

THE ILLUSTRATION OF THE FANTASY GENRE -THRONE OF THE CRESCENT MOON BY SALADIN AHMED

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Annotation: The following article is about the novel "Throne of the Crescent Moon" by Saladin Ahmed and analyzes the main features of the novel. The writer's writing style, the usage of words and the current affairs of the world are investigated. In addition, several characters used in the novel are classified and described below.

Key words: structure, style, symbols, conflict, Crescent Moon Kingdoms, Doctor Abdoulla, djenn, ghuls.

Throne of the Crescent Moon, by Saladin Ahmed, is one of the first works of fantasy based on the Middle East that has really done it for me. The work of Stephen Erikson clearly takes inspiration from the Middle East, but where he draws from the ancient world, Throne of the Crescent Moon uses material explicitly from Islamic cultures. Ahmed's world is monotheistic, with angels in heaven and those fallen, which feels very Islamic. It also has djin, khalifghuls and dervish armed with two-pronged swords.

The story follows Doctor Abdoulla Makhaslood, an ageing ghul hunter who is starting to suspect that an agent of the fallen angel is about to unleash something horrible upon his beloved city. His mission is further complicated by a brewing conflict between the Khalif and a mysterious rebel, The Falcon Prince. The Doctor must gather a team of ghul hunters including a Dervish sword master, magi, alchemist and were-lion to help unpack the ghul master's schemes and put an end to his evil magic, while failing to accede getting caught up in the Falcon Prince's class war.

The plot is pretty predictable and the arches of the characters, though all likeable, are telegraphed quite a long way in advance, but that didn't bother me, as I was having enough fun along the way. The Crescent Moon Kingdoms, home to djenn and ghuls, holy warriors and heretics, are at the boiling point of a power struggle between the iron-fisted Khalif and the mysterious master thief known as the Falcon Prince. In the midst of this brewing rebellion a series of brutal supernatural murders strikes at the heart of the Kingdoms. It is up to a handful of heroes to learn the truth behind these killings: Doctor Abdoulla Makhslood, "the last real ghul hunter in the great city of Dhamsawaat," just wants a quiet cup of tea. Three score and more years old, he has grown

wearry of hunting monsters and saving lives, and is more than ready to retire from his dangerous and demanding vocation. But when an old flame's family is murdered, Adoulla is drawn back to the hunter's path.

Raseed bas Raseed, Adoulla's young assistant, is a hidebound holy warrior whose prowess is matched only by his piety. But even as Raseed's sword is tested by ghuls and manjackals, his soul is tested when he and Adoulla cross paths with the tribeswoman Zamia. Zamia Badawi, Protector of the Band, has been gifted with the near-mythical power of the lion-shape, but shunned by her people for daring to take up a man's title. She lives only to avenge her father's death. Until she learns that Adoulla and his allies also hunt her father's killer. Until she meets Raseed. when they learn that the murders and the Falcon Prince's brewing revolution are connected, the companions must race against time—and struggle against their own misgivings—to save the life of a vicious despot. In so doing they discover a plot for the Throne of the Crescent Moon that threatens to turn Dhamsawaat, and the world itself, into a blood-soaked ruin.

Fantasy is not a genre that is the sole preserve of the West. Every culture has its stories of monsters, magic, gods and heroes. However, a lot of the fantasy filling up the bookshops is grounded in the Western tradition. Thankfully, that is changing thanks to books like *The Poppy War* and *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*. What is so exciting about being a fantasy fan nowadays is that with the publication of books grounded in cultures other than those of Anglo-Saxon mythology, we get to read about a whole bunch of new creatures, legends and mystical powers. Middle Eastern cultures, if approached respectfully, can be a gold mine for a fantasist. *The Arabian Nights* alone is already one of the greatest works of fantasy ever written. The world is really nicely built with enough detail and construction to enjoy while not detracting from the story. It carefully avoids the tropes and the cliches about the Middle East while still having fun with camels, alchemists, scimitars, nomads and a city full of vice.

The weakest part of the story is the villain; not the ghuls, who are greatly varied and horrifying, but the master behind them. The big bad behind it all is able to summon all these horrific monsters to take chunks out of the heroes, which is great, but ends up being a bit of a non-entity himself. I wonder if that is because Ahmed is setting up for a greater foe to be revealed in future books. I hope so. The front page of my copy says that is "Book one of the Crescent Moon Kingdoms" but according to the writer there isn't likely to be a sequel any time soon. I hope that he changes his mind. In the end, *The Throne of the Crescent Moon* is classic sword and sorcery featuring colorful characters, fun magic, and fantastical creatures in a sharp Middle Eastern setting. Much more Arabian

nights, Ahmed endows his deserts and minarets, khalifs and ghuls, turbans and secret scriptures with an adventure story the genre has never seen for its surface, but has seen thousands of times for its foundation.

Light entertainment, it will certainly appeal more to the side of genre who don't mind 'rebranding', while those tired with the formula, no matter how it appears, will be somewhat disappointed. At a minimum Ahmed does the little things right, which will be enough for most to see things through to the dark conclusion. It's always an interesting experience to sit down and try to write a review on a debut novel. There are numerous questions that always raise their heads, not the least of which pertain to the standards that I hold debuts to in relation to other books. Was the debut good as compared to other novels? Or, perhaps, was it just good for a debut novel? Or was it good at all, for that matter? At times I think I'm coming to a point of convergence on the issue, but at others I still wonder.

THRONE OF THE CRESCENT MOON (Amazon) is the first long-form work of author Saladin Ahmed, and one that I was fairly interested in reading. After sampling some of his short stories (finding quite a few that I liked) and noting the large number of positive reviews that seemed to be floating around the web about THRONE, I finally found a slot and wedged the book solidly into my schedule. My first impression of the book: Holy freaking cow, this thing is short! The hardcover weighs in at a whopping 288 pages. Not exactly what I've come to expect from fantasy fare, but THRONE had mostly been touted as a Sword & Sorcery novel (and those are usually shorter). So I wasn't too worried about the length, but it definitely wasn't a plus. The story itself revolves around two main characters, but has about six that get page time. The first character of import is Doctor Adoulla Makhslood. He's a tired, old guy that has been claimed to be the last real ghul hunter (ghuls being corpses reanimated by a powerful sorcerer) in his city. He complains a lot, and has a lot of history riding under the wide circumference of his belt, but knows how to get the job done and does it when it needs doing. His compatriot, Raseed bas Raseed, is a young whirling dervish type that praises God and dispenses His holy justice where necessary. They both live in the city of Dhamsawaat. Over them, rules the tyrannical Khalif. And because he's so tyrannical, there's a guy that's opposing him: the Falcon Prince.

Age versus youth factors frequently into a story that plays outside the normal "Fantasy Sandbox" in more ways than just length. The setting was one of the aspects of the story that I enjoyed. It is one of a more Middle-Eastern flare, instead of the much-seen medieval setting. So we get new cities, and new foods;

new terms and new customs; they're all peppered throughout the story. Although, the size of the book didn't allow for much of the setting to be overly developed, Ahmed did a good job of portraying those pieces that were necessary, and I never really felt tripped up because of a lack of understanding. Thus, props to him for being able to give readers this new setting and keeping clarity.

The main story itself though had some pretty serious issues, from my perspective. There's the spread of the characters to begin. Having six POV characters in a book that has fewer than three hundred pages is just asking for trouble. There just isn't enough time to develop each of their stories. Even giving it the benefit of the doubt, the main story never really took off. It stayed very small and localized. In fact, the book felt more like a watered-down but bloated short story by the time I got to the end.

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