



## Dragon in Chains

*Daniel Fox*

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## **Dragon in Chains** Daniel Fox

From award-winning author Daniel Fox comes a ravishingly written epic of revolution and romance set in a world where magic is found in stone and in water, in dragons and in men-and in the chains that bind them.

Deposed by a vicious usurper, a young emperor flees with his court to the small island of Taishu. There, with a dwindling army, a manipulative mother, and a resentful population-and his only friend a local fishergirl he takes as a concubine-he prepares for his last stand.

In the mountains of Taishu, a young miner finds a huge piece of jade, the potent mineral whose ingestion can gift the emperor with superhuman attributes. Setting out to deliver the stone to the embattled emperor, Yu Shan finds himself changing into something more than human, something forbidden.

Meanwhile, a great dragon lies beneath the strait that separates Taishu from the mainland, bound by chains that must be constantly renewed by the magic of a community of monks. When the monks are slaughtered by a willful pirate captain, a maimed slave assumes the terrible burden of keeping the dragon subdued. If he should fail, if she should rise free, the result will be slaughter on an unimaginable scale.

Now the prisoner beneath the sea and the men and women above it will shatter old bonds of loyalty and love and forge a common destiny from the ruins of an empire.

## **Dragon in Chains Details**

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# From Reader Review *Dragon in Chains* for online ebook

## Sandy Lender says

I was disappointed in the novel *Dragon in Chains*. In this story, the mother and generals of the young emperor have forced him to flee his palace and he crosses the waters to the island of Taishu. While crossing, he purchases a fisherman's granddaughter, Mei Feng, to be his concubine. Concurrently, a boy named Han, who has been sold after just "escaping" one form of drudgery to the pirate ship Shalla, is used in a raid on an important forge where a large slave is set free from huge chains. The slave acts as if this is the end of the world and takes Han as his new little slave (which everyone, including Han, seems okay with) and begins putting new chains on him. Back on Taishu, word spreads of the emperor's arrival and one of the clans sends their strong young lad Yu Shan off to give their prize find—a huge and lovely chunk of jade—directly to the emperor, cutting out the jade traders and carvers and whatnot that are supposed to get their fair share of the profits involved.

Thus everything is set in motion and all sorts of horror and blood and guts and raping and pillaging take place to show us what a horrible bunch of cretins the rebels are who are against the emperor. I should point out that Fox does a good job with description. The reader is left with no doubt that people are out for whatever they can get, except the main characters, who seem to be passively living among all the hate and evil and gore, expecting to get carved up at any time. This left me searching for a character to root for; and I found myself aching for the release of the dragon who caused a tsunami when she stirred beneath the waters, testing the strength of the chains she'd felt weaken. Ah, there's the plot. Sort of.

Even when Yu Shan made a sudden turn from apathetic and passive to a superhero-like, jade-eating warrior fighting for his life and the lives of others that he suddenly seemed to love (although that might be too strong of a word to describe his feelings for Jaio or the emperor), I just couldn't bring myself to care whether people in the novel lived or died. Han seemed so sniveling and powerless throughout most of the novel that I was stunned when he seemed to profess (to himself) that he cared about a doctor's niece and her fate aboard the ship where he had merely passed his days in a sort of comatose existence.

Does this review seem to ramble? That is the style of the novel. Fox rambled through the tales of several characters who didn't all meet up at the end, but whose lives (mostly) eventually proved entwined by the rising up of the enormous dragon who drowned or ate the rebels who would have made the story longer had they been allowed to land and confront the young emperor's army on the island of Taishu. (Although some rebels already had confronted the emperor in a scene that reminded me greatly of Yertle the Turtle—he was king of the mud, for mud was all he could see.)

Unfortunately, I wouldn't recommend this book to just anybody. I wish it had lived up to the text on the back cover for me. I was pleased with the fantasy element of jade imbuing power to one who eats it, but I wish the story had included more of the dragon or a fantastic character I could have rooted for as well. Now, to be fair, I want to say again that Fox did an excellent job with description, making scenes easy to visualize. He also used a very relaxed approach to grammar and structure, letting the reader see the language on the page in much the same way we tend to speak. It gave a conversational, easy tone to the novel.

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## Miranda says

Set against the gorgeous backdrop of Imperial China, *Dragon in Chains* tells a story of rebellion and magic, in which jade can transform mortal men into much more and a dragon lies (as the title implies) chained beneath the waters, waiting to break free and destroy the world.

Fox's writing is some of the most beautiful I've seen recently – evocative, poetic, and spare. While this does serve to distance the reader slightly, the characters he creates are vivid enough to pull you in. Each struggles with immediate, personal concerns linked, if sometimes circuitously, to the larger unfolding drama of an empire at war with itself.

Rather than following a single protagonist (indeed, I'd be hard pressed to identify any one of the characters as the lead protagon), Fox puts us in the heads of a large cast of colorful characters – most of them from the lowest levels of society: a slave, a pirate, an old fisherman and his granddaughter, and a jade miner's son. Thrown into the mix is a boy-Emperor fleeing a rebellion and struggling to fulfill his potential. Fox does an excellent job of dramatizing war's effect on both the powerful and powerless – and explores these concepts deeply and subtly.

*Dragon in Chains* is part of a projected trilogy (the second book is out now, the third will be released in a few weeks), and the ending does leave several large questions unanswered. However, it also ties up many smaller ones – no cliff-hangers here – and gives the portion of the story told in this first book a feeling of completeness.

This lovely fantasy really stands out, both for its less common and very well-drawn setting and for its complex, intriguing characters. Highly recommended!

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## **Ranting Dragon says**

<http://www.rantingdragon.com/dragon-i...>

Inspired by the culture and myths of feudal China, *Dragon in Chains* is the first book in Daniel Fox's *Moshui*, the *Books of Stone and Water* trilogy. Four main characters' stories are bolstered by a large supporting cast, and the action ranges from a slave boy's efforts to subdue the chained dragon beneath the sea, to a jade miner caught up in banditry and addiction, to a young fishergirl's sudden plunge into imperial politics when the young emperor-in-exile chooses her for a concubine. These disparate storylines, all equally important, slowly and inevitably lock together in preparation for the next book in the trilogy.

### **Lush, mouth-watering prose**

Daniel Fox's writing is luxuriant and sensuous. He takes time with his phrasing, and some passages are even more gorgeous read aloud than on the page. He is obviously enamoured by the historical period that inspired the series and relishes the descriptions of his world. On some rare occasions, the poetry of Fox's writing veers into awkwardness, but for the most part the text is completely immersive.

The downside of such beautiful writing is that it occasionally overshadows the action scenes, which need faster-paced prose to convey their urgency. Some potentially exciting events wallow instead, as Fox sacrifices immediacy for a pretty turn of phrase. Other reviewers have bemoaned the lack of action in *Dragon in Chains*, but I think there is actually an enormous amount of action in the book—it's just buried beneath paragraphs of poetry.

### **Engaging characters, but occasionally unbelievable**

Most of the characters in *Dragon in Chains* are complicated and wonderful, and I found myself emotionally attached to them very quickly. Most of the main characters—Han the slave, Mei Fung the fishergirl, and Yu Shan the jade miner—tend towards youthful naïveté, just like in most fantasy epics, but the cast is refreshed by Mei Fung's old grandfather and fearless Jiao the bandit. The emperor isn't anyone we haven't seen before: young, controlled by his powerful mother, and exiled by rebellious forces. This is fairly typical stuff. But the imprisoned, otherworldly dragon is promising and the pirate captain, Li Ton, is deliciously, understandably villainous. (But he's not a villain, mind you. It's more complicated than that.)

The naïveté of Han and Mei Fung, however, occasionally exceeds plausibility. Han accepts his changes in ownership with hardly a shrug, his loyalties shifting easily from owner to owner, and Fox spends too little time on the relationships between Han and his various owners to account for these flexible loyalties. Mei Fung is even worse. Although in every other way an excellent character, she shows nearly complete disregard for her old fishing life once the emperor takes her for a concubine. How does she so readily adapt to imperial life? Doesn't she miss her family and friends of old? And why does she so quickly feel affection for a man who bought her? The absent answers to these questions bothered me for the entire book.

### **The power of jade**

Jade's importance in *Dragon in Chains* is fascinating. Forbidden to any but the emperor, jade isn't just a beautiful stone but also imparts superhuman strength, endurance, speed, and health to any who spend much time in contact with the stone. I don't want to reveal too much of the story, but jade's powers open up a lot of possibilities for future plot lines—possibilities that are not exploited in *Dragon in Chains*, but hopefully in *The Jade Man's Skin* and *Hidden Cities*.

The other magic system, rune writing, plays an important but understated role. It's unclear so far whether it only affects the dragon or whether it has further magical uses in the empire. Religion and magic are also, as yet, fairly undeveloped in the book, but there are definitely hints of more to come later in the series.

### **Why should you read this book?**

This is a classic epic fantasy set in a more original world than the typical fantastic version of medieval Europe. The writing is glorious, the plot is gripping, and the characters are—for the most part—engaging and believable. Any flaws in *Dragon in Chains* have ample opportunity to be resolved or explained in the next two books in the trilogy. You'll likely enjoy it if you enjoyed Daniel Abraham's *The Long Price Quartet* or anything by Guy Gavriel Kay.

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### **Barbara ★ says**

This is a book written by a man for a man's enjoyment. It is full of senseless violence with a plot that is apparently being stretched out to make this into a series.

The current emperor is a boy (teenage?) who is a puppet for his mother who really rules. They have been chased out of the city by rebels and are regrouping on an island. The emperor's people are violent and spend all their time raping and pillaging the town for no reason as the people are more than willing to just give them what they want. The rebels are no better. They are on the mainland killing all the emperor's troops (who are waiting to be ferried to the island) and raping and pillaging. There are also pirates (working for themselves) who are kidnapping and torturing people and making them into slaves.

There is absolutely nothing to redeem this story. There are just too many "main" characters with only a few of them good people. Everyone else is violent and has ulterior motives. Daniel Fox is apparently a British author but the book reads like a translation with poor sentence structure and sentences written in the wrong tense. The book shifts point of view with no warning and it takes paragraphs to figure out which group of violent characters is now center stage. Definitely not a series I will be continuing.

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### **Sam says**

Příběh se dost táhnul (až lemroušsky) kvůli přeskokování k různým postavám - ze začátku jich bylo snad pět, až se na konci tak nějak skoro všechny pohledy prolnuly a zbyly jen dva (nebo tři?). Navíc se mi zdálo, že autor si všechnu akci šetřil až na konec knihy. Skutečné hrůzy války tam sice popsal dost autenticky a hrozivě (až se mi z toho dělalo místy špatně), ale to je asi tak vše. Docela by mě zajímalo jak to bude pokračovat, protože na konci se to konečně všechno... !!!

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### **Tim Susman says**

"Dragon in Chains" is the first novel in a new series by Fox, set in a fantasy world with trappings of the Orient. We follow a half-dozen protagonists through great changes in their lives at a time of turmoil in the world: the young boy Emperor and his mother the Dowager Empress have been chased from the capital by an army of rebels and have fled to the small island of Taishu where Jade is mined.

The strait between the mainland and the island is said to hold a chained dragon, but the monks responsible for keeping her chained have recently been slaughtered by pirates. And the island itself is home to the mines from which the Emperor's jade is torn, to be brought to him and him alone.

Fox weaves together the narratives skillfully, and the magic in the world is for the most part subtle; an initial glimpse of the dragon leaves us wondering whether she is a real dragon or simply a metaphor for the wild weather of the strait. The focus of the book is on the journeys of the characters, as each of them finds him or herself in a different world: the young scribe's apprentice captured by pirates, the young fisher-girl brought before the Emperor to be his concubine; the fisherman enlisted to transport pirates; the jade-miner diverted on his way to bring a shipment of jade to the Emperor; the woman desperately trying to rescue her family from the horrors of war. This is a book about living through turmoil and the importance of custom and friendship to surviving trying times. Fox does a wonderful job with the relationships between the characters and with the beautiful setting. If at times the plot seems to have skipped a chapter somewhere, this doesn't overly diminish the enjoyment of the book.

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### **Ashley says**

*Dragon in Chains* takes place in an Asian-inspired fantasy universe where a dragon has been chained beneath the ocean, and an emperor flees to an island to escape rebels who wish to claim his life. The story is mainly told through three primary PoVs: a crippled slave boy who is bound to the dragon and must keep her chained, a fishergirl who becomes the emperor's concubine, and a jade-miner who falls into dire straits trying to bring a gift to the emperor.

Overall, I felt the book was pretty good. I want to give it a higher rating, but it wasn't until about the middle of the book that I felt any sort of pace begin to move the story. Everything before that felt like set-up, and I think you could probably even argue that the set-up continued long after that. However, there is clear character progression throughout the story, and although it wasn't until the last hundred pages or so that I connected with them, I'm glad the story finally got there. The plot is solid, even if it did move slowly at times. Fox's writing style can be a bit sparse on the descriptions at times, but it flows pretty well. I feel like this series has a lot of potential, and I'll gladly read all the books that follow. Fans of Lian Hearn will probably like this novel, especially if they also like the gritty events and multiple character PoVs of George R. R. Martin's novels.

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## **DaMaar says**

It's rare that I equally like all the POV's in a story but I did. Good world building and a nice culture.

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## **Jules Jones says**

This gorgeously written book is the first part of a new fantasy trilogy which draws on medieval China for its inspiration. It's an alternate universe China, of course, and one of the ways in which it's alternate is that magic is real, if largely subtle. Subtle enough that some characters do not realise that the magic is there. Even the dragon of the title is a background menace in this first book, thought of as myth by the people who don't live in her territory, although she's a key part of one of the main plot threads.[return][return]That's plot threads, plural. One of the joys of the book is that there are multiple plot threads, skillfully balanced by a writer who knows how to use them to create a complex story with several distinctive characters. All of these threads converge on Taishu, a remote island on the edge of empire. On the physical edge, at least. Taishu may seem remote and insignificant to most, but it is the source of the jade that underpins the power of the Jade Throne and the Emperor who sits on it. He who holds Taishu holds the empire, in a very real sense, and Taishu is about to become the centre of more than one conflict.[return][return]Scribe's apprentice Han is enslaved by the raiding party of pirates who kill his master. They are not local men, and their leader Li Ton pays no heed to his frantic warnings against their next raid -- upon a monastery whose monks' magic keeps the chains bound tight about the dragon held under the sea. After all, everyone knows that dragons haven't been seen for hundreds of years, if they were ever real in the first place. As Han and the monastery's sole survivor fight to hold the bindings in place, the dragon senses freedom, and Han senses her.[return][return]Fishergirl Mei Feng finds her life changed one night, when her grandfather's boat is commandeered by generals, by the emperor himself. The boy emperor is fleeing from a rebel army, his own loyal troops not enough to stand and fight, or so his mother and his generals say. They have one hope, to hold the Jade Throne and the jade mines that are the true source of imperial power. In the end the Hidden City is wherever the throne is, and so the Hidden City moves to a remote island, along with as much of the army as can find boats to cross the strait. But the Son of Heaven finds one unexpected resource on the fishing boat that carries him to safety -- a local girl to be a friend his own age, someone who is loyal to him both as emperor and as lonely, isolated boy. And in particular, is loyal to him, not the mother and generals who see him as too young to be anything other than a figurehead.[return][return]The jade miners have heard that the emperor himself has come to their island, and what they hear is a chance to break free of the middlemen who offer them a pittance, a chance to take his jade to him themselves. It is his jade, they know that; but perhaps he will give them a better reward for their work in mining it than do the jademasters. And so one clan of miners breaks the law and sends one of their young men with the fabulous new piece they have unearthed.

Yu Shan is prepared for bandits in the hills, but even so he has a more twisted path to the emperor's notice than he imagines. For he is young and does not know the secret of the jade, why it is so tightly controlled.[return][return]These could all easily become a cliched story, but here they are in the hands of a master storyteller. Fox weaves them together to make a multi-layered story where subtle clues are laid well in advance, creating an "oh, of course!" as the hints finally slot together to make the full picture. It's no surprise that this works so well, as "Daniel Fox" is the pseudonym of an award-winning writer with a depth of experience in both crime fiction and fantasy. The world he has created is strongly grounded in reality, but has magic added, and the consequences of that are woven into the world he shows, rather than the magic being thrown in with no thought for how it might affect things. This world and its characters are described in beautiful and beautifully controlled prose. The result is a richly detailed fantasy that explores new ground rather than treading well-worn paths.[return][return]Dragon in Chains is quite definitely the first part of a single story, but there is enough plot, and intermediate resolution of various plot threads, to make the book a satisfying read in its own right rather than merely a cliffhanger designed to get you to keep buying the series. This is a complex and enticing dark fantasy that is well worth the wait for the next part.[return][return]Official release date is 27 January 2009, and the book is available for pre-order at Amazon UK and at Amazon US.[return][return]Comments thread: <http://julesjones.livejournal.com/295...>

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### **Terence says**

I have belonged to the SF Book Club for close to thirty years now and through them have read some of my favorite books - *Downbelow Station*; the first 5 *Chronicles of Amber*, aka "the good ones" (IMO); *Butterfly and Hellflower*; the original *Conan* stories; *The Swordswoman* and *Consider Phlebas*, among others. Most of them were "risks" - I didn't know the authors at the time and was relying on the blurb and just possibly the cover art. *Dragon in Chains* is another one of those risks. I knew (and still know little) about the author, Daniel Fox, but I enjoyed this book.

The story is set in an Asian-themed world where the author does little to disguise it from a Chinese Empire with magical elements. The dragon of the title is a powerful force of nature/magic that was bound long ago and chained to the floor of the sea (in the straits between the mainland and the island of Taishu). A group of monks has spent the last few centuries maintaining that chain but when they're butchered by a pirate that guardianship ends and the chain is tenuously maintained by a smith, the lone survivor of the temple, and a slave boy. In the meantime, the Son of Heaven has fled to the island of Taishu, fleeing rebel armies, and the jade miners of Taishu have sent one of their own directly to the emperor with an astonishing find. One of the fantastical elements that Fox injects into his world is the remarkable properties of jade. Unlike our jade, the jade of this world is reserved solely for the emperor as it conveys superhuman strength and longevity to those who possess it. Fox does a good job of drawing the three threads together by the end of the book and I am curious to find out what happens next.

Overall, this was a pleasant diversion, fast paced and interesting enough to keep this reader hooked.

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### **Beryll Brackhaus says**

Basically there is only one really good thing about this book: the writing style is really beautiful and very fitting for the setting. At some points it feels more like reading a Chinese ballad than reading a modern novel. The author has a way with pretty words.



Sadly enough he can't put that to good use.

The plot is incredibly slow and still winding. Nothing much happens but it still is twisted enough to not have you know where exactly it's supposed to go. Only on the last 50 pages does the story gain some momentum but by then you are so thoroughly bored you don't really care anymore.

It doesn't help that the story is fractured into tiny fragments with way too many different characters. Sometimes a scene with one character/one plotline will only last two pages so you never really get a chance to get into the scene. The author jumps about wildly between his characters and for the longest part of the book there is no connection between them whatsoever.

In some cases there are minor characters thrown into the spotlight that really are of no consequence whatsoever.

The fact that none of the characters are very likeable - they range from disgusting over confusing to pitiable at best - doesn't help either.

And last but not least the whole setting and action is extremely dark. Granted, war is not a pretty thing - but if you insist on describing it in all its grisly details you have to offset that with something. Be it humour, a really gripping plot or a dear character that you simply must stick with through all of it. None of that is found in this book.

I think I didn't even smile once throughout reading it so thoroughly absent is any sense of humour.

So in conclusion I can only say: If you want a fantasy book with beautiful Chinese writing style and setting that is worth your time read any book by Barry Hughart. They are brilliant.

Don't read this.

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## **David Hibberd says**

This is an interesting novel. It is set in ancient China and follows many characters. Chief among them is Chien Hua the boy emperor. He, his mother, his servants, and what remains of his army are pursued from the Hidden City to the island of Taishu, the source of all Jade which belongs to the emperor. The rebel army they flee from is led by Tunghai Wang.

One character is not encountered very much during the story. It is the Dragon in Chains, kept imprisoned underwater by magic chains maintained by a group of monks. When the pirate Li Ton, who was previously known as Chu Lin, kills the monks it falls to a boy, Han, and the blacksmith, Suo Lung, to keep the dragon in check. This is done through a chain Suo Lung forges and Han is linked to through metal cuffs. Various symbols are inscribed on the cuffs and chain that allow Han a mental link to the dragon.

At the mainland coast the emperor and his assembly utilize a fleet of fishing boats to sail to Taishu. A chief sailor among the fleet is Old Yen. His boat personally transports the emperor and his mother to Taishu. On the voyage the boy emperor meets Old Yen's granddaughter, Mei Feng, and takes her as his confidant and concubine.

A key element in the story is Jade. It is mined by clans and cut by jademasters. Only the emperor is allowed to possess it. In carving jade every fragment is gathered. Emperors will eat jade which gives them special

powers including enhanced vision and hearing, strength, and longevity. One of the jade minors is a boy, Yu Shan. His family discovered a large block of jade in a mine they worked and Yu Shan is given the task of carrying it to the emperor, bypassing the jademasters. He encounters a thief, Jiao, who takes him into her custody. Yu Shan has spent his young life in the jade mines and as a result has come in constant contact with it, breathed it, and eaten it. His jade induced enhancements exceed those of the emperor.

When the rebel general, Tunghai Wang, sends a boatload of skilled assassins to Taishu to kill the emperor, he must flee to the mountains with Mei Feng, Yu Shan, and Jiao.

With that going on, Li Ton orders Old Yen to take him to the Forge, the site where the monks maintained the chains that keep the dragon imprisoned. There he sends a signal to Tunghai Wang to launch his fleet's attack against Tunghai. He also orders Han to release the dragon.

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## **Summer says**

This was a great read with an unusual use of magic and wistful kind of story telling feel to it. I loved the characters and wallowed in the unique writing style that was very evocative of the oriental myths. A great start to a hopefully plentiful series!

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## **Jacqie says**

I read this book just after Liz Williams' Snake Agent- and it might have been a bit wrenching to go from modern China/cyberpunk to mystic medieval China.

I did enjoy the book though, and more as it went on and the different character threads began to pull together. At first, the fragmentation of character viewpoint kept changing the story's pace; when I wanted more about a certain character they would disappear and I'd have to do a mental reset. The dragon was almost too menacing; once she's free, what could anyone possibly do to stop her? But I did truly enjoy the concept of how jade affected anyone it touched, and thus was preserved for the emperor. A miner who even accidentally ingests jade dust is stealing from the emperor and may earn a death sentence. I also like how we got to slowly explore this alternate Taiwan and learn more about it.

I also liked the wry humor in the writing- how it gently made fun of people's foolishness and never lost its empathy. I believe this author is also Chaz Brenchley, from some internet research. I was impressed with his Outremer series back in the day. A good series that explored and humanized the medieval Middle East much as this series explores medieval China.

However, minus a point for the pointless change of author name. Why start over when you've got a good thing going and are building your reputation? And why so coy and secretive about it? Meh. But I'll be reading the next one.

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## **erforscherin says**

It's a (very) slow start, as trilogies go; there are a lot of characters, and the author has to spend a lot of time laboriously getting them all lined up and moving in the right direction for the (presumably more exciting) sequels - the action here really doesn't pick up until the very end, and even then gets cut short just as it was starting to get interesting (of course). I'm still not sure whether it was a problem with the pacing of the plot itself or just that there were *many* characters; the plot thread of the mother fleeing with her children from

invading armies has absolutely nothing to do with any of the other threads, and doesn't feel like it serves any particular purpose other than shock value.

There are two redeeming factors here. First, the worldbuilding: while not as extensive as I would have preferred (we never learn much about the motives of the rebels, for example; and I'd rather hear the residents of the fishing villages tell stories and fables about the dragon under the sea to their children, or the fishermen themselves shown to uphold some superstitions regarding it while out on the water, rather than have the narration state everything outright upfront), the concept of "jade-eaters" and the slow reveal of the stone's properties is completely brilliant, and seeing what happens next with this subplot is probably *the* reason I'd consider purchasing the second book.

The second redeeming factor is the portrayal of the Chinese culture itself, however alternate-universe it may be, because let's just be frank here: too many writers fetishize China and Japan without bothering to do the research. While there are almost certainly some aspects of courtly life that Fox has discarded in favor of a good adventure story, his grasp of interpersonal dynamics in light of social hierarchies seems to be unusually astute, particularly as he is a "Westerner" himself. Sure, it's not perfect: I'm disappointed that the emperor's so-famously "manipulative" mother never really shows up, and I have plenty of doubts as to whether even a smart fishergirl would have been accepted so readily by anyone among the imperial court; more conversations with the staff to demonstrate her supposed "go-between" role would have been nice in further establishing her growing grasp of politics. But his asides displaying the difference in meaning between what is said and what is implied are pitch- and context-perfect, and so by themselves I think go a long way towards reconciling any missteps with characterizations themselves.

It's not a *fun* book, exactly, but it certainly sets the stage for something which promises to be quite interesting. I don't know if I'd necessarily pick up the third book, but I'd certainly be willing to give the second one a chance at some point.

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