



Hex-Rated

Jason Ridler

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A salacious throwback to the detective pulps of the 70s, *Hex-Rated* kicks off the new urban fantasy series the Brimstone Files.

Fall, 1970. Los Angeles has always been a den of danger and bliss, but even darker tidings brew in the City of Angels. Cults, magic, and the supernatural are leaking into the worlds of glamour and dives of the gutter. To the spectators walking down Hollywood Blvd, it's just more proof that La La Land is over the cuckoo's nest. But to former child magician and Korean veteran turned newly-licensed private investigator James Brimstone, it means business is picking up.

After attending his mentor's funeral, Brimstone signs his first client: Nico, a beautiful actress with a face full of scars and an unbelievable story of sex, demons, and violence on the set of a pornographic film in the San Fernando Valley. The cops chalk it up to a bad trip from a lost soul, but Brimstone knows better.

He takes the case, but the investigation goes haywire as he encounters Hell's Angels, a lost book of Japanese erotica, and a new enemy whose powers may fill the streets of L.A. with blood. He'll have to use his Carney wits, magic tricks, and a whole lotta charm to make it out of a world that is becoming . . . *Hex-Rated*.

Hex-Rated Details

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Author : Jason Ridler

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From Reader Review Hex-Rated for online ebook

Titas (I read in bed) says

Hollywood Detective with Magic

Hex-Rated: A Brimstone Files Novel: 3 stars

James Brimstone is Jack of many trades: former child magician in circus, Korean veteran and now a licensed private investigator. His new life starts with his mentor's funeral and his first client Nico, the scarred beautiful actress with a tale of black magic, demons and revenge on the set of a pornographic film. With knowledge of the hidden dark magics and no money in pocket, Brimstone takes the case that takes him to places which he vowed never to visit again.

When I started reading Brimstone felt like bombastic combo of Dan Turner (Hollywood Detective), Jake (Chinatown) and Dean (Supernatural).

Then why just 3 stars?

I was all over this book the second James Brimstone was introduced. Sleek, charismatic and a wonderful liar – the stupendous ragged hero. Nico was introduced perfectly as the damsel in distress of a pulp. Everything was super even the needless sex and action scenes were spot on as per a pulp. The LA setup is wonderful and tasty, the mystery is intriguing and the book is full of magical action. With ‘sexy’ written all over and weird magic gluing all together, I had set my mind to the extreme gear of ppppulp novels. But then I realized how flat the characters are. Generally, characters of pulps are written a bit ‘over-the-top’ which compliments the book and fits like a jigsaw. Hex-rated has characters which are transparent and have good and bad written on their forehead as soon as they are introduced.

All these being said, I still loved it. Somehow it grew upon me and the ride to the last page was very satisfying. I sincerely hope to see more of a better Brimstone.

Damn it I almost forgot: *Thanks to Netgalley and the author for providing a free copy for this honest review.*

Jeff says

Urban fantasy is an interesting animal... its a chameleon becoming what it wants. You want romance (with magic) there's urban fantasy for you, you want spy novel (with magic) there's urban fantasy for you, you want police procedural (with magic) there's urban fantasy for you. However, without a doubt, the most popular disguise that urban fantasy will take is of the private investigator style mystery... the Mike Hammers or Sam Spade's of the world, only with magic. The grandfather of this style of urban fantasy is, of course, the Dresden Files, so its natural to judge every other novel of this ilk to that juggernaut.

If Harry Dresden is Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe, James Brimstone is Mike Hammer or the lurid pot-boilers of the 70's filled with buxom women who fall into bed with the protagonist at the drop of the hat... the cover and the back of this novel tell you everything you have to know about the plot.... its really fairly pedestrian if you're familiar with the genre.

What is amazing is the author's voice... this is vintage 70's cheese... the language is amazing. There are

places where his language is positively poetic.

Hardly perfect... the 70's feel to the novel would have been fine in the 70's... we're not in the 70's now... even in the 80's Mike Hammer's buxom women falling for Stacey Keach in the 80's still seemed a bit much... now, it just feels forced and moderately 'unpleasant'.

The overall plot was a bit thin but enjoyable.

End of the day, this is a winner... hopefully the author's world continues to grow because I enjoyed this first visit.

Elizabeth says

It's Los Angeles in the 70's and James Brimstone is a down and out ex-carney, burying the man who taught him magic (real magic) while endeavoring to launch his Private Eye practice. When a woman shows up outside his office, covered in scars of a supernatural bent, he signs on for a lot more than he had intended. Car chases, fight scenes, porno movies, Nazi magic, and our Korean war hero, Brimstone, just trying to hold his own between two worlds he doesn't fully understand. A raucous, sexy, silly, action-packed mystery.

A book that was written as an homage to 70's occult detective pulp achieved its aim with aplomb. Rating this was difficult, as it accomplished precisely what it set out to (it's delightfully pulp-y). I think that Ridler has set up a fantastically fun detective for his series to come. Unfortunately, the rest of the characters were significantly less developed (with the notable exception of Cactus), often verging on the one-dimensional. A retro read for anyone eager for a throwback read to troubled Los Angeles in the 70's that is coupled with titillating fantasy adventure.

As a side note: I read a lot of ARCs and am accustomed to encountering minor mistakes that are easily fixed in a round of proofreading. I am totally unalarmed by these errors. However, this is not an ARC and it really needs another once over. Forget grammar, this book has actual spelling errors. Bit of a shame.

Chad says

I really wanted to like this book. Urban fantasy set in the seedy side of 70's era, Los Angeles? Yes, please. But I couldn't connect with Brimstone at all. The overuse of metaphors lost my attention page after page. Why use one, when you can use three? Well, because the reader has forgotten what you're even talking about after a whole paragraph of metaphors. I just found my attention constantly wandering and in a lunch hour where I'd typically read 70 pages, I found myself reading the same 10 pages again and again.

Received an advance copy from Skyhorse Publishing and NetGalley in exchange for an honest review.

Shelby *trains flying monkeys* says

I'm putting this one aside until I'm maybe in a better mood to try it. I'm hating the main character too much

right now.

Stevie Robinson says

Sometimes you are attracted to a book because of an author. Sometimes a publisher. Or Sometimes it's a cover. The latter was the case with Hex Rated. I was just tentatively exploring Netgalley (a site that lets you apply for review copies of books) not intending to go for anything, just see how it works. Then my eyes fell on the cover for Hex Rated. I almost broke my fingers applying to review it.

SNAKES, MOVIE CAMERA, DAMES whats not to love - and fall head over heels in love with it I did.

No way the book inside I picked purely on a whim, from an author or a publisher I'd never heard of could be as good?

The book inside is even better than the cover.

I've never been to 1970's L.A. I feel like I have now thanks to Ridler's unobtrusively excellent descriptive style. He doesn't monotonously describe every single brick, he just tells you about a wall in such a way you can see it. This guy can set a scene and environment like no ones business. This is one of the most cinematic books I've read. I could visualize almost everything as I read without missing a beat.

James Brimstone is a heel. We shouldn't like him early on in the book he has almost zero redeemable features but yet we root for him and by the end of the book you love the guy, that level of character development takes a lot of skill from the author. Gives you hints of a back story and origin without hitting you over the head with it. The other characters no matter how fleeting are well fleshed out and the book is all the better for it. I particularly enjoyed the character of Nico, the way her scars are described made me actually make a little intake of breath as I read about them for the first time.

The magic described here isn't for the faint-hearted. it's dark and it's dangerous. Hex Rated is not Harry Potter. Tentacles, sex acts, you name it.

On the subject of sex one of the only things that I felt was a let down in the book were the number of sex scenes. I know this is a throw back to pulp books from the era. I know some of it's scenes are on a porn film set but apart from the first one, at the hotel near the beginning, the sex scenes just get in the way of the plot . They feel forced and unnecessary. This book has so much other titillation going on it doesn't need them. At one point I just wanted Brimstone to put his "piece" away so I could get to the rest of the story.

Dialogue here is just great. It feels of the era, noir and pulpy but not cliched. The cadence feels right and reads as smoothly as can be. It's also really funny. It reminded me heavily of Shane Black's Good Guys,in setting obviously - but also style and comic timing.

There is so much back story left to explore, a great antagonist to come back and so many more cases for Brimstone to solve in 1970's Hollywood, California. This is the first of the Brimstone Files novels and I can't wait for the next one. Filthy, magical and dangerous Hex Rated and Jason Ridler should both definitely be on your radar.

Lord Nikon says

It's weird. I liked the opening of the book, and found it MOSTLY okay for about 1/4 of it...but then the issues started glaring me in the face.

On the face of it the things I liked are the 1970's setting, the pulpy feel, some of the story and plot ideas and the shortish chapters.

I'm not sure what to chalk these other things up to...but here are my issues with the book.

Protagonist James Brimstone is really unlikeable. He's basically an asshole. In almost every interaction he's a smug, arrogant dick. To his friends, to his acquaintances and to total strangers. He's the kind of guy you walk away from a calm conversation with thinking "God, what an asshole!".

Let me put this into perspective. Brimstone is an Irish-American Korean war veteran (scout), who is also a badass at many martial arts (taught to him by a mystic Japanese Circus bodyguard who knew MULTIPLE disciplines...because yeah....THAT happens IRL), who can also somehow (never truly explained) use magic to slow down to bullet time so he can move faster than his opponent...which occurs VIA reciting of "poetry" (AKA concentrating real well!) and only kind of drains him (Sorry, but how?), who also happens to be TRANSCENDENT TANTRIC Sting God in the sack who ALL the women want to sleep with...and WHEN they sleep with him they think he is the greatest they've ever had...and he agrees...out loud...and in his head (POV narration), who was trained by some crazy Magic Castle-attending Magician who was also an asshole, and is now a P.I. (got his license by mail) who operates an office (unpaid for) in a Burlesque Show house.

Got all that? So basically he is Sgt. Rock-Batman-Sam Spade-Neo-Sting amalgam. You know, an omnipotent human who is NEVER in danger. No matter how many times and how long the attempt is made on Ridler's part to make it SEEM like Brimstone is in danger...you never believe it because of all his crazy skills which never fail him. On top of which, he knows EVERYTHING. Like he lectures everyone, knows how to get out of every situation with his MindSkillzTM and can talk anyone down off a precipice (real or metaphorical), or his way into anywhere. There is one spot where this lecturing of how smart he is is SO out of place that it was the moment when I knew the jig was up. He literally comes off a chase/action sequence, and sees a bunch of teens standing outside a theatre discussing MASH the movie (which I think they are about to see) and he literally stops to inexplicably explain to them what MASH is all about. There is ZERO narrative point to Brimstone doing this. It doesn't serve his character, their characters, or anyone else in the story. You know who it serves? The author. It's Ridler's chance to lecture US (the reader) about what his feelings are on the matter. This is neither the first, nor the last time that Brimstone (Read: Ridler) does this in the book. To say it stood out is an understatement. You don't need your main character yo both be whizbang-never-wrong smart...AND a dick who flaunts that to randoms on the street.

Speaking of being a dick on the street. Another instance sees Brimstone alongside a car full of young women (all of whom seem to be ogling him....because yeah...sure..why not) some of who hit on him....he rebuffs them (cause he's on the job I assume, otherwise I'm sure he would have tried to get it on with all of them separately) and the lead ogler immediately turns into a nasty jerk about it. You get that? I could not help but read that as a male-gaze moment. You introduce a car of of random female characters...for no reason (again, this is one of those "it doesn't remotely concern the plot" moments that litter this book) have them come onto your main guy, he rebuffs them and gets shit on by bitchy women who turn on a dime when they can't have him. The sexism that kind of drips off that moment was...not great. Like they can't just drive off and laugh...they have to get angry because they can't have him? I would have less problem with this if it

concerned the plot. It does not in any significant way. As such, what purpose does it serve other than to say “women will come onto you, but get angry if you tell them no”...I mean...come on.

This brings us to the sex. I am no stranger to lascivious sex scenes in books. Hell, I read Haruki Murakami books and that guy spends pages and pages on sex. So I have no issues with it present. That said, once the first sex scene occurs, it's no holds barred “Brimstone gets to sleep with all the buxom (deliciously described) women...most of whom are porn stars. I'm not sure at what point the male masturbatory fantasy kicked in, but it kicks into gear hard and never stops. Combine this with all these women thinking Brimstone is the second coming (pun intended) at the act, but they tell him during, and after...and he agrees vociferously. In one moment even commenting how women have told him how good (and big) he is since high school. Yeah. Okay man. You're the great omnipotent Batman-Shaft, solver of crimes, seducer of women. So as the scenes get more raucous, Brimstone gets more compliments on his performance and his bigger than average junk. I don't know that I need to spell out how ridiculous it becomes.

The story itself is fine, serviceable as far as Urban Fantasy goes. The setting helps with that (the 70's being unique)...but when we have the PERFECT Detective in Urban Fantasy in Harry Dresden, with a fleshed out world, realistic and characters of depth (damned near everyone from Harry's best friends to his most random enemies) who is often fallible, and often loses...is FLAWED like a protagonist should be...the rest of these issues stand out really hard in contrast.

I don't really want to give advice to the author, so let's call this feedback.

Jason, if you read this.

Your protagonist is realistic and easy to identify with (ESPECIALLY since this is First Person and we are in his head) when they are flawed. They shouldn't be superhuman, omnipotent sex machine assholes. No one wants to be in the head of such people. This is why Breaking Bad largely positioned the audience in Jesse's POV and not Walter's. Harry Dresden is flawed, he often loses...Hell, Batman is flawed and often loses. James Bond is flawed and often loses. Look, you DO get to have them win in the end...but on the road to that, they can't be basically untouchable gods. In no fight or action sequence in this book do you EVER worry that Brimstone will lose. He's built up to be Mr. Amazing. The centre of that cannot hold, man.

Your other characters need to be more than cardboard cutouts. I think the ONLY person other than Brimstone that gets any depth is Isabelle...everyone else just feels like they go through the motions that you needed them to go through. It needs to feel organic. Wanna hype up Edgar? You can't just have Brimstone and a few others just refer to him as a jerk...he needs more even if he's not present. Throw in some flashbacks to his teachings/training...I dunno. Something. Because it carries no weight. Cactus felt like someone who needed WAY more depth...he seemed like such an interesting character, and then he's just wasted as a Random Muscle Thug. It was pitiful to watch such a thing go down.

And your P.I....need to be more P.I.-like. Brimstone is a TERRIBLE detective. At no point does he “detect”. Sure he follows some leads, but he MEANDERS. It's tedious. The funny thing is that the pacing is fine...but it's so littered with random events that I can't help but wonder what the book would look like with the extraneous bull cut out.

Also, WORLD-BUILDING. You have this seemingly Supernatural-based world around him...but everything gets random tiny mentions and no exposition so I haven't a clue how the magic works, what myths are real, how they are hidden from the rest of the plebs, ect. Basic world building stuff. Honestly, read the first Harry Dresden book (arguably the worst of the lot..even though that series is utterly stellar) or the

first Kate Daniels book...and both do a fantastic job of setting up not only how the magic works, but a significant portion of the supernatural world around the protags.

I dunno what else to say. I wanted to like this book, but after a decent opening, it devolved into a mess of really glaring issues for me.

I don't mean this to sound too negative...but yeah, I was really disappointed.

Vivian says

Pulp fiction joyride across seventies LA.

This is the stuff cult movies are made of. Hex-rated is a mash-up of Magic Castle, A Boy Named Sue, and Lair of the White Worm. Take a disenchanted, down-on-his-luck guy trying to do the right thing, James Brimstone--most of the time. Add some noir elements like a doll and that just ensures trouble.

There is a lot of scathing commentary about history and the revisionist lies we like to tell ourselves. Set in the 1970s, it's unvarnished from the plethora of body odors and various fluids to race relations and the Hollywood machine.

These myopic twits wished all those blacks would go back to where they'd come from before they helped us win the war by doing dangerous munitions and navy work, and that kind of racist amnesia also fed the battle cry for all the Asians to go back home, even though most of them had been here long before the current set of whites who'd fled the dustbowl and came to California and proclaimed it their white Shangri La.

Overall, fun and appropriately tawdry as the cover implies.

By the way, if you're reading this and have even heard of "Lair of the White Worm" let alone seen it, ping the comments section.

~Copy provided by NetGalley~

Peritrac says

James Brimstone doesn't want to have anything to do with magic anymore. With the burial of his cruel mentor, all his remaining bridges to the world of hexes and demons have been burnt. He can start work as a private investigator and leave the supernatural behind him.

His first case, predictably enough, plunges him right back into it all. A actress with hideous facial scarring – scarring that tastes of magic – begs for his help. James Brimstone finds himself going up against Nazi occultists, monstrous snakes and rage-filled gladiators as he investigates the seamier side of Hollywood.

Hex-Rated is the first book in a planned urban fantasy series. It starts very much in medias res, and does lots of world-building through what's left unexplained, but it is the first book. I checked.

I really wanted to like this book. The cover, the concept, the aesthetic – all of these are exactly my kind of thing. I love the vividness of pulp, and anything containing occult Nazis catches my interest; they're such fun antagonists. So when I started reading Hex-Rated, I was inclined to view it very positively.

And I did find several positives. I liked the magic – it's not as present as you'll find in other books in the genre, and the protagonist's distaste comes across well. Magic in Hex-Rated is strange and scary. Wizards don't throw fire – they make perverted pacts with demons and carve sigils into living flesh. The essential elements aren't original, but the presentation is.

I liked the setting as well. 1970s America is not something I'm very familiar with, and it's an unusual choice for urban fantasy. All the cultural references are slightly off from where I expect them – different songs on the radio and homeless veterans of different wars. I'm growing a little sick of urban fantasy that takes place in the early and undifferentiated 2000s. The 1970s setting of this book is both fresh and important, permeating the whole plot.

Unfortunately, I felt that the positives were outweighed by a significant negative. The issue is Brimstone himself; he's very hard to like. In some ways he's the standard urban fantasy protagonist – impoverished, worried about falling to the darkness, and surrounded by beautiful women. It's a common archetype now, and it is a little hackneyed and objectionable. Normally though, the annoying parts of these characters are tempered by humility or incompetence, so the character ends up sympathetic.

Brimstone isn't humble. He knows how good he is. He's not particularly great at magic, but he rarely uses it – again, in this book, magic is a strange and dangerous thing. Brimstone solves most of his problems through either fighting or sex. And he's very, very good at both of them.

I struggle to worry about a character who outclasses all of his opponents – regardless of size or magical assistance – with relative ease. Brimstone knows all the martial arts. He can disable his enemies' limbs through the careful tapping of pressure points. He moves incredibly fast and can see in the dark. There's little tension to the combat because he's essentially unstoppable, and while the author does try and make situations seem desperate, it rings rather hollow – the reader has already seen how capable he is, so pretending he is in trouble doesn't actually work.

There's a lot of sex in the book. Quite a lot more than I was expecting. That's fine – it's not a problem – but some kind of earlier hint would have been nice. And once Brimstone starts having sex with people, he just doesn't stop. By my (admittedly rough) count, he has sex with five different porn actresses only a few hours. It's very detailed, and not really justified that well by the plot. Most importantly, it's amazing; those of his partners who discuss it (at length) declare sex with Brimstone to be a transcendental experience. In case you were in any doubt over this, his internal monologue also repeatedly explains just how great he is in bed.

Characters must be flawed to be relatable. I don't know about you, gentle reader, but I'm not an unstoppable god of sex and violence. If I was, I wouldn't spend all my time congratulating myself on that fact. Brimstone's abilities are essentially superpowers, and he's really smug about them. He even has the gall to lecture the reader on being respectful to women, and then immediately takes advantage of a distraught victim of a brutal attack or has a threesome with two strangers just to avoid having to tell the truth.

I get that pulp is about sex and violence. I'm okay with that. But there are limits. One of those limits, it turns

out, is graphically describing sex with multiple porn stars while congratulating yourself on your thrusting technique. It's gratuitous, and not in a fun way. Brimstone comes across as arrogant and self-obsessed, which makes it hard to root for him.

I wanted to like Hex-Rated; I really did. There's a lot to like about it – the originality, the setting; even the prose, at points, is snappy and compelling. But it's hard to enjoy a book when the protagonist needs shaking. If you are riding in someone's head, it needs to be a head that's interesting to be in. Not the head of a good person, necessarily, but one who you can sympathise with. With a toned-down protagonist and less emphasis on sex, I'd have enjoyed the book a lot more. As it is, Hex-Rated is a bundle of interesting ideas let down by the overall execution.

Kim says

I really wanted to like this book as it seemed to be right up my alley. However, being set in 1970 (assuming this since MASH was in the theater in one scene in the book) some details did not add up. Not going to list them here as another Amazon reviewer has already taken the time to write a whole list of these items but a tiny bit of editing and research could have prevented these inconsistencies.

The thing that I really couldn't get past here was the overuse of a slur that rhymes with maggot. If you are trying to make these characters sound macho by verbally attacking another man there are many other witty or unoffensive words and/or phrases that could have been used. Despite the main character slogging off these insults with comebacks of his own I felt the author was acting very juvenile in only employing that same slur over and over. Not only juvenile but lazy.

Some of the sex scenes were definitely juvenile as well and read like they were written by a 12 year old boy who has yet to see a woman naked in real life and has only stared greedily at breasts depicted in Playboy or Penthouse magazine.

In short I thought this new series had promise but everything failed to hit the mark for me.

Dave says

James Brimstone, Private Eye & Magician

Hex-Rated a a tribute to all the cheap tawdry pulpy goofy horror novels of the Seventies. When there's a deadly snake pouring out of an actress' mouth, who you gonna call? James Brimstone, Korean War Veteran, circus performer, conjurer, and private eye, dedicated to helping damsels in distress escape the clutches of supernatural beasts. Everything but the kitchen sink is thrown in from cheap no-tell motels to rather graphic Porno movie stars to demons to midgets to powder blue tuxedos.

Although a bit uneven and a bit meandering, other times it's filled with poetic prose. This is one to read enjoying the different monologues and narrative asides the character Brimstone engages in, but not one to read expecting a smooth clear stay in a the lines type of plot.

Andrew says

Just fun to read. This book is a throwback to the sleazy paperbacks (and I mean that in the kindest way) of the seventies (not the fifties as are most of these "homages"). Fun, sexy, violent and mostly tongue in cheek--read it, man, now!

Christopher Garcia says

If Jason Ridler had written this when I still considered making movies, I'd have optioned it. This is a phenomenal story, the kind of novel that seems to exist in a magnificent world that could not be more designed for me personally than if I had commissioned it! I loved the prose, loved the characterizations, and I especially loved the pacing, which helped me to make it one of three books I've managed to complete since the birth of my twins!

Steve says

I received this from Edelweiss in exchange for an honest review.

I really wanted to like this book, but unfortunately, it didn't really capture my attention. I didn't connect with the characters, and it turned into another run-of-the-mill urban fantasy that failed to live up its potential.

Shannon says

My brother's book!! I had so much fun reading this.
