



The Dark Hand of Magic

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Sun Wolf knew he had the power of magic, but he needed a master wizard to teach him to fully use his skills. But there was no one who could do the job. When he was called upon to help old friends against the ancient wizard, he did -- thus ensuring a curse that would be executed, unless Sun Wolf could harness his own powers and find a way out....

The Dark Hand of Magic Details

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Andrea Seiffertt says

2.5 stars. This was painful to read. Just terrible thing after terrible thing with the worst of human nature winning out most of the time and exacerbating each problem. Hurting animals and children over and over. I kept thinking the end would be interesting enough to justify the awfulness (until about halfway and I decided just to finish out of stubbornness). And, no spoiler really, and she was absent for the first third of the book, but Starhawk always saves the day and calmly finds solutions to problems that scare others into complete ineffectuality- and no one seems to learn from her powers of observation and deduction, so she's really the only one ever paying attention and troubleshooting problems... So every character besides her just says "things are terrible!" and then goes on expecting things to improve and not looking for the cause or how to change it. Infuriating. Also disturbing is that Ms Hambly's idea of magic is 99% of the time about power and subjugation of others (and bringing out the worst in human nature), and only special snowflakes who either hide entirely or have Starhawk to save their sorry selves can overcome that tendency. Which, again, why, given endless possibilities of fiction writing, would you create a world that's mostly horrible and tends towards awfulness unless a bunch of children and animals die while the hero stumbles around and eventually works things out (and only because of his partner)? Teamwork is cool, and a strong female character is cool, but the rest was simply grim. Ugh.

KennyO says

While this third of three is not up to the high standard set by her writing in the first book in the Sun Wolf and Starhawk series, it still let me while away a few evenings enjoyably. Except for satisfying the curiosity I had about it before I read it, I'd have been just fine omitting it. Each of the first two volumes ended satisfyingly.

Johannes Herrmann says

The conclusion to the Sun Wolf and Starhawk trilogy. It feels quite different in a way. In the other two, there seemed to be a relatively clear path forward, even if it wasn't the correct one. In this book, the characters struggle with an unknown that causes extreme frustration for them, and a bit of a feeling of hopelessness in the reader. When things come together though, it all makes perfect sense and the clues were all there.

If anything, i'd rate this even higher than the other two. A solid ending to the trilogy, with a hint of an opening for more in the future.

Mary JL says

In Book I of this trilogy, The Ladies of Mandrigyn, it starts out with the action "over"-the mercenary troupe is celebrating a victory. In Book 2 of this trilogy, The Witches of Wenshar, it begins with an argument between Sun Wolf and a witch.

So Barbara Hambly starts the concluding book of this trilogy with a bang--Sun Wolf gets shot in the back with an arrow on page one. And we are off into Hambly's usual skilled blend of adventure and characterization. There are lots of battles and escapes and pursuits and magic duels--all well written and satisfying.

The Dark Hand of Magic also explores further growth in the character of Sun-Wolf. His old mercenary troop has asked for his help to prevent them from being killed by an enemy wizard in a siege. There is an excellent scene where the Wolf must choose between saving his former warrior friends or Starhawk's life.

Also, for the first time in his life, Sun-Wolf sees the opposite of a siege---from inside the besieged city--and suddenly realizes what had happened before to the losers in his previous battles. Intellectually he knew what happened, of course, now he has changed and matured and feels it emotionally.

Besides Sun Wolf and Starhawk, there is excellent characterization of the members of his former mercenary troop, a fleshing out of characters only briefly met in book one.

Also, well written is the character of Moggin--an odd name but a well written character--and I won't spoil it by saying more. But the scenes in which Moggin appears are among my favorite in the book. Look for him.

This is a worthy end of the trilogy and well up to Hambly's usual standards.

(I did notice, however, that she left the door open to a possible Book 4 in the ending. Barbara, are you reading this? Hint, Hint.....

Shaitarn . says

This picks up directly after the end of the previous book The Witches of Wenshar and starts straight in the action, with Sun Wolf taking an arrow in the back and facing death by ant-hill. As if that wasn't peril enough, Sun Wolf's old mercenary troop need his help. Hired to besiege a city, they've been having bad luck -- very bad luck, the sort of bad luck that only comes when a vengeful wizard is slinging curses around. Sun Wolf really doesn't need any more magic in his life, but he and Starhawk can't turn their back on their old friends now, so are forced to take a hand.

All three of the Sun Wolf and Starhawk books can be read as standalone novels, although this one is probably not the best to start off with. I would consider this the darkest of the three, and in some ways a bit of a slog as we're forced to see all the ill luck the troop are going through as they struggle back to their winter quarters -- I should perhaps point out that Hambly doesn't hide the fact that the mercenaries have done some pretty terrible things in the past while sacking a city (rape, the murder of innocents), without trying to justify or excuse them, which some readers may find uncomfortable.

But there's still plenty of action, great character building (especially Starhawk, one of the earlier kickass heroines!) and Hambly's wonderful prose, which many people will either love or hate.

4.5 stars.

Emma Deplores Goodreads Censorship says

My enjoyment of this trilogy peaked with the first book, *The Ladies of Mandrigyn*, which is fantastic. And, sadly, decreased from there. This book follows the further adventures of Sun Wolf and Starhawk, now reunited with their mercenary band, which is threatened by a mysterious magical force bent on causing every kind of catastrophe imaginable.

One of the nice things about this trilogy is that each book has a self-contained plot arc, but they also build on one another. Given all the changes in our protagonists over the last two books, a good portion of this one is spent on their renegotiating their roles within the troop, which does not make everyone happy.

Overall, this was an entertaining read, though somewhat slow going (Hambly's style is a little dense for genre fantasy) and a bit on the darker side. I enjoyed the continued story of Sun Wolf and Starhawk, but missed the great secondary cast from the previous books, especially *Mandrigyn*. Here very little personality accumulates in the secondary cast, and the mercenaries almost all felt interchangeable to me. At any rate, this is worth reading if you enjoyed the first two and happen across a copy, but you probably don't need to hunt one down to make your reading experience complete.

Marianne says

This is the third book in a series, but does a pretty good job filling in gaps, making it feel like you understand what happened before.

This book was just a lot of depressing, with a tiny ray of sunshine at the end. There's a curse, and there's a fair bit of interest in the beginning, but then maybe a third or so of the book is just a depressing cursey slog of sadness.

The wording is descriptive and nicely done, but much of the book portrays the depressing realities of war. Which, I suppose, is a nice change of pace from books idealizing horrifying experiences. I just didn't need it quite so minutely and descriptively provided, to go along with all the sad curse bits.

Valerie says

Note that this review really covers all three books in the trilogy as I read a 3 in 1 version. Sword and sorcery in the truest sense. Sun Wolfe is barbarian mercenary with his own army. After a successful season of campaigning Wolfe is kidnapped by a group of women who need his help going up against the last great wizard. Trying to escape, Wolfe accidentally undergoes the Great Trial which awakens the magic within. Meanwhile his second in command Starhawke, who secretly loves her chief, sets off on a rescue mission. This sets up the series. I wouldn't say these are the best books I've read, but it was a very entertaining series. The characters faced real problems with real consequences, and not everyone survived. Wolfe and Hawke grew as characters. My thought on finishing was that I wish there were more books in this series.

Kelley Ceccato says

Each of Barbara Hambly's "Sun Wolf and Starhawk" books involves a separate adventure, and the first one, *The Ladies of Mandrigyn*, can perhaps be read as a stand-alone. However, now that I've read all three books in the trilogy, I can see the full progress of Sun Wolf's "bildung," his discovery of his magic and his gradual progress as he figures out how to deal with it and becomes increasingly aware of its potential dangers. The series as a whole is a satisfying journey, with much to recommend it:

- 1) a vivid writing style, rich (some might even say "thick") with detail, as well as some intense interiority;
- 2) a "battle couple" who take turns rescuing each other;
- 3) plenty of action;
- 4) moral as well as physical/spiritual progress. Be warned: Sun Wolf as we find him at the beginning of the trilogy is NOT the most forward of thinkers. He has much to learn. His partner, Starhawk, is considerably more sympathetic throughout -- a very rewarding heroine.

Yet even though I recommend the series as a whole, this is my least favorite volume; the book isn't bad in itself, but for me, it doesn't reach the heights of the previous volumes. My main issues:

- 1) The first half of the book tested my patience by burying Starhawk, my favorite character, under a two-ton Distress Ball. In the earlier volumes, Starhawk is a highly competent fighter; if there's a job to do, she gets it done. Here, however, she's rendered helpless by a botched attempt at heroism, and stays that way for far too many pages (too many for my liking, at least). To be fair, she does recover, and her former badassery is restored; her efforts at heroism prove a lot more successful in the book's second half. And of course even the fiercest of heroes/heroines may need rescuing once in a while. Yet I can't help wishing Hambly had been a little quicker about getting the fighting heroine on her feet again.
- 2) The sub-theme of female friendship and solidarity, important in the first two books (the titular ladies in the first one, as well as Starhawk and Fawn; Starhawk and Tazey in the second), is missing from this one. The only important female characters besides Starhawk herself are a Machiavellian economic potentate and a scheming, narcissistic little rival, neither of whom is a friend to the heroine. The first two books pass the Bechdel Test with an A; this book squeaks by with only a D, thanks to a single conversation between Starhawk and the Machiavellian economic potentate.

Still well worth reading, but not quite as satisfying as its predecessors.

Danny says

Some really nice plot twists that made this story both surprising and enjoyable. Spent the whole time thinking we were gonna end up with our first serious female villain (even if I just thought she might have been a proxy)! I truly loved some of the aspects of the development of Sun Wolf as a character in this book. But seriously some things never change, Sun Wolf why you always gotta end up sneaking away at the end,

no happy ever after for this guy

Jonathan says

Oh Barbara, you start series so well and then as time goes by you abuse your characters.

Doris says

The main issue I had with this story is that the Wolf, supposedly a strong, fearless leader, is reduced to whiny tears when he is overcome by magic. Having been raised on stories of Conan the Barbarian, I could not help but compare the Wolf to Conan, to the detriment of Wolf. I understand that Hambly is attempting to portray a strong woman in a powerful role with the Hawk, but it became a bit much when the Hawk internalizes a dialogue about having to save the Wolf – again, and having to save the troop – again.

We do see the Wolf working to overcome the geas laid upon him, but it seems that, at least in matters of magic, he gives his trust too easily, especially for a leader of men. (view spoiler)

It took me several days to finish this story, because it dwelled too much on catastrophe and not enough on action. There was too much lamenting of woes and not enough research into the causes.

Overall I see the Hawk as weak, not because she is feminine, but because she is always jumping in to save the day.

The Wolf too is weak, because he does not think things through.

By the end of this book, I decided that I didn't like any of the characters, with the possible exception of Moggin. Although the book hinted at a possible continuation, I will not seek it out, as I have absolutely no interest in following this cast any further along their stumbling journey.

Katharine Harding says

I thought this was a great end to the trilogy, though I'd like to see Sun Wolf really getting to grips with his magic now! so it is a bit of a shame it's ended here.

I read this in Kelowna.

Scott says

For a third book this one is very strong. In this one we get to see how Sun Wolf interacts with his old troop.

My one disappointment with reading this book was the fact that this series was not continued. The world in which the characters dwell in was very fascinating, sort of a fantasy inspired version of the middle ages. Maybe someday Barbara Hambly will decide to write another Sun Wolf and Starhawk story.

Jamie Collins says

This final book of the trilogy is my favorite, perhaps because it's the first one where the relationship between Sun Wolf and Starhawk felt real. I was moved by the scene where Sun Wolf turns down a tryst with a beautiful woman - for the first time ever - because he knows that it will break what he has with Starhawk.

Plotwise: Sun Wolf's old mercenary band comes to him for help because they've been cursed by a wizard. Although he's not sure that his sympathies don't lie with the town they're trying to besiege, Sun Wolf is unable to refuse his old friends.

The book is pretty dark in places. There's enough rape and throat-cutting for a Bernard Cornwell novel.
