeWord Reviews

FANTASY

The Stranger's Woes: The Labyrinths of Echo, Book Two
Max Frei
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Max Frei's second fantasy novel has arrived on American shores and nightstands nearly a decade after it was released in Russia. Frei has authored at least ten books in the *Stranger's Woes* universe, books that have captured the imaginations of millions of veteran fantasy fans for years but have not, until now, been available to English-language readers.

The Stranger's Woes Series follows the exploits of young protagonist Max Frei as he sleuths his way through magical mysteries of a fantastic city called Echo—which just happens to occupy an alternate universe. Max, it turns out, can hop between universes by dint of his unusual dream states, and this is how he initially winds up in Echo. (Yes, the main character shares the author's name, "Max Frei," which, aside from being a type of geranium, is also the pen name of Russian novelist Svetlana Martynchik.)

Book Two picks up, with scant introduction, where its predecessor left off, with Max in the employ of Echo's magical Minor Secret Investigative Force. Having left behind an earthly identity as a feckless, chain-smoking insomniac, Max is presently known in Echo as "the unequalled Sir Max" due to his once-latent magical prowess. The character has even been called the "anti-Harry Potter" and "Bad boy Potter" by some reviewers, yet in truth displays few flaws that would earn him such a distinction. Still, Max's witty and irreverent banter with his fellow investigators (who all drink and eat far more than seems possible) is highly entertaining.

Divided into three miniature novels, *Book Two* details Max's misadventures with outlaws, magicians, and a slew of fascinating creatures, including historian birds and toilet-obsessed generals.

Heavily reliant on dialogue for exposition and action, the volume comes in short on character development from time to time, leaving readers cold concerning the ultimate fate of the characters. Further, significant events like the placation of a powerful figure (with interdimensionally obtained Cuban cigars, no less) drift by without making an impact. These

rare dry moments occur when the dialogue details the action: we don't get to *see* the action taking place, but only get to *hear* characters experience it. At times it's like listening to a television program without watching it.

Despite these momentary lapses in crispness, *Book Two* rarely fails to engage. Safe for all ages, with only minor and quite toothless reference to sexual situations, *The Stranger's Woes: The Labyrinths of Echo, Book Two* makes a welcome addition to the body of fantasy and science fiction in the US.

Leia Menlove