

The Reluctant King

by Dermot McCabe.

The Reluctant King is the first installment in the Dredgemark Codex, a medieval saga set in a fictional central Europe. This is a land of gothic castles, soaring mountain ranges and impenetrable forests. In the midst of this landscape sits the city state of Dredgemark, marked by gloomy decay and steeped in arcane technology, it is a place ripe, or rotten, for devious intrigue.

The reluctant king of the title, Cesare Greyfell, is too full of youthful distraction to give much time to its grimly byzantine affairs of state. The ambitious Chancellor, Demetrius Tancredi, schemes to usurp the executive powers while colluding with the neighbouring foe, the Brooderstalt, an uncouth, militaristic bunch who are plotting to annexe Cesare's kingdom. The young king is due a wake up call, all the more when his simmering love for Lucretia Beaufort is about to be snipped before it can even blossom, as Tancredi plans to marry her off to the Brooderstalt leader, Captain Pentrojan.

McCabe is keen to dig deeper into the bowels of his fictional world, rather than just concentrate on the great and the good, and the bad, in the city's ivory towers. Deep down in the sculleries and kitchens serving Dredgemark, we find a colourful cast of characters surrounding Cook Meister Lazarus Clutchbolt. Rejoicing in onomatopoeic names, there's the well proportioned Bella Crumble, assistant cook Leopold Ratchet and scullery girl Nellie Lowslegg. This ill assorted bunch is destined to form an unlikely heroic alliance against the forces of evil gathering against the city. Meanwhile, even further down in the depths, candlelighter Verm Bludvile, a Gollum waiting to happen, is inadvertently provoked into action against the king with dire consequences.

Dermot McCabe's debut novel is an assured voyage into an imagined landscape, successfully evoking a fabulous history with its own, convincing vocabulary. There are elements of Gormenghast here, in the gothic gloom of the crumbling city and the often grotesque characters that inhabit it. A more oblique allusion is to the art of Brueghel, in that it is a detailed observation of the crowded comedy of the medieval world. McCabe skillfully balances a raunchy humour against the more sombre elements of political intrigue and betrayal, with plenty of well wrought action sequences to keep the pace from flagging. The love story at its heart alternates between genuine charm and an ominous sense of a star-crossed affair, its own intricacies and deceits mirroring the changes of the society in which it is set.

Whether the personal is political, or the political personal, can not be ultimately resolved. The important thing with Dredgemark is that it recognises the linkage between the two. This is a story of great gusto, a rattling yarn of heightened language and larger than life characters. Fantasy it may be but it is full of the truths of humanity in all its vulgarity and duplicity. McCabe asserts the primacy of honour and the enduring nature of love while retaining the ability to revel in life's comedy. If you like your medieval fantasy rich in the details of real life, with all the chaos caused by love and war, but unmediated by magic swords, evil witches and gibbering elves, you'll love this.

Shane Harrison