



The Wicked and the Witless

Hugh Cook

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The action of this volume of the Chronicles takes place just before that of The Wizards and the Warriors. The young Sean Kelebes Sarazin, returning to Selzirk after a long period as a hostage, expects to play a major role in the city where his mother, Farfalla, is the kingmaker. But his hopes are rudely dashed: his comfortable life as a hostage had left him ill-prepared for a life of war, intrigue and wizardry, and in the event, acquiring power proved rather more complicated than he imagined. Nevertheless, he has a vision: he sees himself as the legendary figure of prophecy, Watashi, and sets out to make that vision come true.

The Wicked and the Witless Details

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From Reader Review The Wicked and the Witless for online ebook

Ceri Sambrook says

I'm cheating and using this review for all Hugh Cook's Chronicles of an Age of Darkness.

Take almost every fantasy cliche and trope you can think of and give it to Eddings or Jordan and you get 'The Belgariad' or 'The Wheel of Time'- entertaining enough but otherwise soulless pap. Give them however to Hugh Cook and you get your tiny mind blown. He turns everything on its head like no other author before or after him. Wizards, magic bottles, monsters and heroes are used in such a fresh imaginative way that you are glued to the story page by page. Humour pervades every book to a varying degree and one of the great disappointments in life is that he never finished the whole set as he saw them- though luckily each book can be read as a stand alone novel, rewarding fans with nods, winks and links akimbo, otherwise complete reads in themselves.

I cannot recommend these books enough- even if you are not a fantasy fan; believe me these books will nothing like you expect and I think represent a truly unique literary experience

Dave says

Read this hard on the heels of The Walrus and the Warwolf (#4) and wrapped it pretty quickly. Perhaps it suffered from the close comparison. I rate the series so far but this has a real "middle book" feel to it. Few new ideas or big set pieces, more filling in backstory and asking the reader to rethink the situations and characters from the first 4 books (3.5 really if you see #2 as a bit of a filler demanded by the publishers).

The language is less playful and 'hero' less dynamic, with a far more event driven narrative. But that totally fits the characters and themes of this piece. It remains to be seen whether this functions as a true pivot for the series, and the casting of unreliable narrators and changing perceptions of the main players so far comes together in later books for a big payoff.

I certainly feel that the plotting is tighter, and the writing more subtle in exercising some control over the reader, than I earlier gave credit for. I felt like I should've been enjoying the ride less, and paying more attention to the details from the first volumes - and that maybe it would be worth owning the copies to dip back and recheck certain 'facts'. This series makes me think I will be re-reading and getting more out of it.

I have always been a fan of Cook's almost indecently fast wrap-ups. Looking forward to the second block of 5 books.

Zivan says

I had an even harder time with the protagonist of the Wicked and the Witless than I had with Drake in The Walrus and the Warwulf.

He is indeed witless and his destiny is controlled by wicked politicians.

The hero is just too stupid and there isn't enough of Hugh's great cometary.

Dan Schwent says

Sean Sarazin, exiled son of a Kingmaker, returns to the Harvest Plains, the land of his birth, and sets about trying to get himself crowned king. Little does he know the vast web of conspiracy he's been ensnared in for most of his life...

The Wicked and the Witless tells the story of San Sarazin, the man known as Watashi in the first four books of the *Chronicles of an Age of Darkness*. In those books, we're given the impression that Watashi is a formidable warrior and strategist. This book shows us the truth.

The Wicked and the Witless takes what has become a fantasy cliche, the hero foretold in an ancient prophecy, and turns it on its ear. There is a prophecy but Sarazin has been nudged into fulfilling it by years of subtle manipulation. There are wheels within wheels in this story and endless political machinations and double-dealing. It was difficult to tell who was working with whom.

Sarazin is an unwitting pawn and as ill-equipped as most of Hugh Cook's protagonists. Thoric Jarl, the wise old mercenary, is a fountain of wisdom, gradually grooming Sarazin to become Watashi, whose name means blood and death. Sarazin's story raises questions about fate, destiny, and even history itself.

Easter eggs abound in The Wicked and the Witless. Miphon and Morgan Hearst are fairly prominent, as is that splendid bastard Drake Douay. The fall of the Confederation of Wizards and the rise of The Swarms is retold yet again, as is the war between Stokos and Hok.

Hugh Cook has woven a twisting tale sure to please any fan of political fantasy. Readers of the earlier *Chronicles of an Age of Darkness* won't want to miss this one.

Duncan says

After a 25 year (or more) gap since I read the first 4 books this one was a fun revisit to the Age of Darkness Universe. Hugh Cook has a fun, not too serious style, and paints an epic picture. The quirk is that, although sequels in the series, most of these books take place across the same timeline and so depict the same series of events but from a different person perspective. Thus the complexity of the characters and politics grows with each book, making it a very satisfactory read, for such seemingly lightweight material. However, that means a 25 year pause between reading the books is not ideal. I did recognise some of the events that took place, particularly later in the book, as scenes I had read from another protagonist angle. Shouldn't have waited so long to read.

Ben says

This is probably my least favourite book of the Cook's excellent *Chronicles of an Age of Darkness*. The main protagonist, Sean Kelebes Sarazin (or Sarazin Sky as he known to his mother, or Watashi as he would be known to the world at large) is a particularly weak and irritating character. Cook is great at giving us flawed characters who are far from being the traditional fantasy hero and making them real and somehow turning

them into personalities who we are at the very least interested and of whom we can admire certain aspects. He did it with Togura Poulaan in The Wordsmiths and the Warguild, with Dreldragon Drake Douay in The Walrus and the Warwolf, and with the character of Guest Gulkan in The Witchlord and the Weaponmaster - The running theme being callow youths who have a rather over inflated sense of their own worth and their place within the world and their development into more mature and somewhat more likable people. The second part of this theme fails to arrive with Sarazin in *The Wicked and the Witless* and he remains a spoiled, selfish, delusional and unlikable character through it all. The lessons he learns along the way fail to temper his personality nor to bring about any kind of moral change. While he does learn things, they add nothing to any sense maturity and even when he reflects on his misfortunes or his mistakes, moments of clarity are instantly rejected when the next opportunity arises for his own solipsistic advancement arrive. Was this an intentional goal of Cook's? Was he striving here to generate an antihero? Given his skill elsewhere, I am inclined to think so. I do not believe that we are really supposed to like Sarazin much at all, though perhaps not to hate him either. Rather, he is an object of contempt and ridicule, and perhaps at best, from those most charitable, of pity.

Yet, despite all this, this book still rates five stars for me. Perhaps this is rather generous, and in all honesty I must admit that Cook is one of my favourite authors, his worst offering being far superior to many other authors' best in my opinion. While much of this book retreads general territory which is covered in both The Wizards and the Warriors and in *The Walrus and the Warwolf*, and while very little is added in terms of the ongoing meta-plot and progressing history of the world, it does give a different perspective of those events and adds to the richness of the world. We visit the Rice Empire for the first time and get a rather more detailed picture of Selzirk and the Harvest Plains, as well as Chenameg. Characters such as Farfalla the Kingmaker and Plovey of the Regency are revisited, as of course is Drake Douay. There are cameos from Morgan Hearst and references to a number of other characters who crop up in previous books, as well as some minor ones from later books such as Zelafona the Witch, her dwarf son Glambrax (perhaps one of the more interesting appearances) and even such random names as Theodora Turbothot (ne Thrug) and of course Thodric Jarl. Seeing some of these from difference perspectives is certainly interesting, in particular comparing the overlapping events of this volume and *The Walrus and the Warwolf*, but in this relatively slim volume not much is revealed that is of particular interest. A different perspective, variant thoughts on a wider theme, facets of a prism. For me, as a fan of the series and the world which Cook created, these are positive things.

Also, whatever is thought of the character of Sarazin, Cook's writing does not suffer with this volume. He remains witty, thought provoking and the prose flows at a pace where the reader is never bored and is always eager for the next chapter. In many ways this is particularly impressive in the face of such a pathetic little creep of a main character as Sarazin. Rereading this book for the first time in over fifteen years (I have read it at least twice before, maybe three times), I definitely both appreciate it more than I did before, and also am more aware of the flaws in Cook's rather brilliant writing. On the one hand I appreciate the way this book fits in to the pattern of the *Chronicles* more than I previously did, especially reading in quick succession after several others in the series, but also well aware that Hugh Cook passed away a number of years ago now and this series is well and truly over lends a significant sense of loss and probably of added value to the reading experience. On the other, it has been several years since I started cataloguing my reading experiences on Goodreads and in that time I have become far more aware and far more critical of the things I read, and there are certain aspects of Cook's writing which may not stand up well scrutiny. The general lack of strong female characters would probably be one of the major criticisms of his style, and yet here we encounter Farfalla, a strong, intelligent and very practical woman. Not the main character, it is nice to see that Cook's world does not treat all women as objects of lust or chattels. These books are very much set in an age of darkness, and the sad fact about a great deal of history is that the world was not a pleasant place for women unattached to men or who tried to be strong in their own rights. I feel Cook is here adhering to a certain gritty realism

which runs through his books, even in the face of the ludicrous or the utterly fantastic. One of my favourites of the *Chronicles* is The Women and Warlords, which has a strong female character, yet it is probably no accident that that book is not the norm. Still, there are various portrayals of female characters here which many may find distasteful, or at the very least outdated. I would argue that these are intentional and serve a literary purpose, but for the more sensitive reader... Well, to be honest, it is unlikely that they have progressed this far through the series.

In the end, for the fan, this is a worthwhile and interesting book. However, I must be honest and say that this is neither the best place to start with Cook's *Chronicles of an Age of Darkness*, nor will the casual reader miss anything of any significant import if they were to skip this book. On the other hand, even today there are not so many fantasy books which can both embrace such a style of epic scope and high fantasy and yet combine it with a dirty, ugly side of things which is so lacking in the typical fantasy read and then add a healthy dose of humour and top it off with sophistication and intelligent thought.

Ed says

I have to say this was the point in the series where my interest flagged somewhat. Again it is another witty picaresque adventure but the central character this time round is less likeable and the whole thing has a certain *deja vu* quality to it - I suppose that after 3000-4000 pages essentially on the same events, it was inevitable that the narrative would start to run out of steam at some point.

Apparently the sixth book shifts the focus away from the events of the first 5 volumes to introduce a new plot and a raft of new characters. Probably a wise decision on the evidence of this one.

Steve says

Chronicles of an Age of Darkness

Jp says

Maintains Cook's high standard of writing, yet not as enjoyable as previous books as it seemed our hapless protagonist just never gets a break. Watashi lacked the stature of Alish or Hearst, or the cheek and boldness of Drake Douay. He really just comes across as an impotent soul with ideas above his station. Enjoyable but not rousing like the previous books.
