

FRIARS' BOOKSHELF



ST. DOMINIC AND THE DEVIL
PIETRO DELLA VECCHIA, C. 1630

THE WAY OF KINGS

Brandon Sanderson, *The Way of Kings*. New York: Tor Fantasy, 2011.

Is Brandon Sanderson's *The Way of Kings* an "epic fantasy" novel? Given its length (over 1200 pages and only the first in a projected ten-volume series) and the fact that benchmark fantasy publisher Tor released it, the answer might seem obvious. But in fact, the book illustrates why most books billing themselves as fantasy miss the point of the genre and devolve into "sci-fi with swords."

Sanderson's novel introduces readers to a vast world of varied cultures, intricate politics, detailed mythology, and, of course, magic, as the stories of four main characters are interwoven. The world of Roshar is dominated by "highstorms"—brutal tempests originating from an unknown point in the east that scourge the land as they

travel west, infusing gems with mysterious “stormlight.”

The dominant religion of this world teaches that Roshar began as a fall-back position for the forces of the Almighty—led by his ten Heralds and their powerful Knights Radiant—after being expelled from the Tranquiline Halls by the nightmarish “Voidbringers.” The Heralds attempted to retake their former abode and left Roshar in the hands of the Knights Radiant. After years of service, these Knights, in turn, cast down their magical armaments and abandoned the people. Centuries later, it is in this betrayed, buffeted world that readers meet the novel’s main characters.

Kaladin “Stormblessed” is a surgeon’s son turned soldier, turned slave, turned “bridgeman” in the army of the King of Alethkar. These bridgemen lead the army’s charge, carrying and setting bridges so the soldiers can ford a series of massive chasms. Kaladin’s story jumps from past to present as readers learn how this charismatic twenty-year-old—who is also a spear master—came to be where he is.

Shallan Davar is a young woman whose mission is to become the ward of Jasnah Kholin, the most renowned scholar of the age, and also its most notorious heretic. While appearing to study under Jasnah’s tutelage, her real goal is to steal her mistress’ magical Soulcaster, which has the power to transmute one object into another. Shallan’s moral struggle is set within the broader context of Jasnah’s research, and both have repercussions for the overall plot and the other main characters.

Szeth-son-son-Vallano is perhaps the book’s most intriguing character. He is a “Truthless,” one who is obliged unconditionally to do the bidding of his master. Most often, this means assassination, since Szeth is the deadliest individual in the book. Not only is he able to draw stormlight from gems to perform incredible feats of magic, but he is also a “shardbearer,” possessing one of the mythical swords once carried by the Knights Radiant. A pacifist, he weeps as he is forced to kill.

Lastly, there is Dalinar Kholin, Highprince of Alethkar and uncle to the King. A shardbearer, a peerless general, and a legendary warrior, he has strange visions whenever highstorms strike. This, com-

bined with the fact that he lives by ancient codes of nobility outlined in a text called *The Way of Kings*, makes him a pariah. His mission from the Almighty is to “unite them,” (though the referent is unclear) and by the end of the book his story has met up with Kaladin’s.

The book is surprisingly well paced—presuming that readers don’t have television-induced attention spans—and Sanderson does a good job interweaving plots and avoiding meandering descriptions. He’s certainly gifted at creating worlds, and he gives the book a grand scope without necessitating a twenty-page glossary. This should suffice to show that the book is truly epic.

But *The Way of Kings* is not truly fantasy. Rather than charge headlong into the murky waters of defining fantasy over and against science fiction, I’ll make a more modest—and hopefully less controversial—proposal: whatever its definition may be, true fantasy has its roots in fairy tale. *The Way of Kings* does not.

In particular, there are two traits of the fairy tale that save the fantasy genre from being merely sci-fi at the Ren-Fest. First, fairy tales presuppose that the fantastic or ineffable is an indispensable part of the real. As a genre, science fiction demands no such presupposition (even if individual works of sci-fi, like Lewis’ Space Trilogy, do). The second trait is equally important: fairy tale does not posit a hypothetical. Instead, it makes a fact claim (or at least a belief claim) about the nature of the real world. Science-fiction stories are “what if” stories. Fairy tales are “once upon a time.”

While this trait need not be as explicit in fantasy as it is in a full-blooded fairy tale, it must at least be implicit if it is to maintain its roots in the latter. Tolkien goes to great lengths to identify Middle-Earth and the real world (despite the massive physical differences between the two), and even the story of Lloyd Alexander’s Prydain Chronicles is told in such a way that there is no reason to think it isn’t our world in a mythic age. This must be so, because while sci-fi is inherently “futuristic” (and so potential), fantasy and fairy tale look to the past, which was once actual. When it comes to Sanderson’s *The Way of Kings*, however, there is neither an explicit link nor an implicit connection between Roshar and our world. The reader

has the distinct sense of being immersed in a hypothetical of grand scale.

If *The Way of Kings* makes no claim to reality, even less does it uphold the wonderful and the ineffable as an essential part of the real. The most noticeable characteristic of fantasy is magic, and Sanderson's magic is clearly a "system." It has detailed rules, making it a techne in the original sense of the word (an art or craft). As such, it is indistinguishable in all but appearance from the technological feats of science fiction. Not so with the magic of Gandalf (or the miracles of the Saints).

The Way of Kings entertains readers with a "what if" of epic proportions. It does not ask readers to believe in Roshar, but only to follow the playing-out of its internal logic. It does not claim that the ineffable is a part of the real, and, in fact, Sanderson goes much further: the ineffable, if it must be present at all, cannot play any pivotal role in the plot. Indeed, according to "Sanderson's First Law" (as he calls it elsewhere), "an author's ability to solve conflict with magic is directly proportional to how well the reader understands said magic." Only what can be comprehended has a place in the resolution of human drama. The final answer must not involve mystery.

Thus, *The Way of Kings* is an epic work of sci-fi, with swords. The characters are interesting, the battles are thrilling, the magic system is clever, and the plot proceeds like a well-oiled machine. But whatever this world of Sanderson's may be, it is not our world (implicitly or explicitly), and there is no room for what cannot be explained therein. Everything of significance must be comprehended and circumscribed, and thus the roots of fairy tale have been dug up and the leaves of fantasy scattered.

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