



The March North

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Egalitarian heroic fantasy. Presumptive female agency, battle-sheep, and bad, bad odds.

The March North Details

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Lesley says

Maybe it didn't help that when I started this I was reading in fits and starts on a research trip; but then I put it aside in favour of comfort reading during travel and never went back to it. Possibly just not the right book at the right time in the right circumstances rather than anything wrong with it.

Olethros says

Nice, interesting... but ... the terrible writing ... is it English?

Ozsaur says

I really wish I could give this book a higher rating. The writer did some interesting things with magic, world building, and gender, but the lack of explanation, and the all around obscurity for the sake of being obscure makes it hard to be more enthusiastic.

The magic system is unique, and far more intriguing than the typical Tolkien-esque knock-offs. It feels like the writer did some deep thinking about what the world would really be like if magic was abundant, and could be used by nearly everyone. What would a world really be like if powerful magic-users were able to shape the universe to suit their whims over thousands of years? It certainly wouldn't look anything like medieval Europe, or any other place that this world has experienced.

Unfortunately, some of the world building didn't work for me because there was little to no explanation about what things were, or even what they looked like. I still have no idea how I was supposed to visualize a lot of the action, and objects that played an important role in the story. What does a Standard look like? I have no idea.

There were several characters that I liked, but many felt interchangeable because I had no idea how to visualize them. I get that the writer was downplaying gender (and that aspect did work for me to a certain extent) but I needed more than just an odd name to remember who these people were.

The plot was fairly straight forward, and there was a lot of fun magical stuff, but the reading experience was more difficult than it needed to be.

David Tate says

If David Weber's endless infodumps make you want to scream, this might be the military fantasy for you.

Here's an author who doesn't coddle the reader, telling him exactly what to think and feel and expect. On page one, you're dropped into weirdness squared -- something extra bizarre is happening to people that you

would already consider bizarre enough. Explanations happen, but in bits and snippets. A picture builds. You discover that words that you thought you understood (Line, Standard, weeds, focus, ...) don't actually mean what you thought they did, not here. You are thrown into a cataclysm, viewed through the eyes of people whose job is to be ready for cataclysm. Just as you're figuring out how the world works, you figure out that the rest of the world doesn't work like that at all, and that your local corner is the weird one. About to get weirder. The phrase "made of solid despair" will occur. Very Scary People will do things; some of them will be on our side. Probably.

This is a superb work of worldbuilding, an introduction to a place you will want to return to time and again. It's also an exciting story, so far as it goes, but that's not the real point. Welcome to the Commonweal. Other works of fantasy will seem somewhat more mundane after this.

I would give *The March North* 4.5 stars if that were an option; it's biggest flaw is that it isn't quite as good as the sequel, *A Succession of Bad Days*.

Sineala says

I feel like I'd better review this book after the author was nice enough to walk me through how to buy it from him. (Google Play is occasionally extremely unintuitive.)

This one actually took me several tries to get into -- I can imagine people bouncing off it -- but when I actually sat down and tried to read it today I read it straight through. It's military fantasy with no gendered pronouns (no, really), an interesting look at systems of government, obvious affection for the smallest details (you like logistics? get yer logistics here) that meant I came away feeling like I knew a whole lot more about artillery than I did when I started. Also I was definitely here for the war-sheep.

The pacing felt a little off in that I hadn't expected quite so much of the book to be devoted to the time after they got home from the north, but now that I think about it it feels like that's really the best way for it to have gone. I loved the sorcerers, and Twitch, and, hey, the main character wasn't bad either.

It probably won't be everyone's thing, but it was reasonably priced and I was willing to take a chance on it, and, hey, I'm happy. It was good, and I'm glad I read it.

Resonant says

This book is extremely dense, and it throws you right in without any introduction. I had to read and re-read sections before I understood, and am still realizing things on my third re-read. Not light fluffy reading at all.

Dani says

I read this book, then read the two sequels, then reread the two sequels, then reread the trilogy - so, retrospectively, five stars.

The main attraction is the world-building: Take our world, add magic that lets a small number of people be

Evil Overlords - and let a quarter-million years pass. The resulting world is **not** a medievaloid world with a thin patina of plot device. It's a world that's had a long time to evolve, and societies that have had a long time to learn how to survive a toxic mix of whatever long-dead sorcerers left behind them. It's a sophisticated world, whose scientific understanding appears to be slightly ahead of ours.

The author doesn't club the reader over the head with his world-building. The story retains center stage, and it's up to the reader to notice the strands connect the story to the world in which its embedded.

"The March North" is, frankly, not as engaging as the next two books. It is useful to think of it as the prequel that introduces the Commonweel, its world, and some important characters. Still well worth the ride. The Commonweel is a society that trying to live without sorcerous overlords, and it's been doing so for half a millenium. (Five centuries is a drop in a bucket of a quarter-million years. We have no reason to believe that this is the first such attempt.) Now the sorcerous overlords next door are paying a visit.

Andrew says

Graydon Saunders is one of those ancient Usenet RASFW refugees, like me. Some of that crowd wandered off to other parts of the Net and continued their commenting ways. A few wound up as SF writers (Jo Walton, Ryk Spoor, etc). Graydon is one of the former who has abruptly become one of the latter.

(If you're reading this post **on** Usenet, joke's on everyone who left, right?)

(If you're Graydon, sorry about that "abruptly". Seems that way to the rest of us, mostly.)

This is a strange book, and not just because it is cliche-looking military fantasy that veers without warning into the murky waters of "What kind of society are we fighting for?" and "What does an emergency backup plan for a civilization look like?" And then wanders back to the grueling magical warfare.

The writing style is that very particular brand of prose beloved of software geeks who learned people as a second language. It is careful, structural, recursive, and you sometimes need to read a line three times to see where it came from. I write this way. I **try** to go back and stick in periods and knock everything down to no more than three layers deep. I am being less careful in this review, because I've just read all of *_The March North_* in a sitting (long train ride) and it's sunk in some.

I don't usually quote in these reviews but I think I need to give the flavor:

"Passing for a Creek just to look at is tough, and if you look like a Creek, being anywhere near here without being able to explain where the previous six generations of your ancestors lived and what they did is impossible."

Got that? Good. And you **will** need to read those lines three times, because the author tells you everything exactly once. **Maybe** twice, for foreshadowing and resolution, but then one of them will be indirect. Blink and you'll miss major plot elements.

Blink and you'll miss the fact that the prose is entirely free of gendered pronouns. I noticed halfway through the last chapter -- I suspect the author deliberately stopped making it unnoticeable, there at the end. It's not a gender-free **story**; the narrator occasionally describes someone as a man or a woman; it just doesn't come

up that often because this is the army and they're soldiers first. Without the pronouns, if it doesn't come up, it's not in the book. Take a lesson.

I haven't said what the book is about. Consider a world where magical talent has been popping up in the population for hundreds of thousands of years -- with a power law. So in a nation of (referring to the book) seven and a half million people, you might have two thousand sorcerers powerful enough to be effectively immortal and therefore become **more** powerful sorcerers. Fifty-odd who are powerful enough to subjugate the nation. A dozen who could wrap the nation around their pinky fingers and move on to the rest of the planet without breathing hard.

Dozens of better-known fantasy series match this template, if you strip off the fake-Euro-medieval assumptions and look at the guts. Few of them go on to the obvious question, which is **why do you have a nation still standing?** You should have a flaming wreck of a slave-holding ruled by one sorcerer-king and whatever demons, monsters, and slightly-lesser sorcerers he's bothered to brain-ream rather than kill. Or she. Doesn't matter to the slaves.

This book pulls an answer out of one additional assumption: that it's more efficient to pool power voluntarily than to coerce it. (Philosophically palatable to you and me, I hope.) Thus, the Line: a volunteer army that marches under a standard sworn to the Law and serving the Peace. With staff thaumaturges.

(Why does the Peace need an army? Because they're surrounded by militant sorcerer-autocracies, and also demons and monsters galore. Magic has not left a lot of friendly terrain on the planet.)

The slant of the military lifestyle is convincing (at least to me); the protagonist knows what both sergeants and COs care about. The protagonist also knows what an ox cares about, which is relevant both to the military (no army without supply wagons!) and the greater picture (armies fight, but someone's gotta grow the food).

The author is up-front about drawing inspiration from Glen Cook's Black Company stories. I'd also trace lines to Steven Brust (see the enchantress older than recorded history), John M. Ford ("he had a horror of being obvious"), and Derek Lowe's "Things I Won't Work With" chemistry blog.

There is also a five-ton war-sheep named Eustace. If I haven't sold you by now, I don't know what the hell you think you're looking for in speculative fiction.

(*The March North* is self-published as an e-book. If you buy it from Google Play you can download a DRM-free EPUB file. I think it's in the Kobo store too.)

Nick Fagerlund says

This is basically a military SF story but set in an unusually gonzo fantasy world. The protagonist, a brigade captain out in the boondocks, gets some cryptic orders and a transfer of some unusual units, the combined message of which being "there might be an invasion happening but we're not sure; here's 100% of the power we could spare without panicking the whole country and/or wrecking our ability to survive the OTHER ongoing crisis. Hopefully it's overkill, glhf." Spoiler alert, there is definitely an invasion going on. Anyway, the plot has that classic mil-SF bad-odds/high-competence formula which is **VERY** satisfying when you're in

a certain mood (and I was).

The magic here has a certain rigorous physicality to it that reminds me a bit of Jemisin's Broken Earth trilogy. It's definitely fantasy rather than SF (this is often a squirrelly question of methods and starting points and aesthetics, but I am pretty sure about this one), but their magic interacts with familiar natural laws in entertaining ways. For example, after a brief detour to Wikipedia to find out if samarium was a real material or not (yes, it is a lanthanide element), I realized that their magically-powered "artillery tubes" were actually straight-up magnetic railguns.

There's also a certain rigor to following down the consequences of what magic can do in this place. None of this "medieval life plus fireballs" shit; it gets integrated into every layer of life and industry, in a very satisfyingly thorough way. Or put another way, stories where magic works as reliably as technology are common, but stories where people develop and innovate magic the way they do technology are much rarer. For example, a particular sorcerer back in the bad old days invented this way to loop a bunch of middling magical talents into a conditional partial hivemind, as part of a campaign to knock over a series of Dark Lord-level rivals. That's still in use for military purposes, but it's also been adapted for mining and refining, sheep shearing, excavations and public works, food preparation, you name it. It kind of drives the entire economy at this point. That's neat.

Another thing that I liked, but where I think mileage will vary wildly: it's under-written in certain ways. Saunders leaves many important things un-stated, for the reader to puzzle out or just wait for. Done well, that's a thing I'm super into. Here, it's done decently; I think some additional editorial eyes might have improved it, but the book works. It might not work for everyone, but I was very into it.

Marna Nightingale says

The first book of the Commonweal series and I still love it.

Vasil Kolev says

Nice read. The only issue I had with it is the language, it's pretty hard to follow sometimes.

Thomas says

Pretty good, different enough from the usual fantasy tropes to be interesting, but mostly in a mechanical sense. Less so in terms of plot or characters. Still an enjoyable afternoon though.

Alex says

This novel was really polarizing.

On one hand, it contains *magic* magic. I love that. Sorcerers in this universe are forces of nature by themselves, immortality is basically a given, and they could and have in the past destroyed armies, landscapes and nations by themselves.

On top of that exposition is kept to a minimum, which turns many aspects of this setting into intriguing pieces that I enjoy putting together.

That being said, there are too many things that remained confusing, that I missed, or straight out didn't understand. Parts that are important and essential to the plot. This left a bad taste in my mouth, like a missed opportunity. I mean, I was able to get enough of a picture of many things in order get this rewarding feeling of accomplishment that comes with novels of this nature, but some parts remained so obtrusive and oblique that it feels like this novel could have used a few more beta readers.

Adding to that, the last ~15% contain a sort-of tacked on exposition and conclusion which served as a way to flesh out the world. Lots of tell, little show. Not great, excusable because the setting is so interesting, but it should have been part of the main narrative.

This book is definitely worth a read just because how freaking awesome the magic in this universe is. The author nailed the potential of limitless power and possible weirdness that comes with that, plus how each act of magic has its own smell or feel kind of added to that mysterious but mesmerizing vibe.

It's one of these outstanding things which is going to stay with me for quite a while. This book was a breath of fresh air in a genre which is desperately trying to come up with one exceedingly boring magic system after another.

Overall a 3/5.

Todd says

I found this book incredibly dense, in the exact same way CJ Cerryh's "Rasulka" was dense. Saunders goes for the same narrative style she used there (and that I remember from her run in Thieves' World - the characters don't bother explaining what they consider mundane details, and given the fantastical nature of the world Saunders has built, the reader is often confused as to what exactly is going on. Careful reading slowly draws a picture, though, and it's worth the effort. There is a lot of dry humor of the sort I associate with stories about the military. Some of the funniest bits are actually left for the reader to figure out, alluded at rather than pointed out.

I see this book as having three main acts.

(view spoiler)

The plot is pretty simple, almost to the point that it gets repetitive, but not quite, as every scene felt necessary, ultimately, to tell the story and establish the setting. I look forward to reading the next book in the series, and hope there are more to come. I also look forward to re-reading this book as soon as time permits.

Fredrik says

Okay. This was not the easiest book to get a grip on, and it's probably not going to be the easiest book to describe, but I'm gonna give it a shot! Cause it's worth reading.

First, imagine that you're reading *Master & Commander*, except without any of the introduction to workings and terminology of a Napoleonic war era British navy sailing ship provided to the viewpoint character dr Stephen Maturin. Instead, it would be like reading the first person account of the operation by captain Jack Aubrey, written for people who are already familiar with both the world he exists in and the structure and organization of a military outfit.

Second, also imagine that instead of Europe around year 1800, this takes place in a high fantasy world where plantlife can eat you, rivers can flow with blood, fire or acid (alternating depending on the day of the month) and a sorcerer can ride on creatures like a giant, firebreathing sheep or a ghost horse.

Third (and this is where it all starts to come together, the following is hidden for mild spoilers), imagine:
(view spoiler)

The story of the book is fairly simple and straightforward, military fantasy more concerned with logistics, efficiency and professional soldiering than melodrama. It's not all dry, but it can be challenging to read, thanks to its strict adherence to in-world perspective. But I quite enjoyed that! It's a fascinating premise, and it was an interesting to put the pieces together as I read. Almost like a puzzle-book.

I haven't mentioned characters, though not because the book is devoid of characters, but, well.. they're really more the focus through which the story is told than what the story is about: The account of how a volunteer batallion was raised from the people of the West Creeks to march north and prevent an invasion of their homelands.
