

There Comes a Prophet

David Litwack

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There Comes a Prophet, a young adult novel by David Litwack, focuses on three friends—Nathaniel, Orah, and Thomas—who have grown up together in the village of Little Pond, part of a carefully controlled network of settlements overseen by the vicars of the Temple of Light. The vicars ensure that “the darkness” never returns to their lands by teaching villagers who’ve recently come of age how to maintain belief in the light among their families and friends. But there’s no joy in these teachings; those chosen come back hollow-eyed and haggard, forever changed. The “Light” always takes more from its adherents than it gives.

Thomas is selected for a teaching, to the great surprise of his friends, but returns without his happy-go-lucky personality. Nathaniel hides in the woods during a village blessing to avoid being selected for the teaching. After a day or two out of sight, his guilt overcomes his fear and he returns to Little Pond—only to learn that Orah has been taken for a teaching. Nathaniel feels compelled to rescue her, and when he’s caught in Temple City and brought before the senior clergy, he offers himself in Orah’s place. The arch vicar accepts on one condition: Nathaniel must join the clergy and undertake a journey as “an envoy of the Temple,” or Orah’s teaching will resume. He has a week to prepare for this endeavor. Nathaniel, however, has other plans.

By themselves, stories of postapocalyptic times, religious fervor, or the adventures of a “ragtag band” sent on a quest often fail to move beyond their starting points. Forging these three into one story, though, opens a wide variety of possible roads for a writer to travel. The trick is to create a deftly paced story with well-rounded characters on a journey that takes a reader along for the ride. David Litwack accomplishes this in masterful fashion.

Nathaniel is a thoughtful young man who sometimes lets his thoughts stray further than the vicars consider acceptable. Thomas is set on becoming someone special; he believes he has a destiny to fulfill. Orah is quite capable of taking care of herself and has the personality to match, which is part of why she’s attractive to Nathaniel. Her job, she decides, is to keep Nathaniel safe from himself and the vicars. Their lives in the village follow a well-worn pattern of work and play, a routine that just begs to be upended by excitement and danger.

Stories that begin as standard Western-based fantasies and turn into science fiction later on aren’t uncommon—they were once dubbed “science fantasy”—but the task of disguising the clues that let the reader know the story is more than fantasy can be a daunting one. Past masters in this area are C.J. Cherryh, Andre Norton, Gene Wolfe, and Roger Zelazny. Litwack has earned a seat at their table with *There Comes A Prophet*.

J. G. STINSON (October 18, 2012)

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