



Winter's Reach

Craig Schaefer

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Pope Benignus is dying, and the man who takes his throne will hold the reins of an empire. Conspiracies swirl like shadows around Livia, the pope's daughter, who refuses to be anyone's pawn: chasing the whispers of a deadly coup, she vows to expose the truth and save her church from disaster. Livia has secrets of her own, though, and one wrong move could cost her life and her soul.

Felix is the scion of a dying merchant house, a man with just one chance to save his family and the woman he loves. His last hope lies in the snowbound hell of Winter's Reach, a former prison colony turned "free city" under a brutal tyrant's reign.

Livia and Felix have never crossed paths, but they've both been snared in a far greater web than they can imagine. They -- along with a pair of veteran bounty hunters, an exiled politician, and a sadistic coven of witches -- are cogs in one man's apocalyptic plan for revenge. A plan which, if it succeeds, will leave an entire nation in flames.

Winter's Reach Details

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Author : Craig Schaefer

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From Reader Review Winter's Reach for online ebook

Jason says

4 Stars

Winter's Reach is the first book in the Revanche Cycle by Craig Schaefer. It takes place in the same universe as the other two amazing series of Schaefer's, Harmony Black and Daniel Faust. Faust is one of my favorite fictional characters and his series is also a favorite of mine. The FBI Witch series that is Harmony Black is awesome just not up to the level of the anti hero Daniel Faust.

This series centers on the pope and is much more dialed down in tone and scope. It has very minimal supernatural. The characters are all small compared with Faust and Black. Thankfully, this is still a Schaefer novel and his writing does not disappoint.

I am a huge Craig Schaefer fan and if you enjoy urban fantasy than he is an author not to be missed.

Bart says

Actual rating: 4.50

Emma says

4.5 stars. This was fantastic! It reminds me a little of Michael Sullivan's writing, where it doesn't take itself too seriously (one of the villains is called Verruca) and where it has a friendly feel. A great cast of characters- heroes and villains alike. It just misses 5 stars for me because there was nothing terribly new here. Nevertheless, very well done and very much enjoyed. Craig Schaefer proves he is a flexible author, moving from his urban fantasy Daniel Faust and Harmony Black series to a more traditional fantasy. I am thrilled to see there are several more books in this series just waiting for me. Happy days!

Esmerelda Weatherwax says

Plot:

A merchant house is dying off, and they need to save themselves. The father of the family has decided that his son, Felix, is going to marry the daughter of another house to secure their business and trade. The problem is that Felix is already in love with someone else, but she's just a bar maid and his father said he would rather Felix be dead than have him marry so low.

Felix has decided he doesn't care, and he's going to go to Winter's Reach in search of old mines that could be re-purposed and used for profit for his family. If he can do that he can secure his father and brothers future, and run away with his love and abandon his inheritance and family business.

Going to Winter's Reach is a risky business though, it's an old prison colony that formed into it's own thing – like Australia ? Scary place full of scary people, or so he's always been told.

He gets there and runs into problems, and the rest of his plotline is trying to fix things so he doesn't have to marry someone he doesn't want.

There's another grouping of characters that are bounty hunters, but they seem like decent people, especially the woman Marie. She's devout and agonizes over mistakes that have hurt people in the past, she's haunted by them and strives to do better in the future. Her relationship with her partner isn't all that it seems, and secrets pour out over the course of the book.

There's another grouping of POV's surrounding this world's pope, he has two children a son and a daughter. The son is set to rule after he passes because in this world women can't hold that kind of office. The son is inept and cruel at times, and the daughter is kind and helpful to the people. She's trying to find a way where she can be more of an influence on the world, but is finding her gender hindering.

There are lots of smaller subplots going on, but so much of this book is murder, mystery and intrigue to go into much more would be spoilery.

Characters:

Felix – a headstrong good person who just wants to marry someone he loves and run away from it all. But, he also has a strong sense of family duty, and won't run away until he can secure his family's business. He gets in over his head quickly trying to make it all work, and there are multiple forces working against him.

Marie – a quieter spiritual person who's suffered unbelievable tragedy. A war struck when the empire wanted her home land to submit to their rule, but they rebelled and suffered the consequences. There were atrocities on both sides of the war, but for a girl who witnessed her parents' gruesome deaths she has a ton of resentment for those responsible.

Vernon – Marie's partner in bounty hunting. He seems to be a decent person but as you go through the book you find out more and more of his past which turns him into a very grey character.

The owl – creeeeepppppyy fucking witch character who does unspeakable horrors to people. She murdered an entire house full of people to get to one guy, people choking as cockroaches pour out of their mouths and other horrible ways to die. She's ruthless and evil and in charge of a coven of witches.

World Building:

There's a lot going on with House politics and trading/economy. The house that Felix's father wants him to marry into is an underground crime family and the father is extremely dangerous.

There's lots of mysterious magic going on in this book, it's not explained how the Owl does what she does, it's just dark magic that's very messed up. There are bone masks that the witches wear that are illegal contraband, the Owl has been tracking these down and is searching for a book as well that holds secrets to their order.

There's a decent amount of religion in the book as well, with the Empire supporting the Mother Church who worships the Gardener. But, Marie has a different religion of the goddess of 500 faces, she believes that one

of the faces is the Gardener, but that the goddess does so much more than just garden.

Giant squids are a thing in this book, and referred to as an “elder”, it took down an entire ship.

Pacing/Prose/Tone:

This one went by pretty quickly for me, but not because it was super action filled. I just wanted to know what was going on, with so many people betraying each other and plotting against each other it was fun to see what was going to happen next.

I'd say the tone was kind of bleaker, the main character keeps getting thwarted and the consequences of failure are high on a personal level – it's not a high stakes “the world is ending” kind of book.

Audience

multi pov
murder mystery
creepy witch covens
betrayal, backstabbing and plotting
mysterious magic
slower burn without as much action
crime bosses/underground crime

Mary ~Ravager of Tomes~ says

Actual Rating: 3.5 Stars

This one is **tough** for me to rate.

On one hand I really enjoyed the feel of this novel. It immediately jumps into the action, spinning a few different perspectives that quickly weave together into a larger, very political picture.

The story doesn't try to entangle you in a complicated mess of lore or class wars, two common elements of high fantasy. Though I **adore** both of those things, I found it refreshing to read a fantasy book without an overwhelming emphasis on them.

On the other hand, I don't know that I'm entirely satisfied with the *journey* if that makes sense. I only ever felt a **vague** interest in how things unfolded, and I faded in and out of being invested in the individual story lines. I didn't discover enough about any one character to feel connected to them on a personal level.

The writing, however, was one of my favorite aspects of Winter's Reach. Schaefer's style is descriptive but concise. In fact, the **beautiful images in my head** were a huge part of my enjoyment while reading this.

I do believe some of the sexually explicit scenes in this novel were unnecessary. At times I get the feeling they're tossed into adult novels as a way to say *"This IS an adult book! Look! There's sex!! Just in case you were confused. Definitely a book for adults. *wink*"*

Also... the phrase "water is wet" was used *twice* to say something was obvious. Unfortunately I could not stop myself from thinking of the following meme...

So needless to say I may have giggled when it was inappropriate to do so.

A pretty decent book, there are definitely things to appreciate here. I'm not sure though if I will continue on. The plot picked up near the end, & I am low-key curious to see where things go from here. It's on the "Maybe" list.

XX Sarah XX (former Nefarious Breeder of Murderous Crustaceans) says

? Oooh Oooh Oooh Fantasy by Craig Schaefer Yum Yum Yum Buddy Read (OOOFbCSYYYBR™) with some of my slightly excellent BB&B colleagues ?

Friendly warning: I'm slightly excited about this book. Remember what happens when I'm slightly excited about a book? Yep, that's right, GIFs tend to attack en masse. Enjoy.

First instalment in the series. BOOM. 5 stars. Just like that.

Damn. I already worship the ground Schaefer walks on, what am I supposed to do to prove my **undying love** for him now? Wait. I think I got it. I'll turn my **Holy Trinity of Utter Awesomeness** (HToUA™) (view spoiler) into a **Holy Quadrinity of Utter Awesomeness** (HQoUA™) (view spoiler). There, problem fixed. Now on to the fangirling. Just kidding. Then again, **maybe not.**

I know, right? I'm telling you, my Little Barnacles, Hitchcock is a total amateur compared to me.

Okay, so the first thing you need to know about this book is: it's **slightly awesome** ← *this just in case you weren't paying attention. And hadn't noticed my rating. And hadn't read the previous paragraph. You're welcome.* How and why is it **slightly awesome**, you ask? Now that's a very interesting question, and I shall be more than happy to satisfy your **eager curiosity** by kindly answering it (view spoiler). Here goes.

① **Schemers and scammers and liars, oh my!**

Craig Schaefer, you make Glen Cook proud. Such glorious **backstabbing**. Such delicious **double crossing**. Conspiracies & contra-conspiracies. Treacherous everything and everyone. **Cunning stuff** galore. Foxes being outfoxed by the foxes they thought they were outfoxing while these foxes where outfoxing them. **It's beautiful.** Okay, so there's so much marvellous scheming going on here that you sometimes lose track of **who is trying to screw whom over**. But you know what? Ultimately, it doesn't matter. Because all that counts at the end of the day is that this book features one of the **Mostest Exquisitest Collection of Machiavellian, Slippery Bastards & Bitches Ever** (MECoMSB&BE™). And what do we say to that? We say YUM. **Obviously.**

② **Mostest coolest world and stuff.**

Some people have been **foolishly reluctant** to read this book because of the **blurb** and the world it depicts. I

don't want to name names here, because I am not like that and things like these are just not done, but **some people are slightly silly**, if you ask me *waves at Gavin cheerfully* Yes, it is true that this world is a bit reminiscent of **15th/16th century Italy**. What with the papacy stuff, Machiavellian everything and Italian-sounding names. And yes, it is also true that, because of this, the world isn't that original. But **who the shrimp cares?! As long as I get political machinations, blackmail, ~~fucked-up~~ slightly screwed up bloodlines, revenge, lies and delightful betrayal, I'm happy. And if I'm happy, you're happy**, right? Right.

③ **Characterization heaven and stuff.**

No wonder I **somewhat worship** Craig Schaefer. I mean, the guy is slightly talented when it comes to writing **mostest excellentest complexest characters**. Okay, so some poor Barnacles might feel kinda sorta **overwhelmed** here, because there are LOTS of characters in this story. BUT. They are ALL **mostest excellentest** and stuff, so problem solved and stuff. Besides, there's more **character variety** here than there are species at the San Diego Zoo, so I dare you to NOT find ~~ten~~ a couple of characters to your ~~liking~~ **loving** here. We've got mercenaries, bankers, popes, pirates, cardinals, bounty hunters, politicians, knight errands in disguise, confessors, sociopathic mayors, witches, barmaids, priests, assassins, spies, urchins...Aka **every single character you've ever dreamed of reading about**, right? Right. I know you so well, my Little Barnacles.

④ The **Awesome Guuuuurl Power Display** (AGPD™) .

Craig Schaefer. The only male author (along with Glen Cook I Worship Thee, of course) who **truly knows** how to write amazing female characters. Let me tell you, my Little Arthropods, **the guy's got the whole guuuuurl power thing figured out**. Okay, so I already knew that before reading this book, because, you know, Caitlin rocks and stuff. But I have to admit that **Schaefer's Super Duper Revanche Chick Clique** (SSDRCC™) is more than I could ever dream of finding in a book written by a ~~lowly~~ male (no offense to my Manly Barnacles). These gals are **so yummy** I'm kidnapping all of them and locking them away in my Cool Chicks Harem. **Poof! Gone!** One of them will get the special **High Security treatment**, too. Ah, Veruca...I think I might ~~be totally in love~~ have a **certain fondness** for you. You're batshit crazy, merciless, homicidal, and rule over a nation of criminals. Sounds to me like we're a **match made in heaven**.

But you know what makes the SSDRCC™ **really wondrous**? No matter how tough as nails, delightfully ruthless, beautifully devious and/or splendidly unhinged these babes are, they also have **weaknesses**. They can be fragile. They are not ALL badass ALL the time. They are delectably **flawed**, and that makes them feel **real**. And that, my Lovely Decapods, is **bloody shrimping cool**. Let's dance.

This ↑↑ officially marks the end of the Deadly GIF Attack (DGA™). You're welcome.

» And the moral of this **It Took me so Long to Write this Crappy Non Review I Now Have Great Great Great Grandchildren Crappy Non Review** (ITmsLtWtCNRINHGGGGCNR™) is: I have the best father in law ever. What do you mean this has **nothing to do** with this book? Of course it does! What? You didn't know Craig Schaefer was my father in law? I forget **how clueless** you sometimes are, my Little Barnacles. Craig Schaefer is MY **Daniel Faust's** beloved daddy; ergo, he is my slightly awesome father in law. **Ha**.

(view spoiler)

🔪 **Book 2:** The Instruments of Control ★★★★★

🔪 **Book 3:** Terms of Surrender ★★★★★

🔪 **Book 4:** Queen of the Night ★★★★★

Lukasz says

Craig Schaeffer is mostly known for the Daniel Faust series, however he's also written dark fantasy series that starts with Winter's Reach. The book participates in this year's SPFBO.

Story follows a young nobleman - Felix Rossini who, against his father's advice, plans to go to Winter's Reach to make a deal to secure his family's wealth and position. His father wants to achieve the same goal other way – by marrying him to a daughter of powerful banker. Thing is, Felix already has a loved one, albeit not from his social class. With enough money though forced marriage may be avoided. The problem is that Winter's Reach is controlled by barbaric criminals controlled by cruel Mayor Veruca Barrett.

That's the first plot but there's more plot lines that start to intersect later in the book.

An ageing Pope is dying. His only son - a natural successor - is a gambler and drunkard. And in church there are at least few divided factions. Some are really power hungry and prepared to do anything to win.

Elsewhere two bounty hunters with troubled past go to Winter's Reach as well. They're supposed to bring important figure to safety. But thins are often more complicated than they seem.

There are few more plotlines – some political, some focused on vengeance and one focuses on faith and witchcraft. Let me tease that pope's only daughter will be exposed to witchcraft – in what way? You'll have to read the book to know that.

The novel immediately jumps into the action. The pacing is excellent and different perspectives soon start to weave together into larger picture. Even though the book isn't very long, there's plenty of interesting characters. There's Felix, pope's daughter Livia, a villainous banker, a witch, a psychotic killer who has quotable lines:

Simon Koertig took no pleasure from the act of murder.

That wasn't true, exactly. He took tremendous pleasure from the art of murder. Of honing his skills, refining his craft, pursuing his quarry, and staging their perfect and elegant demise. Some murders were quick and brutally simple, others long and drawn-out affairs, but they were all handcrafted and beautiful acts. The relationship between executioner and victim, he believed, was more sacred than the bond between lovers.

I must admit I don't particularly like Felix as a character. Maybe he'll grow on me if I decide to read sequels. I really enjoyed Simon's perspective – he's a total psycho, but he's written in a great way. I think Livia and Mari are interesting. Also I'm really interested in Owl plotline. She's a witch. She can be cruel but I believe there's much more to her than that.

The tone of the book changes a lot. I would say in the beginning it feels rather hopeful. But just for a while. Soon things turn bad for many characters. There's violence, murder, double-crossing. Near the end blood flows from the pages. There are two graphic sex scenes and quite a bit of cruelty. So be prepared.

The prose is concise and flows effortlessly making this book really fast read. I finished it in one day. Why then I gave it only 3.9/5 you may ask?

Well, there are some issues. First Italian-esque names can be confusing. Taking notes may be indicated to follow the plot. That's part of the lore though and as such it's not really a problem. The main thing is the book is unsatisfying as a standalone novel. It's first book in finished series and can be treated as great introduction to the world. Sadly it can't be read as a standalone. The ending is simply unsatisfying and most plotlines remain open. It's fine when you plan to read all the books. If however you're not sure and expect some kind of closure, you won't find it here. I prefer series in which each installment offers some satisfying closure, even if it finishes with cliffhanger. Here though, while we don't have a strong cliffhanger, most plots remain open. I guess readers should be compelled to pick up the second volume *The Instruments Of Control*.

While I really enjoyed the book I don't feel the urge to pick up next installment right now. I guess I'll do that in the future but for today I'll start another book from this year's SPFBO.

Rob Hayes says

Actual rating 3.5 stars.

Winter's Reach is the first book in the *Revanche Cycle* by Craig Schaefer. It is also one of the #SPFBO 2017 (Self Published Fantasy Blog Off) contestants in Fantasy Book Review's group... that is to say, in the same group as *Where Loyalties Lie*. That's right! I'm checking out my direct competition, but I do so on the recommendation of a couple of trusted bloggers who assured me I would enjoy it.

Winter's Reach follows a whole bunch of characters as they either plot to undermine a regime, plot to stabilise a regime, plot to bring their families bank balance back to the black, plot to do witchy things, plot to start a war, or plot to make a bit of easy cash. Yup, this book is plots on top of plots on top of schemes. Everyone has an angle, everyone has secrets, and everyone wants something. In some ways it's a bit like *Game of Thrones* in that there are tons of characters to follow and each one is some kind of bastard or another. Well, all except Felix the erstwhile nobleman, and Mari the knight aspirant. I don't think those two have a bastard bone to share between them.

The title (*Winter's Reach*) refers to a town up north in the arse end of cold nowhere. It's an interesting concept of a ex slave colony turned free city and it's run by a woman who seems very much like a mistress from a wild west town... only with more knives up her skirts. Unfortunately it barely features in the story. It's a kick off point for Felix Nobleman's quest to save his family coffers, but by about a third of the way in we've left the city never to return. It was a bit of a shame in many ways as I thought there could have been a lot more said about the town and its shaky politics.

The book has some real stand out scenes. One of these is early on and features a sea monster ripping a ship apart as the people on board attempt to flee through frozen waters to reach the relative safety of frozen tundra. It's a really tense scene full of vivid imagery, and saved what was a fairly slow first quarter.

I struggled a little with the number of characters whose PoV (point of view) we ride along with. There are about a dozen, and it's not exactly a long book. I kept finding myself having to remember who a certain character was because we left them behind a long time ago and suddenly we're back in their head. This large number of characters also meant we didn't get to spend too long with each one, so I struggled to connect with many of them. They were well fleshed out with aspirations and motives, but it felt like a bit of a whirlwind of PoVs and it rarely stopped on any one of them long enough for my liking. That being said, it's a complicated plot so most of those PoVs were required. There was also a measure of head-hopping going on throughout chapters and as a personal taste, I really dislike head-hopping.

One last thing I do want to mention is the witches. I'm a fairly big fan of witches done well and they definitely are in *Winter's Reach*. They operate in a coven of sorts that stretches far and wide. Each witch takes on an animal name and wears a mask depicting the face of that animal. Their magic too is a cool concept that seems to be focused through blood (and occasionally other bodily fluids). And one witch in particular, who we come to know as Owl, is a wonderfully dangerous character as intriguing as she is terrifying.

This all boils down to me really quite enjoying *Winter's Reach*, but finding some flaws which kept me from loving it. I'm giving it 3.5 stars and rounding up to 4 for the purposes of Goodreads and Amazon.

James Lafayette Tivendale says

Winter's Reach is Craig Schaefer's entry for this year's Self Published Fantasy Blog Off and is Fantasy Book Review's first semi-finalist. Although he is mostly known for the Daniel Faust series, this is Schaefer's foray into writing complex dark fantasy.

It starts by following a young nobleman called Felix who has a plan to go to *Winter's Reach* to make a deal to save his family's dwindling reputation. The problem is that *Winter's Reach* is controlled by barbaric criminals under the guiding hand of the notorious Mayor, Veruca Barrett. Making this deal might not be so straightforward. Against his father's advice, he goes through with the trip but, perhaps he has another motive for venturing to the infamous, blisteringly chaotic city.

Elsewhere, an ageing but thoroughly loved Pope is close to death. His son is a gambler, drunk and maybe unfit to succeed. This leads to political unrest, doubt, plots, divided factions, and evidently a great number of betrayals within the Church. Throughout this side of events the Italian-esque names of the Cardinals and the Council can be slightly confusing so I took a few notes and was fine.

This book's greatest asset is its brilliantly created characters. We are presented with such a wide, complex bunch and I didn't think there was one weak point of view perspective. The main people we follow are Felix, a pair of bounty hunters, a Cardinal, a villainous banker, and the Pope's daughter who is flirting with certain ancient arts which she really should not be doing. I analysed two types of characters in *Winter's Reach*. Firstly, those who change dramatically throughout the book due to the horrors of the world. Secondly, those individuals who are aware this world is a vile and corrupt place. The latter people don't change too much throughout yet we receive snippets from their past creating a truly three-dimensional world. The mixture of these types makes for great drama. My favourite characters were Felix, Armadeo and Mari. Notable mentions go to the assassin, Simon and to Veruca. She reminded me of a Batman villain, however, definitely not the kind from the comedy series.

From the beginning, it truly shines how well written this book is. It seems edited brilliantly and the narrative has an addictive pace that kept me engrossed, essentially being the reason why I finished this in 24-hours. The world building and descriptions aren't over the top or too detailed but for a character and plot focused book that isn't an issue. The descriptions of the environments and the cast are still deep though just not 10-pages worth when I would do, unlike some modern fantasy. Every character and event I had a perfectly painted picture of in my mind. The prose is fluid and poetic and surprisingly in fiction these days, I didn't notice a single spelling or grammatical error.

The book starts off quite hopeful with a few likeable characters in the first couple of chapters. Things don't stay that way for long. Although not Grimdark, this is still quite macabre. Mutilation, brutal murders, double-crossing, ginormous sea beasts and all the other good stuff those people who ride on the darker side of fantasy enjoy. The mask-wearing dark religious cult is extremely interesting, haunting and sometimes brutal. Towards the end of the story, I had no idea who was helping who and who was trustworthy and it was great. This book is the first of 4 completed stories in the Revanche Cycle saga. The finale here is pretty great but don't expect closure. It sets the sides and leads to a few gems of what may happen in The Instruments of Control. To conclude, a stunning dark fantasy narrative with all the double-crossing, deceit, blackmail and political chaos you could hope for. A great find in my #SPFBO group. It will take something truly stunning to beat this. Note- I'm pretty sure all 4 of these books cost a combined total of £8.00 on Amazon.

If you aren't familiar with the contest then check out this link
<http://mark---lawrence.blogspot.co.uk...>

Sh3lly (grumpybookgrrrl.com) says

Craig Schaefer is officially going on my "awesome authors" shelf. I have now read the first three Daniel Faust books, plus this one. I might have even liked this better than the Faust series!

Where Daniel Faust is urban fantasy involving demons and magic/sorcery, this is ALL political intrigue, betrayal, lots of plotting, revenge, knights in armor, swords, peasants and nobles. Think Game of Thrones, but not as wordy.

I love that about Schaefer's writing. It's succinct. I hate long descriptions and meandering filler. He gets right to the point; there is a lot of action and great dialogue and pacing!

This story involves MANY different characters who are either part of a corrupt religious government - or working against it. I really got into all the characters. There are several plots with mercenaries, a sociopathic mayor of a nation made up of criminals (I want more Veruca!), powerful witches and their apprentices, star-crossed lovers, ruthless sons of dead politicians, etc.

I highly recommend this book and will definitely be reading the next one!!

Buddy read with the Buddies Books and Baubles group. I'm starting late, but hey, that's the way I roll these days.

Gavin says

I'm a massive fan of Craig Schaefer's UF books. Both the Daniel Faust and Harmony Black series are fantastic! The blurb for this is a bit crappy sounding so I was hesitant to pick it up for a while but that was definitely a mistake as this was a good fantasy story.

This was a dark fantasy filled with a great mix of intrigue, action, and mystery. Schaefer switched from the familiar first person, single POV, narrative of his UF books to a third person multi-POV writing style. I'm generally fine with either writing style and can see why Schaefer chose to go with the third person style for this story as it let us keep track of a ton of different characters and that added a ton of depth to the story. The problem was I know Schaefer can write better in the first person than the third! I feel like the third person style created a distance from the characters in Winter's Reach that is not present in Schaefer's UF books and also limited his ability to deliver humor in the story.

The fantasy world was a fun one. It was reminiscent of an alternate Italy. Pope Benignus is on the verge of death and all around him people are scheming to be next in line for the spot! It was not just the clergy in on the plotting as the wealthy nobility all had intrigues of their own going on to take advantage of the situation and even the Emperor had an interest in the outcome. The focus of the story was definitely on intrigue but we got enough personal stories thrown into the mix to give the story plenty of depth. There was also a focus on witchcraft which was the magic of the world.

I loved the story a lot! Schaefer has a super engaging writing style and Winter's Reach was packed with interesting characters and a great plot. The villains were a crazy bunch but they always had believable motivations for their actions as did the "good guys" be they hero or anti-hero. I think the villains were a fantastic and interesting bunch and every bit as good as the villains in Schaefer's other series. The same goes for the morally grey characters who land somewhere between hero and villain. The problem in Winter's Reach for me was the lack of likeable characters. It was not a problem in the early stages as we had Felix, Livia, and Amadeo to root for. The problem developed in the second half of the story when both Felix and Livia took a turn for the worse. That left Amadeo as the only truly likeable character in the story and he was just not enough on his own. It upset the balance of the story for me and left me feeling like this tale was lacking characters I could truly emotionally invest in and as a result the tone felt overly bleak and nihilistic at times. Likeable or not the one thing Schaefer did get spot on was that the story was always interesting and exciting. The villains were fun to follow as were the anti-heros. I just wish we had a few characters that I could like to make the story even better!

A few of the more brutal twists and turns caught me by surprise probably did just leave the tone a little dark and bleak for my liking but I do not feel like it was over the top dark so it was still just on the acceptable side of things.

I liked this overall as it had a lot of good things going for it. The world was good, the story was fun, the characters were a crazy bunch, and Schaefer's writing is as super engaging as always. I just feel like this could have been a fantastic 5 star read with a few tiny tweaks that would have gave the story a better balance.

Rating: 3.5 stars. This feels a super harsh rating but that is what happens when I start of loving something and then feel it takes a turn for the worse as the story develops. It always leaves me extra disappointed!

Audio Note: Susanna Jones did a decent job with the audio. Her character voices were good and she had a

good general narration voice as well. I'm not sure if this series just lacks the humor of Schaefer's UF series or if it just seemed that way as Jones did not deliver any of it as well as Traister and Verner so it seemed that way.

Nafeeza says

3.5 Stars

Kira says

Epic fantasies are not my favorite. Unlike most epic fantasies, this wasn't weighed down with overly complex world building, which made it easier to get into. It did have a lot of characters, but not so many that it was hard to keep track of who they were and how they were related. However it didn't grab me from the start. I had tried to read this 3 other times and never got more than a few chapters in. I'm not sure why it interested me this time. Maybe I needed to be in the right mood for it.

The pope is dying and wants his worthless son to take over when he dies. The other clergymen weren't blind to the son's faults and knew letting him be in charge would be disastrous. Many other powerful men and ones wanting to get more power were taking advantage of the situation in the church and playing their own manipulative games.

I didn't love any of the characters. Some are definitely better than others, but I have the feeling we've only scratched the surface in regards to what these characters are capable of. It doesn't appear that this is a series with clearly defined good and bad guys; these people have varying shades of gray. I am curious to see how all of this plays out because knowing Craig Schaefer, things are bound to take a few unexpected turns.

Mihir says

Full review over at [Fantasy Book Critic](#)

ANALYSIS: This is the first volume of the Revanche cycle and is set in a world that's very reminiscent of medieval Italy. The story features a multitude of POVs and is an epic fantasy that slowly introduces the world and magic system. One of the first POV characters we come across is Felix Rossini who is the second scion of a house in financial tatters. Felix has plans to rescue his house's worth and fortunes however he has to be taciturn as he has a secret worth protecting. The next POVs are Werner Holst and Mari Renault, a pair of mercenaries who are horrified by their last job, which resulted in the burning of an (alleged) teenage witch.

Lodovico Marchetti is a merchant lord who is planning quite a few things in the city of Mirenze and has things in motion that will unsettle things across the lands. Simon Koertig is his accountant who also doubles up as an assassin who likes to kill in numerous ways. Amadeo Lagorio is a priest who serves as confidant and confessor to the dying Pope Benignus. Lastly there's Livia who is the first born papal child who is forced to abandon her leadership credentials simply because of the patriarchal society.

These are the major POV characters and there are a few more introduced but basically the plot hinges around the actions of the afore-mentioned characters as well as the plot twists that have been set by the author. The primary draw of the story is the strong characterization, beginning with both male and female characters, as well as the antagonists and protagonists. The author absolutely nails down these characters and as each chapter focuses upon a new one we get a very multi-faceted view of the world within. This approach was very reminiscent of George R.R. Martin's ASOIAF, while Craig Schaefer cannot claim the same high level prose, he does emulate GRRM's ability to make the reader invested in the POV of the character they are currently reading.

My favorite characters were Mari, Livia, Felix and Simon. Mari is a person suffering from a severe form of PTSD due to her family dying in a horrible manner. Livia bristles against the patriarchal traps set by the society and is forced to watch her father's crown pass on to her drunken sot of a brother. Felix is an honest person forced to take gargantuan risks to save his family, marry the love of his life and possibly make the Rossinni clan a successful one again. Lastly there's also Simon who while being a murderer is very intriguing with his narrow-minded focus and multi-variate ways to kill people. These characters and others truly make the story that much more shining. I thoroughly enjoyed this aspect of the story wherein we truly get a 360-degree view into the happenings of the story.

The next positive factor is the top-notch plot pace as frequently we end a chapter and the next chapter easily shifts the focus on to a new person thereby amping up the tension as well as intrigue. The overall plot while seemingly predictable has plenty of plot twists to keep readers guessing and ultimately take quite an unorthodox route to the climax. I enjoyed how the author explored the various roles especially vis-a-vis the female characters stuck in a patriarchal society. Both Livia and Mari are quite fierce, capable characters who strive to make the best of their sordid situations. I believe the author has special plans for both of them and I'm very excited to see what arcs they end up taking.

While expecting a medieval epic fantasy, the author certainly undercuts expectations by providing a very fast-paced character driven story that while being fantasy has magic in very small amounts (This was very GRRM-esque). Of course there are hints provided about the true nature of the world, also there's a fantastic sequence over water that features a creature that is sure to provide terrify readers. Also there's a certain sound associated with the creature and I can't wait to read how the author imagines it to be.

The storyline is also not without its flaws, the background history of the world isn't really explored and only hints are strewn through. The magic system also seems to be a tad confusing and I hope the author shines a light on it in the sequel volumes. Lastly as with any fantasy series, a map is always a plus. This series doesn't have one and as a cartophile, I was disappointed.

CONCLUSION: Overall this story ends on a strong note and leaves almost all characters in certain places because of which readers will be compelled to pick up the second volume *The Instruments Of Control*. I believe this is book one on a series of four books and I started reading the second book almost immediately after I finished this one. Winter' Reach is the start of a fascinating political fantasy that will be sure to find its fans. Make sure you grab a copy and enjoy Craig Schaefer's magnificent skills.

Elena says

► Guess who said

As a writer and a feminist, positive representation is really important to me. Note that “positive” doesn’t mean “only positive character traits.” I don’t set out to create flawless, all-powerful Mary Sues, because that’s just as bad as wilting damsels in distress; both reduce female characters down to playing pieces and plot coupons. God save us from “kick-ass heroines” whose entire personality is 1) spunky/snarky and 2) they know kung fu, which is often exactly what Hollywood foists off on us.

and

My aim [...] is to write female characters with authentic voices, inner lives, strengths and flaws. Which is really the standard we should all expect of any character of any gender, in all of our media, so the simple fact that it’s notable proves why it’s so important. It shouldn’t be extraordinary, it should be the baseline.

Craig Schaefer, ladies and gentlemen, **that's who**. During a Q&A with our very own Sh3lly for the MacHalo Blog: go read the whole thing, I promise it's worth your time.

So anyway: long story short, the MacHalos, utterly overwhelmed by the man's sheer awesomeness, set out to read his entire bibliography, starting with the **Revanche Cycle** (since Schaefer said that it's his favorite).

And true to the author's words, **Winter's Reach** is densely populated by female characters: nuns, assassins, witches, city majors, cooks, aristocrats, barmaids, bounty hunters, street urchins; mothers and daughters, single women and women in love; some of them swore an oath of celibacy while some others live their sexuality freely; some scheme to overthrow an enemy, some fight to maintain the power and others live by a strict code of honor or dream of a simple, happy life; some play the violin while others commit gruesome murders or secretly help those in need; some are young, some are old; some are attractive, some aren't. All of them are complex, three dimensional characters, indefinable by just *that one* adjective. It's bizarre, really: it's like Schaefer is under the impression that women are people and they represent, say, (more than) half of the world population.

The male characters are, obviously, no less intriguing and the plot won't let you catch your breath for a second. So you think you've spotted the bad guy? That you figured out what a certain character's end game is? That you saw the danger coming? **Think again**. Schaefer doesn't do baddies *à la* Marvel: you won't find villains dead set on destroying the world for the sake of being evil assholes here. And he doesn't do naive "good guys" that see a trap closing in on them 547 pages after you did, either. What the author does is crafting believable characters with multifaceted personalities, each of them with wants and desires of their own and a wide variety of means to get to their goals.

The backdrop is a world that closely resembles that of Italy from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance (I'd like to brag about how I immediately spotted the similarities thanks to my studies but I'll be honest here: the fact that Schaefer's main city-state is called *Mirenze*, the papacy and the Church and the Italian names of most of the characters were kind of obvious giveaways) with the added bonus of witchcraft (the truly nightmarish kind: the sequence where we first get to meet part of the coven is a cross between a gothic

horror movie, a torture porn and a home invasion - simply terrifying), sea monsters and prophetic dreams.

So the one pressing question that comes to mind after reading *Winter's Reach* is: how come this book has only 406 ratings and 47 reviews on Goodreads? **Go read it, you guys.** Like, really.
