



The Blade of Ahtol

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Alternate Cover edition

Since Llian wandered and Aerluin was lost, evil has steadily crept across the lands, building itself to conquer all of Aeredia. The pickpocket, Firah, joined by her burly patron, Tohm, a bartender; Zyr, a monk shrouded in layers of mystery; and Shien, an expelled patriot seeking heirlooms stolen from his family, venture out and soon find themselves thrust together and targets of the spreading evil. They attempt to flee, only to be doggedly pursued by their enemy and even by their allies. When they also become afflicted with madness, possession and power they cannot control, how can Firah and her companions survive to save their world and Aerluin?

Sapling: The Blade of Ahtol is set in a world of conflicting magic, where demons possess humans, and monsters enslave farmers and villagers. Factions clash in their struggle for control and in all of this is a violent race to find someone to embody the growing evil or the essence of Aerluin. In the midst of this turmoil, Firah is a sensitive; she is attuned to the patterns of energy moving through Aeredia, making her a receptacle for good and evil. Her sensitivity makes her trackable and constantly dogged by those who would possess her. In a world where loyalties shift and alliances and adversaries switch, any move, even flight, is dangerous.

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The Blade of Ahtol Details

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From Reader Review The Blade of Ahtol for online ebook

Matt Cowper says

Firah, the thief with untapped powers – Zyr, the spell-weaving monk who must protect her – Tohm, the burly, gregarious barkeep who serves as a father figure to Firah – Shien, the lone wolf warrior who seeks a new purpose – all thrown together in a battle against rampaging dark forces. A fairly typical fantasy novel plot on the surface, but there were enough fresh ideas in the story to keep it from being another predictable “we must defeat this vile evil” tale.

The characters are all interesting, mainly because they change – sometimes significantly – throughout the novel. Tohm is no longer gregarious by novel's end, and we learn that beneath Zyr's monkish calm broils passion, regret, and determination. Other characters pop in – with their own viewpoints – and they're just as fleshed out as the main characters.

The novel moves along at a good clip. Gillis doesn't bog us down with unnecessary details; he sets the scene, then lets the story flow. I'm irked by authors who feel they need to describe every blade of grass in the forest their characters are trekking through – Gillis thankfully isn't one of these. His prose is impressive, with very little repetition, cliches, or perplexing phrasing.

The battle scenes are the highlights of the novel – and there are a lot of them. The fights are fluid, with varying tactics or magical powers used based on the specific situation or the character's abilities. These weren't Lord of the Rings-style one-sided beatdowns (I'm mainly thinking of the movies), where the core characters massacre dozens of enemies apiece in every battle. I felt like the characters in “Blade of Ahtol” were in serious danger throughout the story, despite their powers or sword-fighting prowess.

There are several flaws that prevent me from giving this five stars, however. One, the point-of-view shifting could've been handled more skillfully. By the end of the novel, I was sort of used to it, but I think a disciplined Game of Thrones-style structure, where chapters alternate between characters, would've kept things from getting muddled. Gillis has a tendency to jump around different points-of-view before we really get settled into a specific character's thought processes. He also uses omniscient narration sometimes, and gives POV to questionable characters – one of them dies by the end, without us learning much about him, for example.

The ending was also lackluster. Zyr confronts his past, but the encounters are confusing and don't have the emotional resonance I anticipated after all the strife and sorrow. I also can't figure out what exactly the goal of this little party is. Firah is the key, it seems, except Zyr's odd “bargaining” with Nuril appears to give the good guys a respite? There were numerous things in the story that could've been clarified in a paragraph or two, instead of just left there to dangle.

Book Two should be just as exciting, and I hope Gillis polishes up his manuscript so everything is clear and the point-of-view shifting doesn't vex the reader. There are plenty of fantastic ideas here – oh, did I mention this novel has a glossary and several illustrations? – but some work needs to be done on the technical aspects of novel-writing (formatting, POV, etc.) to really make this series awesome.

Bibliophile Johnson says

Sapling, The Blade of Ahtol is an epic tale in the world of Aeredia that combines all the wonderful elements of fantasy into an exciting novel. There is a nice blend of magic, battles and mystery that kept me burning through the pages to find what would happen to Firah and Zyr, and how all the characters and elements would come together. I was impressed that Gillis could eloquently write about forces of good and evil intermixed within his characters, making them realistic and relatable despite all their underlying skills and powers. He is also skilled at using flashbacks to paint the story and fill in the gaps that I found myself curious about as the book progresses. This is a well-written adventurous saga for any fantasy reader.

E.J. Bennett says

I liked this story. The jump in time lines did get confusing at times but not too much so. It was well written and the Characters were well built. A great read.

Anna Fantabulous says

In The Lord of the Rings, everyone is after The Ring - a ring that has the power to rule the world, whose bearer cannot be defeated and which sucks the life out of anyone who does not yield to its evil power. The unlikely heroes in Tolkien's sweeping dark adventure are the tiny Frodo and his other hobbit friends, who neither have the training nor the expertise to fight the forces of evil searching for them across villages and mountains to get their hands on the ring.

Something like this happens in Gillis' Sapling: The Blade of Ahtol. A small-time thief Firah lives in the town Lenhir situated in the Mehnin province of country called Kenhar (all detailed in a cute map at the beginning of the book). Her only friend is the father-figure Tohm, a pub owner. A bird gives her a stone, the blade of the demon Dark Lord Ahtol. She doesn't know that it is a cursed object and accompanies Tohm and the mysterious Zyr on a journey across town. They are attacked by fourteen people. It looks like she has something everyone wants.

Chief amongst the villains is Lady Nuril who believes she can control demon Ahtol once it is resurrected.

It would do well to readers to begin the book by reading the Glossary first.

Gillis has done the graphics himself, which shows what imagination and talent he has.

I received a free pdf of the book in exchange for a fair, unbiased and non-reciprocal review.

Joe Jackson says

This is a solid opening in a fantasy series that does a few things exceptionally well. Its characters are well-fleshed out, both from current dialogue and flashbacks used expertly. The world, though small on the map,

still feels big and full of mystery. And the major threads, while not all resolved in this opening act, are real and alarming.

There are some strange points in the story as well, such as Tohm's descent into bestial "madness," and the curiosity of his relationship with Firah. These are things, however, that if taken at face value, don't detract from the story or take over the story in their curiosity. They are things that will likely be better fleshed out as the series progresses, and give readers something else to wonder about in the grand scheme.

The one thing I found truly puzzling is that the Defilers, who seem to be universally reviled, make little effort to conceal themselves. Sure, their agents go out and work at night, but they have the name of a demon in the name of their cadre, and there's little mystery to who and what these people are all about. But, as we know from real life events, oftentimes the greater populace is happy to ignore what's obvious in the hopes it will pass them by.

Overall, a very solid 4.5 Stars, rounded up. The writing is good and flows well, the characters are pretty easy to identify with, and their struggles are sympathetic, even those of some of the villains.

Ed Ashford says

If you like fantasy books that are packed with description and have an almost flowery style to the prose, then this is the book for you. This book reminded me in some ways of The Lord of the Rings, so if that's your cup of tea, you'll probably enjoy the way this book was written.

Personally, I felt like the sapling metaphors at the end of each chapter were a little awkward. It always coincided with what had already happened in the chapter, so I felt like the author was trying to explicitly spell out for me what I was supposed to have gotten out of the chapter. I would have much more enjoyed them as openings to chapters rather than closings, and I don't think it would have spoiled what was going to happen in the chapter, since they were such short little symbolic snippets.

I also really grew to love the characters in this. They had strong energy. Sometimes it got a little hard for me to keep track, especially as more and more kept getting introduced, but it was manageable after a while. They seemed a little typecast according to the standards of the genre, but it wasn't as blatant as it could have been.

Overall, this was an enjoyable read. It was a little wordy/heady for me, but I'm not going to subtract stars for that because I know some people in the genre prefer that style. I voluntarily reviewed an Advance Reader Copy of this book.

Shari Branning says

The Sapling. So, I'm thinking if you're a fan of Tolkien's Silmarillion, then there's a good chance you will appreciate this style of storytelling. It kinda has that same vibe. Eloquent and aloof, with a richly in-depth story world. Unfortunately, even though I'm a huge LOTR fan, Silmarillion was a miss for me, which means that Sapling was as well.

So, the things I did like about it.

The concept. It's not super original maybe, with cursed weapons, magic weapons, a band of companions travelling and fighting together, each dysfunctional in their own way, but defending and caring for one another greatly. I liked the way the magic system is portrayed-- complex, nature-bound but also supernatural. A lot of thought and development went into creating Sapling's mythology, and I can appreciate the amount of effort and world building that go into putting in those layers. I liked Shien's character, and thought it was a nice fit for the type of adventure here. He's slightly villainous when we meet him, consumed with his own quest, yet still jumps into to save a stranger, and he grows to care about the other members of the ragtag little band. I really liked the banter between him and Firah, and the love-hate relationship that they fall into.

The things I didn't like so much.

The writing style. While the surface eloquence might appeal to hard-core, old-school epic fantasy lovers, it majorly crosses the line into passive voice, making the narrative sound like it's constantly tripping over itself, and keeping both the action and the characters distant-- held at arms' length, without any sense of immediacy or clarity, or sympathy. Like an old fairytale retelling. I had a hard time visualizing what was happening. The overall narrative had that same feel, not just the way it reads, line by line. There were quite a few parts that were confusing. With a LOT of changes in viewpoint and flashbacks to earlier timelines, the fact that the author seemed to always withhold names and other critical information, apparently in an effort to evoke a sense of mystique, really, REALLY didn't work. There were times when I would have no idea who or what a scene was about until several paragraphs or pages in, because there were pronouns and adjectives used in place of specific names and details. 'The young girl,' or "the (insert one of dozens of made-up fantasy words here) priest," would often be all you'd get. And I'm like, ok, am I supposed to guess? Is this someone new? Is this one of the main characters? And that did not, in fact, add that touch of mystery. There was also a LOT of backstory. SO MUCH backstory. Is it relevant to the sequel? Don't know. I hope so. But from what I could tell, a few sentences or paragraphs could have taken care of the few things I might have needed to know, without bringing the story to a halt for pages (and chapters!) at a time.

One more thing that really bothered me, and kind of went a long way toward keeping me from liking most of the characters-- the scene early on in the book where young Firah gets spanked by her only friend (and pseudo father-figure). She's seventeen years old. And there was literally no sane reason for it. I mean, no person in their right mind would make an excuse to spank a seventeen year old girl for the reason given. No one should be spanking a seventeen year old to begin with. Especially a girl. WHY???? That's not corporal punishment, it's sexual assault. Not that it's played that way in the book, but that's what literally every modern reader, who isn't a pervert, is going to get out of that, and if you're not writing for modern readers, then I'd sure like to know who the target audience is. Not only the character who does it, but Firah's reaction to it. She's not outraged, or violated, or even really angry. Like, she's cool with it. At that point, I pretty much lost it, and couldn't take the characters seriously at all. Just... What? But it wasn't JUST that scene. The characters' reactions seemed skewed throughout the book. A bit puppet-y, I guess? Not anything horrible (beyond the spanking)-- just enough that they didn't ring true. At least for me.

Oh well, this one wasn't for me, but that's fine. if you enjoy old-style, flowery prose, classic fantasy fare, and possessed daggers, and can shrug off a few glitches, then you'll probably get a kick out of this.

Alex Vrettos says

This is a classic fantasy adventure that promises far more to come. Don't only judge this book by its cover and title which I feel is a little weak compared to the book's contents. The story moves quickly using some very likeable characters each of whom finds a weird and wonderful rabbit hole of their very own down

which to fall as their adventure deepens. The world is built on an interesting mythological foundation which I found slightly confusing but both original and creative. The violence is not gratuitous and flows well using both swordplay and magic as weapons and the interludes of battle pace the rest of the story development well. For those who like intricate magic systems, you will find the beginning of something interesting here, but I feel it could have been described clearer or it is deliberately under developed with plans to explore it on more detail as the story develops – I was not sure which. We start the story with one character who is clearly the main focus but as the story continues we realise that the cast is clearly an ensemble however I felt this initial main character who we had learnt to root for became somewhat ancillary towards the end and was almost forgotten during the concluding action which was a little disappointing. Over all the book is written in an easy going style and mostly easy to read except for a few pockets of confusion and the fact the POV kept drifting from character to character without warning which put me off a little. The action sequences and characters are columns of strength that hold the story aloft though and so I would recommend this to any fans of high fantasy and have a feeling it is going to develop into something quite epic.

Christian Nadeau says

Sapling: the Blade of Ahtol starts in a classic fantasy way. You've got the orphan with great untapped potential, the innkeeper with a past along with a stranger that is more than he seems passing through town which tags along. A simple premise; the same as many fantasy stories published over the years. Where some of those tales later brought magic to life, for me, the weeds of darkness strangled that sapling.

First, I have to mention grammar and editing. All across the book, there were several instances of two consecutive sentences meaning the exact same thing in different words. I'd rather read about something once, not twice or thrice. I won't keep writing excerpts, but this is just an example:
“...around a pinwheel on either side of the gate (one for either side)..."

I can also appreciate trying to put flourish into words, but more words don't mean better or more immersive. Sometimes, descriptions were so wordy, and with adverbs shoehorned in, I had trouble getting through them. If these occurrences had been isolated, I wouldn't have mentioned them. Unfortunately, the story was peppered with them.

In terms of pace, it felt a mix between frantic sprints and jarring stops. In the middle of an early battle scene, there are long pauses for exposition and elaborate thoughts description. Another time, there is a jarring stop to a scene of suspense to fast forward in time and detail how the survivors are traumatized and lost the will to fight after that night. Then the actions snaps back in time to the end of the conflict/situation. In the climax battle, we are taken into a flashback, and then into a flashback within the flashback (couldn't help but think about a fourth wall break within a fourth wall break gag from Deadpool).

I do not have a problem with stop and go per se, but in Sapling: the Blade of Ahtol, the stops just didn't work for me because I didn't feel the detours added anything to what was going on. In the best cases, they just seemed like wordy ways to do exposition that could have been done as part of the action instead of detached from it (Most of the information imparted during those flashbacks is to flesh out a single relationship).

Story-wise, I felt as if not much happened in the book. I don't want to spoil anything, but if I'm drawing parallels, it would be like if the Fellowship of the Ring had been cut just after the confrontation with the Nazgul at Weathertop. Everything ends without us getting much closure or revelations on any of the key mysteries (won't mention them to avoid spoilers). There is a great mountain fortress which is a den of evil,

yet we only learn of its existence in the flashbacks, and more than halfway through the story. There is one hero who's so physically strong it is mind boggling, but we never have a beginning of explanation on how this came to be. An item contains a world-ending threat and we have no backstory for it. I understand the first of a series will not answer everything, but I would have liked to at least get a grasp of the world, get to know its history. As it is, we can't place the flashbacks on a timeline (or if we can, I failed to do it, and not because I'm not familiar with complex storyline juggling).

As for the characters, perhaps I missed something, but a threat is described as world-ending, there's one person able to contain it, and that person goes on to disable himself for a few days for something completely out of the blue at the moment. And he does that knowing there is pursuit after them. Conveniently, he recovers just in time for the final battle. That same character then later performs the same kind of miracle, but for me it didn't seem consistent with his behavior in the very first ambush depicted in the book, where he didn't bother to do that. That hero is so overpowered it's hard to ever feel like the group of protagonists are ever threatened.

I might have missed something, but for me, the villains came off as run-of-the-mill evil sorcerers who kill subordinates for failures. Yet inexplicably they spare opponents when given the chance to end them (I know one reason could be brought up for one of those miraculous spares, but especially with the last reveals, it didn't seem to fit).

Then, there's the issue of world building. Kudos for having a map and glossary, doing that takes some effort and I can appreciate it. Beyond that though, the world felt empty. We start in a village, and the main character is reclusive all right, but beyond a single person (the stranger with which they leave) and the innkeeper, we don't see a soul. When they get to a city, something starts to develop (shopkeepers, criers, etc), and it looks as if the setting will start to live.

Before half a day has passed, though, it goes downhill and every encounter from that point on is a fight (even in the flashbacks, with a few exceptions). No encounters with tradesmen, village folk, anyone who could have fleshed out the world, given an insight on what is happening beyond what the characters can see. It's mentioned that factions are vying for seats of power, apart from the antagonist faction, we have no clue who the other factions are, what they do, etc.

So, due to editing issues, a hiccup pace, and overpowered heroes we know little about, I would rate *Sapling: The Blade of Ahtol* two (2) stars on the goodreads rating. It was ok. Despite some issues I found crippling, I finished the book, and reading it wasn't a chore. Someone who likes more classic stories of heroes with enemies of pure evil might like it.

L.N. Denison says

Action all the way with this one!

I have given this book a 3.5 rating. Although I liked this story and connected with the main characters, especially Firah and Zyr, I found that it became quite confusing in places with the sudden jump in time lines. But saying that, the dialogue and narration were solid, nicely written. Regardless of the confusion, I gathered that it was pivotal to the plot the further I read through. It tied things up nicely in the end.

The action sequences could've done with being a little shorter, I found them quite long winded.

One thing that I liked, was the glossary and the preview of the author's next novel, which was enticing enough for me to want to read the next installment.

Elizabeth Johnson says

This book wasn't an easy read for me, at the beginning I struggled but it soon got better.

The plots are well written, the author definitely paints you a picture of the scenes and the main characters well developed. I particularly enjoyed reading about Firah the pretty teenage tomboy. She is a petty thief who had been given an object by a bird but unbeknownst to her, the object is cursed and wanted by others. The book in a way is similar but not a copy to Lord of the rings.

All in all, if you have time to invest and you are patient then this book is for you, it slowly builds your appetite until you are truly satisfied and the author delivers in the end. I recommend this book to anyone seeking a good fantasy book

J.B. Trepagnier says

I really enjoyed this novel and am looking forwards to any sequels that come from it. I couldn't really say that Firah, the thief that everyone is after was the main protagonist because the author gave detailed back stories and motivations for most of the other characters in the novel. The prose, character development, and the way we sometimes move away from Firah to learn about other characters reminds me a lot of the Wheel of Time series, which I also loved.

There are beautiful graphics and a glossary in the back of the novel to help aid the reader. I didn't know the glossary was at the end, or else I would have read that first, then read the novel. Not reading it first did not hinder my reading and I understood what the author was trying to say, it was just clarified a little better in the glossary

K.A. Krisko says

This is a nicely-done quest-style fantasy with a number of important features. It takes place in a well-imagined world with a complete geography, including maps and place names, and a thorough political system, which gives it an air of authenticity. The magic system is extensive and well-explained, with a logical basis (explained more thoroughly in the appendices). The ideas are unique, with a kind of omniscient prophecy at the end of each chapter bringing together events.

The quality of writing is high, with nice descriptions and a plot that moves along generally logically and is fairly easy to follow. The characters are unique, each with his or her own voice, style, and characteristics. They're well done, with history and motivation that becomes clear throughout the book. One of the main characters is female, and this (apparently) male writer does a better-than-average job at characterizing her by simply treating her as a human being and not worrying overmuch about her gender.

The uniqueness and thoroughness of this book makes it easy to recommend for fantasy fans, nature-magic fans, quest fans, battle-scene fans, and female protagonist fans.

I could see adding another half-star at least, were it not for some issues, most of which are easily fixed. Readers of this review should realize that I'm very picky about some of this stuff, and it may not be as important to others as it is to me.

Whereas many authors seem to stick in extraneous punctuation, this one has swung to the other side of the pendulum and a frequent lack of any punctuation at all within the body of a sentence meant I had to go back and re-read on a regular basis to figure out what was intended. There were also misused words (recluses instead of recesses, for example). These are errors that a good editing could fix easily, and it doesn't affect the story.

Although the book starts out doing a good job of keeping the characters' points of view separate, later this deteriorates and there is quite a lot of head-hopping, even where the paragraph and section breaks delineating shifts in POV continue (head-hopping is when we are suddenly treated to an introspection or viewpoint from another character that the main character of the section could not possibly know or see). Besides the fluctuating POVs, we get a history lesson from omniscient viewpoint, with no one narrating, upon arrival at the city of Khyvla. This could have been rectified by having one character relate it to another.

While Firah was, as I mentioned before, generally very well done, I did have few issues with her portrayal as a woman-child. It seemed inconsistent. For example, a scene between Firah and Tohm before the trip to Khyvla seemed almost gratuitous and not in character with the previous descriptions of Firah as independent and on her own. Suddenly she is being treated like a child. Tohm asks her, almost begs her, to go along for conversation and company, with apologies, then seems to be forcing her to come and punishes her severely for being late, then doesn't need to talk to her anyway because Zyr is coming along, so she ends up being nothing but baggage. Tohm is supposedly a friend, not a parent. Firah is not dependent on him, so why would she allow him to punish her? Later, it's revealed that she told him he was not her parent when she was twelve, so why is she letting him punish her five years later? I was also disappointed that her well-detailed skill at thievery was never put to good use.

The book starts out being about Firah, but by the end, she's just a side character to be protected, and it's Zyr's story for the most part (which is, I admit, somewhat more compelling of a story). Even though she occasionally steps forward with a brief comment, acting as though she's the group's leader, there's no introspection on that – why is she making the decisions? Where does she think she's going? I was left unsure, and didn't get much of Firah's thinking in the last part. They just seemed to be on a quest with no goal, or at least not one I understood – though it may have been lost in the lengthy battle scenes. And they don't accomplish anything by the book's end. They're just left in the middle of the wilderness with no resolution. While I realize this is the first of a series, it's nice for each book to stop at a point where there's at least some resolution, some natural breaking-point.

These quibbles are minor enough for me to have still really enjoyed the book and to give it four stars. I see a lot of potential here for a great series, and I'd love to see it cleaned up to reach that potential. Worth a read as-is!

S.E. Sasaki says

A compelling, complex world of good versus evil.

Sapling by Dan Gillis introduces the reader to Aerelia, a fantasy world in which its Mother, Aerluin, is the power who resides deep within the earth. There is an Order that still follows her, but other groups are gaining ascendancy and they hearken to a new, darker power. The black shadows seek out a young girl, Firah, for their mysterious rituals but the demonic cadre, known as the Blade of Ahtol, run into resistance in the form of a burly inn keeper, a monk, and a mysterious stranger possessing stolen weapons. The seventeen year old girl and her entourage become embroiled in several battles but it is the battles within their hearts that come closest to breaking them.

I enjoyed this first novel in spite of the confusing experience of jumping between myriad points of view - far too many to give this story a really tight, cohesive flow. Much time is spent trying to decipher to which character, demon, beast, the point of view belongs. Gillis' prose is beautifully descriptive, however it often gets in the way of the action or battle, where every thought by the character actually slows down and obstructs the pace of the scene. Often less would be more. This goes for the paragraphs at the end of each chapter as well. There are spells and weavings and objects imbued with special powers. There are hidden pasts that are revealed. The story is action-packed and jumps back and forth, from past to present, until it reaches a climax that is unexpected.

Overall, Gillis' world is complex and, though his characters fall into all the traditional fantasy tropes, they are three-dimensional and compelling. It is a book worth reading, if you enjoy fantasy, and I look forward to the next installment. Recommended.

E.P. says

"The Sapling" is the story of a young pickpocket, Firah, who has a secret destiny--of course she does! The "secret chosen one" is classic fantasy; what I appreciated about this take on it was making the main character a female pickpocket. Firah is brash and naive, but slowly matures over the course of the book, and by the end passes the first stage in her coming-of-age.

The style of the story alternates between epic fantasy, with a great clash between good and evil, and sword-and-sorcery, with "low" characters such as pickpockets and innkeepers, and lots of fight scenes. I thought this was an interesting approach, although sometimes it could be a little stylistically jarring: the language goes back and forth between a modern, colloquial style and the "high style" characteristic of the highest of high/epic fantasy, something that works better in some scenes than others. This book is clearly interested in the "big" questions that often come up in high/epic fantasy, but there is a lot of weight given to action scenes as well, so fans of that kind of thing will find a lot to enjoy.

The characters are deliberately complex, and I quite enjoyed the arrogant naïveté of the younger characters, and of the older characters' flashbacks! There is some budding romance and the revival of old flames that shows promise for a continuation of the story. The worldbuilding is also complex; the book includes a map and a glossary at the end, which is a nice touch. I was able to follow along without them, but they served as a handy reference, and it's always nice to see that the author has thought their world through and made it internally consistent.

I received a free copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.
