



The Shadow of the High King

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Violence, betrayal and vengeance rot Caermark from within.

King Aenwald, a murderous tyrant determined to continue his twenty-year rule, will suffer no man that lusts for power. But those who came long before the Kings of Caermark stir once again, after a hundred years of silence, and even Aenwald's iron fist may struggle to hold them and the chaos they bring.

The mercenary lord, Arnulf, dreams of greater things than a life of bloodshed and murder. Robbed of his birthright and denied justice by King Aenwald, those very dreams may carry their price in blood for his loyal band of men, as he strives to see them made real.

The young warrior, Harlin, haunted by the atrocities he suffered as a child, struggles to come to terms with the past. Consumed by hate and obsessed by revenge, how far is he willing to go to see it done, as the horrors within his mind run unchecked and unchained?

The Shadow of the High King Details

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From Reader Review The Shadow of the High King for online ebook

Carlton Rolle says

The story follows multiple characters to give readers an overview of events. Several characters are prominent throughout the novel. King Aenwald, of course, is loved and hated by many. Many respect and follow him through the fear he has placed. Arnulf is a mercenary and leader of the Black Shield. This is a group of sellswords that fight on behalf of others for money. Harlin is a strong warrior and mercenary in the Black Shield. Taken from his clan's homeland and made into a fighting slave, Harlin holds onto anger and justice to live. Ceatha is a clansman with Harlin. Confused and ravaged like her clan, Ceatha guides Harlin towards dreams of power.

The Shadow of the High King is in the same genre and style as Game of Thrones. I was repulsed by some characters and cheering on whole families. At other times, I felt I was in a large arena filled with blood, screaming along with the rest of them. I began to connect with characters like Harlin and Ceatha on their travel. I pained for them and their back story. Watching your people be killed or shackled into slavery takes an incredible weight. Both of them dealt with it, but in different manners. I found myself hoping for the same brand of bloody justice many characters were searching for.

My favorite thing about this story is not the story itself but an aspect of it. I love the idea of ancient knowledge or people resurfacing. This is influenced by the story by a couple characters directly. I think it adds a set of variables when introduced to a situation. It could bring more power or an untimely demise. For readers, it adds an element of surprise. I think enough was in this book without confusing readers too much. In the second book, should there be one, I would imagine that more this aspect will occur.

It feels like Dorrian took his time thinking about the characters and the plot. Betrayal and justice riddle the land of Caermark along with bodies. Characters are forced to fight or die. The Shadow of the High King is a great book if you're looking for a legendary story to read! It's sure to leave a deep impression on you as if sliced by a sword. As one king falls, another rises. I'm interested to see what other surprises and acts will be apart of the next book!

Damien Black says

Well now.

I posted on Facebook recently saying I would be a bit harsher with ratings in future, but Frank Dorrian has proved a spanner in the works – because The Shadow of the High King is a darkly poetic fantasy novel that impressed me no end. Yes, there are a few flaws, but overall this book is so damned good I just had to give it five stars in spite of them.

This young author's prose is, put simply, astonishing. I don't want to stray into hyperbole by comparing his descriptive imagery with Tolkien and Peake, but it's hard to avoid that temptation; I loved the world, which is reminiscent of medieval Ireland, England and Germany with a splash of the Middle East and Byzantium

thrown in for good measure. And it's a dog-eat-dog world all right: Caermark, having long thrown off the shackles of the Eastern Empire, has itself become an oppressor, plundering and raping the forlorn island realm of Luah Fail while fighting an internecine border war with Gausslandt to the south.

Clearly not just a pretty face writing-wise, Dorrian has done his research and tapped real-life history with diligence, giving his milieu a gritty and authentic feel. Arms and armour are detailed in such a way as not to detract from the story; the battle scenes vividly drawn to seem very believable and realistic. The dialogue veers entertainingly between the coarse and modern ('gobshites' and 'limp pricks' abound) to the more conventional declamatory style; I realise not all readers care for this kind of variation, but I for one thought the author bridged the linguistic gap skilfully. I was always engaged by what the characters were saying, and wanted to hear more from them.

In keeping with the epic scale of this tale of betrayal, slavery, war and magic, there are several protagonists and quite a few support characters, all of them etched in my mind by some 200k words of fiercely evocative writing.

Foremost among them is Harlin, an islander who is captured and enslaved by knights in service to the King of Caermark and sold to the eastern fighting pits at the tender age of eight. As such, he grows up violent and brutalised, nursing a serious grudge against King Aenwald, the tyrant who ruined his life and destroyed his family. I was mightily impressed by Dorrian's handling of this young warrior's damaged psyche, sometimes using the omniscient voice to convey hard home truths to chilling effect. This then is not going to be a tale of one man's redemption, but rather of the inevitable darkening of his soul as he pursues a bloodthirsty quest for vengeance.

Harlin's sidekick Anselm, who befriends the young gladiator when mercenary captain Arnulf rescues him from the pits only to use him as a sell-sword to further his own ends, provides some much needed light relief, and I liked his cheerful, happy-go-lucky demeanour. Trust me it was badly needed, because most of these characters are not nice people; Arnulf himself is well drawn as an honourable but ruthless nobleman embittered by past betrayal, all too willing to play the same game that disinherited him.

Ceatha was my only problematic character, in terms of her back story. A sorceress from Harlin's homeland who becomes embroiled in his quest but has motives of her own, she is the main female lead. I wasn't convinced that such a powerful witch would allow herself to be trafficked into prostitution by a violent brothel keeper, although I have to respect the author for his unflinching realism here: rape is not a crime to be made light of, and Dorrian graphically portrays it in all its odiousness. However, I was left unsure whether the author wanted us to trust or like Ceatha: Harlin certainly doesn't, but I couldn't help feeling that she was overly maligned. Is it so wrong to want to reunite your people so they can fight their oppressors, in this case the cruel and arrogant Marchers of Caermark? I felt that Ceatha and Harlin wanted much the same things and couldn't see why he despised her so much. I believe that if her back story had been better thought through, this issue might have resolved itself. At any rate I liked her as a character, but felt that more could have been made of her.

This gripe aside, I thought the characterisation was very good overall: Dorrian really gets you into the mindset of warlords like Aenwald and Arnulf, and it's obvious that he has read many a classic and not just modern fantasy books (always a good sign, in my opinion). Making characters who do horrible things sympathetic is never easy, but Dorrian manages this with some brutal insights into the human condition, expressed in arresting prose that grabs you by the lapels and forces you to listen even when you don't want to. This book is thus as much psychodrama as it is sword & sorcery, and the author has taken pains to delineate what leading a violent life does to a person: at no point do we feel that Harlin or any of the other

protagonists emerges unscathed by their own deeds. Yes, there are blood and guts aplenty for the hard-core grimdark fans, but the consequences of perpetrating such violence are also explored, making it even more resonant.

The story is fairly light on magic, but I liked the concept of ‘weaving’ as a subtle rather than an overt supernatural force. The backdrop also references ancient civilizations who dabbled in powers no mortal should, and there are some decidedly creepy moments with undead warriors, nameless monstrosities, and shadowy cultists just past the point of being human... at times the narrative had a hint of HP Lovecraft to it. I also felt that there was a lot more being held in reserve, and look forward to seeing what book #2 reveals about Dorrian’s world and the dark forces underpinning it.

I should mention that there were a few grammatical howlers: a pity, as I think Dorrian’s work is on the whole some of the best I’ve read in the genre. My advice to him would be to shoot his editor and find a professional who can do justice to his talented writing; my advice to readers would be to dive in and pick up a copy of *The Shadow of the High King* regardless. In fact I’m going to be quite blunt here: if you like intelligently written grimdark and dark historical fantasy and choose not to investigate this book, then the more fool you.

Kristian Dobson says

I had no idea what to expect when I started reading this, a grim dark fantasy debut from an up and coming local author, but it sounded like it could be worth my time. I don’t usually go for unknown novels - there are far too many famous works I’ve yet to catch up on before I venture into the world of self publishing - but, thankfully, this is a most impressive debut.

On its most basic level, this is a tale of good old fashioned revenge. Almost every character is motivated by revenge in one form or another.

The story is told from the perspective of three characters: Harlin, a mercenary of The Blackshield Dogs. Aenwald, King of Caermark (imagine a less drunk and more ruthless Robert Baratheon). And Arnulf, Lord-Captain of the Blackshield Dogs. Although it’s told from three points, it is Harlin that is the true focus. His thirst for revenge against those that murdered his family is what drives his character and the novel as a whole.

I had a lot of fun with this book. It is very dark so expect extreme violence, a few rapes and just general foul language. Despite all this it never feels excessive. It’s only really the language that feels gratuitous, but only at times. A lot of it is funny and inventive, but sometimes it feels somewhat out of place in context with certain scenes. This is only a minor complaint and doesn’t detract from the storytelling. I feel for a lot of people this won’t be an issue.

The opening chapter is particularly noteworthy. It sets the world up in a most impressive fashion. I haven’t been gripped so completely by an opening chapter in a while. Tense and atmospheric description whilst introducing us to mysterious threat that will set everything in motion. Truly compelling stuff. After that, the pacing does slow down drastically and it is somewhat jarring. It feels slightly drawn out and almost episodic up until Harlin finally sets off for answers about his family’s murder. Then it begins to pick up the pace and by the brutal, blood soaked climax, it’s at a breathless, breakneck speed.

There are plenty of major battles sequences to be found with inventive and brutal descriptions of warfare. That's one thing I really like about this book. Dorrian really brings you into his world with his descriptive prowess. What he sometimes stumbles in dialogue (a tad clunky at times) is made up for by compelling world building and vivid storytelling. This may be the first book in the series but it brings you in and wanting more.

I also enjoyed the feel of gritty realism. Magic is something that only begins to rear its head in the last third of the book and even then it's only slight and never enters the realm of high fantasy. This is a grim and dark tale told in as real a way as you can get while still being labelled fantasy. The magic is something that feels almost lost or forgotten in this world, but is beginning to slowly comeback to the fore.

All in all, this is a great debut. Anyone looking for a good piece of grim dark fantasy al a Mark Lawrence's Prince of Thorns needs to read this. This is a good start to a potentially great series.

4/5

Mark Kearney says

If you like your Fantasy dark and filled with gore, then this is the book for you
Well written with great characters and excellent world building
Totally recommend this

Stanislas Sodonon says

OMG!
This was... ARGH!!!!

Ok, ok, let's do this properly.
So what do we have?

Welcome to Caermark, land of a long bloody history, continuous upheaval, and innumerable grudges.

The first chapter

I don't know what happened in my copy of the book I got from Kobo, but the first chapter it opens with is actually the 18th. Pretty weird. So I think that the quickly departed sergeant's chapter was the first. And it gets us right into the whole mood of this book. Cold, brutal, pitiless. SuwWeeet!

The Bad

Frank, dear man, it seems you let the pleasure of writing prose take the better of you.
So full of repetitions, 3 or 4 phrase to say the same thing, so many times. I found myself so many times going *"alright! I get it; can you please move on?!"*.

I also had some annoyance with the whole Magic System. It was very confusing to determine it's potency. We see evidence that Weavers can do a lot of physical damage, yet the power is scarcely used for battle. This

made little sense to me, considering the number of weavers there are.

Harlin may seem overpowered at times. (view spoiler)

The connection between the Old Empire and their "relatively" more sane island cousins was confusing, considering that the race is portrayed as invaders. I'm still unsure of who got to Caermark first.

There also a recurring issue I have with Frank's books: time lapse. Time suddenly jumps forwards so fast and without a pause. It can get disorientating.

And that's basically all the bad I can say about this book.

The Good

The story:

I loved Every Minute of it, every event, every turn, every character.

The plot was great, full of surprising twists at every drop. It kept me on my toes: absolutely no one did what I would have expected.

The world:

Personally, I never really look much at the world-building. It's but a backdrop to the story, and we only see of the world what is relevant to the story. But I really "felt" this world, it was so real.

It's not a typical GD wasteland, nor a handful of ominous landmarks. It's simply a land, with history. It does not distract us.

The characters:

That's where this book probably takes the crown. They were all... absolutely SUPERB!

No good or evil. Just people, greed, grudge, ambition and choices. Every single one of them. You want to start taking sides early, root for someone. I ended up not being able to. I raged at Harlin's single-minded obsession. I encouraged Arnulf, even in the midst of treachery, I admired the ruthlessness and cunning of Aenwald.

Although we mostly follow Harlin, all the side characters are deliciously deep. Except Anselm. :-D but even him I enjoyed reading about. I was like a freaking ping-pong ball Frank kept bouncing from camp to camp. BRAVO!!

My final score: 4.5

And well deserved!!!

ijeoma Agbaje says

Frank Dorrian want's you to believe that this "hideous abomination" is a good book because he disemboweled a couple of characters and used "prick" and "fuck" more than a handful of times.?

I've had this lingering suspicion for a while that most fantasy authors especially authors that write grimdark feel that this genre belongs exclusively to boys...to men to the male species. It doesn't matter if your

characters are fucking ORCS and ride bloody pigs, *yes i'm looking at you Jonathan French* or gaddamn fairies, *totally side-eyeing you Phil Parker*, fuck it when you even get a female character as the lead, the authors go to great pains to tell you how plain she is, *You really didn't think i left you out did you Robert Jackson Bennett?*. Why do female characters always get dealt a shitty hand? I read this books and i'm like why? Why do your female characters need to be so humiliated, why do they need to bend over backwards to just exist in fucking fantasy?? You literally make up worlds, you literally make up society . Are you saying it's so abhorrent to you when you write these books for female characters to even have a modicum of power??? Do you realise how ridiculous it is to be comfortable putting in dragons, magic, witches, orcs, fairies etc but god forbid a female character gets treated fairly in a fucking fantasy novel?? Frank Dorrian if the female characters in this book weren't raped and treated like shit, would the plot have disintegrated?? The first noteworthy female character Dorrian manages to introduce turns out to be some raging bitch for no reason. Like no reason at all, it's like at a point in this book she just puts on another face and becomes some crazy, power obsessed psycho. The second female character of note somehow turns into some sex crazed, jealous appendage to Harlin.

What is wrong with you fantasy authors?

I HAVE NEVER BEEN THIS UPSET WITH A BOOK.???????

I see all these reviews mostly from guys lauding this book is. Conveniently erasing the absolute filth female characters are subjected to and for what??? Remove all that and it would have in no way affected the plot (*not like there was even that much of a plot to begin with*) of this dumpster garbage pretending to be a book.

For those of you who still feel like wasting £1.99 on this glorified unfortunate claptrap. Allow me to simplify this:

?Plot - Zero; A guy wants revenge, then some god thing wants to cleanse the world then this king keeps telling us how he's the top dog and then some other guy wants justice/ revenge, then they rape a ton of girls then gods appear, then ahh screw it.

?World Building - Zero; I mean there were rocks and sand and bushes so that helps i guess oh and gods made an appearance, who doesn't love gods

?Prose - Zero; fuck , prick, fuckwit, Vathnir's fiery prick sprinkle in some pretentious hoity toity talk and you have your prose.

*?Characterisation - Zero; Angry character, greedy character, power hungry character.
Omg did i hear you say you need characters that are 3 dimensional??? lmao*

I find that now i have zero patience for this kind of nonsense especially as it did not need to be there. Burn this book

Brian Blaski says

Would recommend to anyone. I stumbled upon this, and fell in love with it. Absolutely a joy to read while waiting for some of the big fantasy releases this fall. Thank you, Frank!

Luke Hindmarsh says

Shadow of the High King

I finished this book a few weeks ago. I normally don't delay before writing a review. Here it's mostly down to personal reasons taking up all my time and getting dragged into the drama in an online writing group I was fairly active in as it self-combusted. *sigh* Enough of that though.

I'll start by noting that I read one of the author's novellas 'Scars of the Sand' before I read this novel. I think it's quite clear that the novella was written after this. If I'd read this first, it would have received a five star reviews with no 'buts'. However...

Scars of the Sand is shorter and faster by being a novella but also its prose is so sharp that it leaves you lacerated and bleeding. SOTHK is not quite as polished. Whereas the novella literally left me gasping for more, the novel leaves me planning to read more by Mr Dorrian but not quite with the same breathless anticipation. I may reread SoS to recapture that but in truth SOTHK is good enough that its sequel is already on my shortlist TBR (as opposed to the epic length long-list TBR).

What I don't want to do is damn this novel with faint praise. So here goes: It's tale of characters seeking revenge, of a kingdom invaded by forces of 'darkness' that are inhuman or perhaps beyond human. The story is very much character-driven but with plenty of action and excitement. The prose is well-honed but not as razor-sharp as the prequel novella. Most important of all for me is that the author conjured the setting so that I felt I was there and the characters so I felt they were real.

I hope a sequel is out soon and that it carries on with the skill shown in SoS.

If you've not read anything by Dorrian before, you will love this. Particularly, if you like gritty and realistic characters and (mostly) tight prose. It's worth a 9.5 out of 10.

If, like me, you've read one of his novellas first, you'll see this debut in context but still enjoy it immensely. I expect you'll agree that compared to his other works it's more of a 9 out of 10. Still bloody brilliant but we've seen what beautiful work he's capable of.

C.T. Phipps says

A dark and fascinating story by author Frank Dorian which deals with a number of bleak topics from regret to loyalty within the context of a grimdark world. The book is a little slow to start but becomes engrossing after awhile, dealing with Arnulf's frustrated ambitions as well as contradictory nature. If you appreciate dark fantasy then I suspect you'll really enjoy this work. Frank Dorian pulls no punches with the violence, language, or situations and I respect the book the more for it.

Darren McGowan says

Fantastic

You can call this book dark, gritty, or grim. None of those terms can describe how bleak this story is. From the fascinating characters, to the landscape, everything about this book is black. Great story and intriguing characters make this a very good read. The writing is well paced and detailed. The shining light of this story are the well developed characters, like them or not, they carry the story.

Lavita Mahan says

!!!!

What a ride! I was late to this book and I look forward for the next gasoline infused explosion of my mind.

Gordon says

Disclaimer: I am a friend of the author's, and offered him some advice on eBook publishing as this book was written and redrafted, as noted on the acknowledgements page. The opinions expressed in this review are however my own: it would be an affront to Mr. Dorrian's artistic integrity if I wasn't honest about his first published novel.

The Shadow of the High King is a bold, smoothly flowing, and action-packed debut which combines believable characters in a grim, early Medieval setting that brims with dark threats and human wrongdoing. The writing is never flowery and seldom turns long winded, only rarely straying into the verbose. Instead we have descriptions which are blunt but intense, and dialogue likewise: this is agreeable for winding tension - a device this novel relies upon and uses with aplomb - and for the characterisation, which ranges from humourous to harrowing to disgusting. The language is coarse, sometimes gratuitously so, but generally lends colour to the scenes rather than cheapening the plot.

The protagonist, Harlin, is a thorough brute of a man; a mercenary for whom murder is sport. His horrific childhood and adolescence have warped his conscience and personality. Yet we are given reason to sympathise with his tortured soul - I found myself willing glimmers of warmth or humanity after just a few chapters, which is testament to the author's ability to construct a character with depth. The narrative is generally in the third person, but at intervals dives into character's skulls, excavating their emotions and vulnerabilities in passages which at their best are moving and illustrative.

Happily, this quirk of form continues throughout the book: characters who are around for long are generally portrayed as flawed humans who are neither paragons of virtue or irredeemably evil. However, characters who are around relatively briefly tend to lack such depth: the squabbling Lords in particular I would have liked to hang around a little longer, if only for their dimensions to grow beyond the greed and wanton displays of power, to spy a mildly redeeming trait or two and understand more about why they became so rotten.

This is a feat I'm confident that the author is capable of: the entire novel - and the world of Caermark - brims with promise. At times I was reminded of the Eisenhorn series (Warhammer 40k) for the combination of swift narrative, action and the device of personal journey. These aspects are the book's strongest, and in titles to come I'm certain Dorrian will shine here. The fantasy mythos and lore is also quite rich, with open-ended scope for expansion - the author's imagination and dogged research into aspects of Celtic antiquity doubtless

hold the means to form a vibrant universe; maps, languages and all.

Another aspect I'd hope to see grow would be the other staple of dark fantasy; court intrigue and backstabbing, and the sense of pieces falling into place per Machiavellian planning. Without spoiling this book, I see the germinal roots of this beginning to appear. If future works can flourish compelling personal journey for some characters, and behind-the-scenes scheming for others, then future fans may have cause to heap praise.

To sum up: there is hope that dark fantasy has in Frank Dorrian a new master on the approach. That alone is cause for all who discover and devour this superb first foray to celebrate...and anticipate.

bryan richter says

A Dark Delight

Dark fantasy delivered like a literary throat punch. A revenge driven protagonist as bloodthirsty and brutal as any villain....a supporting cast whose resolve, treachery, and cunning seem boundless, the most hardcore fairy folk you'll ever encounter, and a unique and mysterious magic to ice the cake. Epic battles, blood, guts, and glorious revenge driven by solid characters. I'd have given this seven stars but five will have to suffice.

Hannah Langendoerfer says

The best of dark fantasy

If you enjoy reading gridmark/dark fantasy you need to give this book a try. I've been reading grid-mark fantasy for a while now but nothing I've read could hold a candle to this. This book is gritty, raunchy, bloody and bleak. There is not a stitch of happiness anywhere. It's all about one man's obsession with revenge and what he's willing to do to have it. There's lots of battles, sex, intrigue and even some "magic".

I picked up this book after reading a novella that accompanied this story. I thought the writing was excellent and engaging so decided to try the novel. And wow, this story blew me away. It's not a terribly long book, but it's not a quick read. It's a heavy, dark, emotionally trying book. The pace is not fast, but it is full of action and intrigue that was never dull. The characters are all (with the exception of Anselm) on a mission for themselves, whether that mission be power, position or revenge. That being said, the author does an exceptional job of fleshing out those characters enough that by the end of the story, you understand WHY they do there terrible things they do. The main character, Harlin, is a mess. He is not a good person. **HOWEVER**, he is so well done that by the end of the story, I was rooting for him. His pain felt real enough that you can empathize with him. It makes sense. He's also real enough that he still occasionally laughs and smiles, feels guilt and regret for some things he's done. The only reason I didn't give this story five stars is because the ending was a little rushed I think. The big antagonist that had been terrorizing the kingdom the whole book suddenly was just... pushed aside? Made an ally? It was jarring and confusing, needing more context- even just another chapter. That being said, the main theme of the book came to a satisfying end. I'm really looking forward to the next one!

Rebekah says

I had heard some good things about Frank Dorrian's work, and I had a few preconceived notions about this book. I expected battle, knights, mercenaries, and some amount of ass. But I have to say, there was way more to this book than I expected.

The worldbuilding is incredible. Original races, varied cultures, and unique religions. The magic system is druidic in feel. The mythology of the Luah Fáil people holds an intriguing mix of Celtic and Egyptian vibes. Dorrian's work has an uncanny way of being crass and poetic, bold enough to handle scenes with rape or slavery, yet capable of waxing philosophical in the calm before the storm.

Pacing struggles in the first third of the book, as the chapters are long and rife with backstory. Just when I felt like things were about to get moving, the narrative would switch point of view and back up in time considerably. But that works itself out further into the book and the plot hits its stride as the characters regroup and become more active in their plans.

The main POV characters in this book are hard to like. They are all SOBs, each with an agenda of his own. Whether their actions are justified is up to the reader to decide. Their complex personalities echo their complex fates. In a war where loyalty can be bought with coin or blood, none are sure to come out with everything they desire.

The Shadow of the High King is an entertaining grimdark adventure for readers who enjoy battle, politics, religion, history, and a clash of cultures that threatens to destroy the very land they fight over.
