


Mike Vargo 

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Fiction

Reviews

Book Review

Review: *The Green Mage* by Michael SimmsAA A  2670

Going highbrow all the time will limit a person. There's a lot of good mass-market culture to be enjoyed, too. As someone who favors literary fiction and art films, I'd be happy to tell you why more of us should read Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled* — but also why *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* should rank with the 20th century's great movies.

Then we come to the fantasy genre called sword and sorcery. It's hard to avoid these days, but if you have missed the train lately, a newly released novel offers a worthwhile onboarding experience. *The Green Mage* scores well as both a page-turner and a thought-provoker. The book is slotted in the young adult (YA) category, which in this case mainly means that sex acts are referred to rather than being graphically described. So the novel is safer than the internet for teenagers and engaging for grownups as well.

The author, Michael Simms, has been known primarily as a poet. One pleasant surprise in *The Green Mage* is that the language doesn't strain to be overly or idiosyncratically poetic. When the characters include an irate she-dragon and a king robbed of his powers by a mesmerizing black stone, we're already in augmented reality, and illusions are best maintained by telling the story plainly. Which Simms does, often to powerful effect.

The Green Mage is set in an imaginary land where early medieval customs and standards of living seem to blend with Bronze Age technology: swords and knives are made of "copper." Sorcery, though not ubiquitous, is afoot. The narrator, the Green Mage himself, knows some green magic, the healthy and nurturing kind. Yet he uses it only in times of utmost need, preferring to live simply as an itinerant trader and peddler.



The Green Mage by Michael Simms

Will his itinerant lead him into a great adventure? You bet. The river valley in which the Green Mage plies his trade is randomly terrorized by a wizard adept in black magic. That villain, nominally a regent of the king, will ride into a village leading a troop of soldiers who proceed to burn, rape, kill and loot. The dark wizard's mistake is crossing a young woman who dares to resist. Tessia turns out to be quite a foe. Her magic — such as it is — consists of being fearsomely effective with weapons and in barehanded combat. She's also a natural leader. Along with a couple of her rough-and-ready pals, Tessia persuades the reluctant Green Mage to join her on a seemingly impossible mission. She aims to overthrow the entire corrupt regime ruling the land. And to do it, in part, by recruiting the renegade dragon Tyrmiss to her cause.

Action aplenty ensues. But that isn't the real appeal of *The Green Mage*, nor are the fight scenes necessarily the ones that stand out. Most of the drama stems from the interplay of personal tensions and conflicting motives. We get imperfect characters trying to be perfectly noble, which of course they can't. Much of the comedy comes from people inadvertently showing up with their weak sides showing. (When first threatened by an armed opponent, the Green Mage pees his pants, launching a series of self-confessed embarrassments.) All of this stuff rings true to life, and it elevates the novel beyond the realm of piling on supernatural thrills to keep the reader entertained.

The Green Mage does deliver the things that discerning readers look for in fantasy stories. There are cool invented rituals, such as a wedding ceremony unlike any this writer has seen. Equally cool is the scientific explanation of how a dragon breathes fire. (Mini-spoiler: it's like lighting a fart. The dragon summons a methane-laden belch and ignites it by clicking her teeth.) There are also scenes that mimic actual modern history, except with key details changed. A young man who slipped into petty crime is surrounded by a circle of his neighbors, who subject him to a public treatment that looks eerily like the denunciation sessions practiced in China during the Cultural Revolution. But instead of shaming the fellow, people shower him with praise and love. Features like these are prized in fantasy because they invite us to envision how life could be, as opposed to the same old same old. They're nicely rendered throughout *The Green Mage*.

And BTW, if you are looking for a woke book, here it is. Despite treading lightly on the erotica, *The Green Mage* is NSFT — not suitable for Texas school libraries. Same-sex relationships abound, as do racial and interracial themes. Trans characters are absent but several characters are bi. We meet strong, heroic women and sensitive men. And so much sex happens offstage that you'd think people were doing it every day everywhere. Wait: on further review, they are. Chalk up another point for realism.

This isn't a perfect novel. The later chapters feel rushed at times, packing a host of developments and denouements into a whirlwind. Author Simms might've addressed the issue by expanding his 311-page book into a 700-page gobstopper. He has opted to run lean, presenting *The Green Mage* as the first installment of a trilogy, and the approach has benefits of its own. You get a quicker read sooner, presumably without having to wait years for the next novel either.

As for comparable books in the world of lit fic, we could return to Ishiguro. If you enjoyed *The Buried Giant* — also a fantastic early-medieval dragon tale, which is more than just a dragon tale — try *The Green Mage*. Different spin, different author, very different sort of ending. But variety gives you the spice of reading.

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Purchase *The Green Mage* by Michael Simms

YA

Michael Simms



Mike Vargo

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Mike Vargo is a Pittsburgh-based nonfiction writer. Aside from pointing out that nonfiction means "not not true" he tries to stay away from hammy humor. Past credits as a journalist include several major awards and lead-writing a piece that was a finalist for the National Magazine Award. He has been anthologized in Lee Gutkind's *Our Roots Grow Deeper Than We* and has collaborated on prominent nonfiction books. He also writes personal essays, and reviews theater and the visual arts.

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Great review, Mike Vargo. I concur on all points!

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