
Review of Last Argument of Kings

Review of Last Argument of Kings, Book Three of The First Law

by Joe Abercrombie

The golden rule in any character-led story is to make said characters sympathetic so that the reader cares what will happen to them and thus engage fully with the book. Well, Joe Abercrombie trashed that one.

His main protagonists are an amoral, power-mad Mage... a hard-bitten warrior whose berserker rages cause him to commit unspeakable acts of barbarity... a drunken, embittered woman who has a love affair because she can't think of anything better to do... the cowardly, arrogant fool she slept with... Oh – did I mention the scheming cripple who tortures innocent people for a living? All these characters' flaws are unflinchingly laid open to our gaze. Laced with a lot of bad language – and if you are squeamish, there are a couple of unpleasantly explicit torture scenes, as well as loads of blood and gore in the fight scenes. Personally, blood and gore doesn't do it for me.

And yet... and yet... I couldn't put the book down! Not only that, my favourite character by a long mile is Superior Glokta, the aforementioned torturer. It's a neat trick to pull off. And if you're wondering whether I've overloaded on too much caffeine, or that reading said book till 3 am has fused my brain – my husband, who has views on profanity, is also a great fan.

Abercrombie's vivid prose and masterful character depiction are major reasons why this author can get away it, along with the humour threading through story - desert-dry irony that has you panting for more. The world in all its grimy vividness leaps off the page with the same relish that the Monty Python crew depicted medieval filth in *Jabberwocky*. Having said that, while Glokta's adventures sometimes teeter on the edge of farce, thanks to the wonderful internal musings on his plight, the savage undertow of violence and his constant pain keeps it from becoming too cosy.

Abercrombie's other clever trick, is that despite this being Book Three of the series, I didn't feel I needed to reread Books One and Two. He manages to make the storyline of this volume self-contained enough that, although there was no prologue, I didn't feel it mattered too much.

'The last argument of Kings' was apparently the inscription on Louis XIV's cannons, according to Abercrombie. This classic fantasy plot, written in third person multiple viewpoint, complete with an ineffective king and corrupt courtiers facing a series of unpleasant threats, enlivened by this cast of nasty characters, has the full range of unexpected twists, delivered with plenty of pace. If your tastes run to the gorier end of fantasy tales, then you've probably already come across Abercrombie. But if you usually enjoy a gentler version of fantasy, give this author a try – he's well worth it, and I certainly found him a five star read.

10/10