

The Dark River

Review of The Dark River, Book Two of The Fourth Realm Trilogy
by John Twelve Hawks

John Twelve Hawks' gritty science fantasy book, *The Traveller*, was a great success and if you haven't already read it, I highly recommend it. Which must have created a lot of pressure for Twelve Hawks as he worked on this second book in the series – and in places it shows.

During *The Traveller*, Twelve Hawks delivers a nicely balanced mix of description and action along with his cast of intelligently drawn characters – altogether a powerful and well crafted story. Travellers can escape their own bodies and travel to three other existing realms. This talent has always created lethal hostility in the ruling classes - and never more so than now. Twelve Hawks' depiction of a dystopian world, where the Vast Machine controls the population through the politics of fear and an ever-widening network of sophisticated surveillance equipment, is all the sharper for being recognisably our own. Two brothers are targeted as potential Travellers by the Brethren/Tabula – a shadowy organisation who run Governments and oversee daily security throughout the world. However, instead of exterminating them – their default response – the decision is made to keep these two alive and harness their abilities towards strengthening the powerbase of the Brethren.

The story unfolds into a classic pageturner, as we follow the fortunes of Michael and Gabriel Corrigan and their efforts to come to terms with their situation – along with a host of well-drawn, complex characters. My personal favourite is Maya, the troubled Harlequin, trained to kill from an early childhood – and bitterly resenting the lonely, limited lifestyle she endures as a consequence.

The Dark River takes this thriller forward after a cliff-hanger ending from the first book – but the pace initially stutters. Despite a brief synopsis of the story so far at the start of the book, Twelve Hawks holds up the pace for explanations during the first few action sequences, which I found jarring in comparison with the balance and poise of the first book.

However, the narrative regains its stride and I especially enjoyed the section in the tunnels under New York and the episode in London. Twelve Hawks is particularly good at scene setting – you get a real sense of place from his description and as the action in this place swings around America, through Europe and into Ethiopia, the backdrop to his adventure is cinematically sharp.

The Dark River is a much shorter book than *The Traveller*, which is not altogether a good thing. The story is told in multiple viewpoint and one of the great pleasures throughout the first book was Twelve Hawks' skill in interweaving a complex, fast paced plot with three dimensional, engrossing characters. While he still delivers the plot, some components seem a bit rushed, for instance, the introduction of the Ark would be more convincing for me if the idea that others had also used it as a portal was more fully explored.

I also felt that several of the newly introduced characters did not get the time and attention they deserved. For example, Alice Chen's viewpoint seems to be missing throughout the book, except in the most cursory manner and after introducing us to the key figure, Mrs Brewster – a truly intriguing personality – we are left looking at her from the outside. Throughout this book, I felt the motivations and shifting power struggles within the Brethren/Tabula deserved to be depicted in greater detail. General Nash, a leading character in *The Traveller* fades into relative obscurity in this book, which means his confrontation with Mrs Brewster near the end comes as something of an anti-climax – a shame, after such a great build-up in the first book.

I am conscious that I appear to be giving *The Dark River* a really hard time, which is not the intention. I recommend it as an enjoyable 3½ star read. However, *The Traveller* is a great read and I look forward to Book Three when John Twelve Hawks, hopefully, regains his initial form and completes this excellent tale with the same flair.