

## **Riders of the Dead**

Written by Dan Abnett

Published by the Black Library

£16.99

Dan Abnett is easily the most prolific writer for the Black Library, so it is quite appropriate that his work has been chosen to be the first hardback release by them. What we have is a handsome volume, clothbound with a rather lurid cover painting by Adrian Smith on the dust jacket. It's surprisingly reassuring that no corners have been cut in offering a genuine hardback pulp fantasy, and full credit has to be given to the publishers for the physical qualities of the book.

The story itself is also a little different from your typical Black Library fare, though not in actual plot and characterisation but more in the manner of narration and level of descriptive detail. Set in 2521 at the time of the current *Storm of Chaos* narrative campaign, we follow the travels of two Imperial cavalymen as they travel north with their regiment to face the barbarian northmen. The very act of placing the story in an ongoing event automatically imbues it with more dynamism and excitement. We know almost immediately that large-scale events are taking place and that the very nature of the Warhammer world can and may change. It's a minor criticism of most Black Library fare – especially Warhammer – but you often can't escape the feeling that the story being told is so minor and unimportant that it could be happening anywhere and bears little relevance or connection with world events. In other words, nothing is going to change. It's beyond my knowledge of the internal workings of the Black Library and Games Workshop as a whole as to whether 'trusted' authors such as Abnett are given more leeway when it comes to advancing the storyline, but this book at least *feels* like some kind of history is taking place.

And indeed, it's the history that stands out from the book. Without giving too much of the story away, our heroes Gerlach Heileman and Karl Reiner Vollen are eventually separated due to a major conflict, and their differing paths lead them into quite disparate cultures. Abnett has clearly spent an awful lot of time attempting to make the Kislevite and Kurgan cultures more detailed in an attempt to add realism, seemingly by reading up on similar cultures in real world history. I can't claim to be literate enough to tell the difference between clever bluff or genuine levels of research and understanding, but the text is liberally spiced with archaic terms, foreign words, and attempts to evoke culture. Sometimes this does go too far; one paragraph in particular felt more like it was showing off depth of knowledge (or at least, the ability to make up convincing historical text) whilst adding little to the story.

While this detail adds a great deal to authenticating the value of the story beyond mere hack fantasy - at least for those of us who enjoy a bit of 'culture' in our light reading – it does jar a little from the existing material. We tend to accept that the Empire is our everyman state, we're supposed to relate to it. Yet the Empire should be fairly alien to our modern sensibilities, especially those of us who don't hail from continental Europe. It would have been great to have seen more of the research put into enriching the Empire. Instead we have the tiresome cultural stereotypes that anyone with a copy of the Empire army book can recall. A soldier in

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black must be from Nuln, and odds on he has knowledge of some kind of gunpowder weapon. The Empire is a huge place, yet it seems there is little or any variety beyond the thin clichés supplied by the core material and endlessly repeated in every fiction release ever since. It's a minor quibble but one that stands out more because of the effort put into realising the culture of the principle peoples of the novel.

So we have a story set in unfamiliar places and full of detail, with our two heroes being dragged off in separate directions to experience the richness of the backdrop. But there are problems more fundamental to the enjoyment of the story than fanboy nitpicking regarding the background. Characterisation is weak in places, in others non-existent. Vollen and Heileman begin the story defined as a case of have and have-not, and it seems clear where the split will occur and how it will affect them. The obvious path isn't chosen, to the readers' relief, but this initial attempt at setting up our principle characters seems undermined by the rest of the story and even forgotten. As each strand of the story develops in its own way, the characters are put against personal tests that change them, but the actual change seems ill-explained. The actual change is clear to see but I found it hard to understand quite why there would be such transformation in the characters' behaviours. The motifs aren't new to Warhammer fiction, indeed it can be said that the *Konrad* books make a more believable attempt at showing how the harsh nature of Chaos can corrupt.

Despite these flaws, the narrative carries on at a rollicking pace and it is quite easy to forget niggles when you are drawn in by well-written dialogue and action sequences. Here we see the author's strengths, and he employs them well. I'm not normally a fan of overlong and overly heroic combats, but Abnett manages to balance realism with heroic excitement and pulls it off with some style. This is at heart a Black Library novel, and blood and gore is liberally applied whenever good reason is given. Given that the story is set during Archaon's invasion of the Old World, it's a safe bet that bloodshed isn't more than a few pages away. Unlike other Warhammer books, I didn't ever find this gratuitous. There is a pervading sense of, dare I say it, realism, throughout the book. *Riders of the Dead* is a very low-fantasy story, both in style and content. Magic and the supernatural is mentioned, but always kept as something to fear and distrust rather than a commonly-encountered force. All credit is due for this balancing act.

In attempting to avoid giving too much of the plot away, I've managed to do the opposite and give very little. This is high-action pulp fantasy, but a high-class one at that. While the motives and nature of some of the characters is unfortunately weak, the overall plot is sufficiently strong to forgive the flaws and enjoy it. For WFRP players there is a wealth of interesting information on the background of Kislev and the Marauders, and the overall success in balancing the fantasy aspect of the world is a lesson that no GM can do without. Overall an enjoyable story, and worth taking a look at even if most Black Library fiction leaves you cold. I get the feeling that the hardback nature of the book might put off some casual buyers but may attract those unfamiliar with the games and setting. For those too tight to splash out, I'm afraid you will have to wait for the paperback release!

Robert.

StS Rating 7.

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