

## KIRKUS REVIEW

Humans and mystical creatures band together to stop an evil sorcerer in Batchelder's debut, the first in a fantasy series.

Tarmun Vykers is a notorious warrior called The Reaper. He's mercilessly beaten by men and left in the forest with his hands and feet severed. He finds an unlikely rescuer in Arune, the ghost of a being (called a Shaper) capable of magic. Vykers agrees to share his body with Arune in exchange for his extremities—even if they're invisible. Before he can return to full strength, he's captured by the Virgin Queen's men. The Queen, despite being the one who ordered Vykers' mutilation, needs the warrior's help. A powerful sorcerer calling himself The End-of-All-Things is decimating the land and its people, and the Queen wants Vykers to halt the End's advance. Aoife, meanwhile, seeks vengeance against her brother Anders (aka the End). One of the magical A'Shea, Aoife gives birth to beasts of the forest, such as a satyr, all of whom will soon join the fight against her wicked brother. Numerous prolonged journeys occur before the impending battle. But Batchelder maintains impressive momentum with short scenes, switching between, for example, Vykers and Long Pete, who, along with friends, joins the Queen's military. There's likewise distinction among the plethora of characters: Arune's merely a voice in Vykers' head but offers sage advice and takes over if necessary (rendering the warrior unconscious to avoid a fight he'd likely lose); and Spirk, one of Long's traveling companions, clearly functions as comic relief. The fantasy treks through mostly familiar terrain, including magical swords and chimeras that fight alongside Vykers. But there are original creatures too, like the Svarren, which are misshapen, wart-covered humanoid beings. The plot, not surprisingly, entails a hefty amount of action, especially once it reaches the inevitable conflict between the End's and the Queen's armies. Intrigue, however, abounds when swords aren't clashing: the chimeras may be untrustworthy, while at least one character is not what he or she seems. Vykers is a remarkable, indelible protagonist, an antihero as equally lethal as the End.

A world most readers will already know but a story told with affection and skill.

## Midwest Book Review

Steel, Blood & Fire represents Book One of a series which is recommended for readers seeking an ongoing saga spread out over several (forthcoming) books. Those with an appreciation for stories that include satisfyingly complicated protagonists, action and confrontation and high drama in a dilemma faced by a notoriously great warrior who loses his abilities just when his skills are most needed by the world will find the story a gem.

What would such a warrior do, when confronted by a simmering disaster that only his recently-lost powers can prevent? How far would such a fighter go to regain his abilities? As a soldier used to winning by sword and violence, Tarmun considers transforming his very being through an unholy alliance with a sorceress, if that's what it takes to return to the fighting field.

Besides the surprising series mention, one thing to note about *Steel, Blood & Fire* is that it lives up to its title: its fantasy is tightly wound up in battles, blood, and confrontations which use action to its best advantage and hones motivation until it's an unpredictable and fine art.

It should be forewarned that there are gruesome scenes right from the start, juxtaposed with many unexpected moments that keep the action both soaked in blood and intriguing even to the most seasoned fantasy or warrior saga reader.

What other fantasy would include gigolos, autistic characters, and supernatural terrors alike? Because *Steel, Blood & Fire* takes its time (as it should) to build up complex, believable, and engrossing characters, it needs more books: a requirement that will delight fans of the epic fantasy/supernatural chronicle, who will appreciate the story's unexpected twists, thoroughly-developed characters, and engrossing dilemmas.

## Fantascize

*Steel, Blood, & Fire* by Allan Batchelder is an engaging epic fantasy novel that incorporates immortality, magic, and the nature of courage and war. There are many elements to keep track of, but it is a gripping tale.

The reader follows a number of character threads throughout the tale, including Vykers a ruthless warrior who is almost as bad as the man they need him to save them from and Arune, a Shaper or sorceress, who died years ago but whose conciseness and powers now resides in Vykers head until she can find another situation. Other characters include, Long Pete, a former gigolo in a small town and his friends who all get swept up in the conflict, Aoife a healer with a chilling past that drives her actions, Wims a man who is out for himself who places little value on human life, including his own, and End-of-All-Things a ruthless, psychopathic sorcerer, who is also Aoife's brother, whose taste for blood and destruction seem limitless. There were many other quirky and interesting characters that we got to meet, all tied to the battle surrounding End-of-All-Things.

The buildup to the final battle scenes, as well as the individual journeys of the characters, is compelling and well done. The internal conversations between Vykers had great comedic elements as well plot related material that helped Vykers defeat the End-of-All-Things and helped the characters to grow throughout the novel.

*"So, what's next?"*

*"After you get out of my body, you mean?"*

*Yes, well, that's going to take a considerable amount of gold.*

*Vykers stretched. "I've got gold. I just need to dig it out."*

*You buried it?*

*"In a manner of speaking. I've got various...business ventures, I guess you'd call 'em. My money'll keep building up ten years after I'm dirt."*

*And you don't think anyone's stolen it?*

*Vykers stared into the fire. "Terrible things happen to folks who steal from the Reaper."*

*I'll bet."*

The reader follows their journey from initial reluctance to work together to friends who bicker with one another frequently.

Another interesting storyline was Long Pete's capture by End-of-All-Things, which puts him on the other side of the war from his friends. His struggle to fight for a man who stands against everything, because of love was heartbreaking at times and his frustrations were sympathetic.

The horror of war, even when it is just, the strength of the individual, and finding inner courage were all examined within the story. The novel also creates a picture of what it means to relate to and work with other human beings in the midst of crisis and chaos, even if their motivations aren't aligned.

The way that the threads of the storyline came together, the quirky and unique characters, and the battle scenes were some of the best elements of the novel. It is very dialogue heavy, and the number of characters might make it difficult for readers to follow if not paying close attention. I would recommend this book to anyone who loves epic fantasy with these elements.