



## The Desert and the Blade

*S.M. Stirling*

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**The Desert and the Blade** S.M. Stirling

In his novels of the Change, *New York Times* bestselling author S.M. Stirling presents “a devastated, mystical world that will appeal to fans of traditional fantasy as well as post-apocalyptic SF.”\*

Continuing their quest that began in *The Golden Princess*, two future rulers of a world without technology risk their lives seeking a fabled blade...

Reiko, Empress of Japan, has allied herself with Princess Órlaith, heir to the High Kingdom of Montival, to find the *Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi*, the Grass-Cutting Sword, a legendary treasure of an ancient dynasty that confers valor and victory to its bearer.

Órlaith understands all too well the power it signifies. Her own inherited blade, the Sword of the Lady, was both a burden and a danger to her father, Rudi Mackenzie, as it failed to save the king from being assassinated.

But the fabled sword lies deep within the Valley of Death, and the search will be far from easy. And war is building, in Montival and far beyond.

As Órlaith and Reiko encounter danger and wonder, Órlaith’s mother, Queen Mathilda, believes her daughter’s alliance and quest has endangered the entire realm. There are factions both within and without Montival whose loyalty died with the king and whispers of treachery and war grow ever louder.

And the Malevolence that underlies the enemy will bend all its forces to destroy them.

\**Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

## The Desert and the Blade Details

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## From Reader Review The Desert and the Blade for online ebook

### Sean Smart says

Another great story from S M Stirling. However as SM Stirling gets more successful he seems to fall into the trap of many successful authors do of needing to be edited. I believe it was 150 pages of dialogue in this one before anything really happened. Some great battle scenes and great characters but really needed to be shorter and snappier in my humble opinion, it was just too long.

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### JP says

For me this is one of those series that you want to see through to the end. The people after the change are now in their third generation and there are few pre-Changelings left. Stirling is masterful at exploring how language and cultural references might evolve in such a scenario. I enjoyed this book, though not as much as the earlier stories. The protagonists aren't quite as complex, and the final action in this one started and stopped too abruptly for me. The whole saga is still engaging, such that I'm looking forward to the next one.

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### Ann Friedman says

I felt this book was overly long.

Remember that one professor in college that just droned on and on and on without really saying anything new; that is how I felt about this book.

Over 800 pages to get to the point of the story, only to have it over in 10 pages.

Same concepts and descriptions repeated, until I wanted to shout OK I know about the kilts already.

I have read the previous 11 (14 if you include the Island series) books in this series and this is the first time I have given a star rating less than 4. Unsure if I will continue, but I know I am going to give it a break.

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### Steve says

I read the 13th book in this series before this the 12th. It did not seem to make much difference in being able to follow the story line. This novel like Stirling's others later in the series drags at times when he goes into detail describing the post apocalyptic society variations and traditions. If I were editing the book I might have taken out 25 or more pages of this type material to get to the action sooner. Make no mistake his fights are interesting and entertaining. There is a mix of magic and monovalent evil with his villains. His heroes and heroines have the magic of a sort too. I will probably read book 14 if it comes out.

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### Brian says

The continuing adventure in Montival are never a disappointment. This time we follow Crown Princess Orlaith Mackenzie on her first real adventure following the death of her father High King Rudi Mackenzie.

Orlaith has joined forces with her brother John, future leader of the Association, and the Empress of Japan, whose father just happened to die on the same day and in the same battle as Rudi. Together with their band of followers, many of which have basically run away from home to join in, the two royals set out to recover the Grass-Cutting Sword, the counterpoint to Orlaith's Sword of the Lady.

Along the way we get to spend time with the Mackenzies the McLintocks, and the Dunedain rangers of the Redwood forest. We also get to meet new allies, the hippies of Topanga Canyon, and the wandering Jews of the Mojave Desert. We see hippos and camels thriving in California and are forced to square off against the Eaters and well as the Koreans.

A Wonderful Reads

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### **Matt Mitrovich says**

Originally posted at: <http://alternatehistoryweeklyupdate.b...>

Many of you who follow my reviews know that I am a big fan of SM Stirling's Emberverse (or Change) series. Hell I am responsible for creating the Wikipedia article on the series (O the things you can do when you are an intern and have nothing to do at work). You know what I like most about this series? Unlike many post-apocalyptic tales, the Emberverse isn't dreary or depressing with cliche stories about pointless survival. The Emberverse is not just about people surviving, but rebuilding and creating a new world in the process. It's an alternate history series as well, but of the alien space bats variety. Enough about the series as a whole, let's take a look at *The Desert and the Blade*, the newest installment in the Emberverse.

*The Desert and the Blade* takes up right after *The Golden Princess*. Orlaith, Crown Princess of Montival, and her followers are helping Reiko, Empress of Japan, and her band of loyal samurai recover the "Grass Cutting Sword", one of the three Imperial Regalia of Japan. The sword is being kept in a "castle" somewhere in California, which was devastated and depopulated by the Change, except for a few Montival colonies, some tiny survivor communities and several tribes of Eaters (cannibalistic offspring of the few people who survived the loss of modern technology in 1998 by feasting on the only remaining source of readily available meat: humans).

Their quest is not an easy one as they are hounded by Haida pirates and Korean warriors, who are ruled by the grandson of Kim Jong-il (and remind me a lot of the Russians from *The Peshawar Lancers*, if you know what I mean) and want to stop the Japanese from recovering the sword. On the way the questors will battle armies of Eaters, be aided by Saxon warriors, meet Jewish desert nomads and come upon a community of aging hippies who worry about how the modern world will change their way of life...which is actually kind of funny when you come to think of it.

Like most long running series, *The Desert and the Blade* suffers from lengthy reintroductions to characters and settings that anyone who started from the beginning should already be familiar with. I know authors do it on the off chance that there is a reader who is entering the series from this book and you see this a lot in comics, but for long time readers it can be a slog to get through. There are also some references to events from previous stories, which are not given lengthy explanations, so new readers are going to be confused at times anyway.

In fact, Stirling works in a lot of characters and places from *The Change: Tales of Downfall and Rebirth*

anthology and I don't mean just quick cameos. Many characters originally introduced in those stories have become important, plot-turning characters. This isn't a bad thing (and I enjoyed the quick epilogue to Walter John Williams' "The Venetian Dialectic", which was my favorite story from the anthology) since it shows Stirling is happy to have other authors play around in his universe, but it means one more book new readers have to pick to get the full enjoyment of The Desert and the Blade.

Common issues with long running series aside, The Desert and the Blade is still a good book. I would say its even better than The Golden Princess, since that book featured a lot of characterization and worldbuilding, and little action. This book balances all three better, giving us fun neo-Medieval conflict and Clarksian magic, along with character development and beautiful descriptions of post-Change California and its peoples. I especially liked the Jewish nomads and hope to see more of them in the future, but then again I have always been a sucker for nomadic people ever since I took a class on them in college. Perhaps that is why I always preferred the Bearkillers perspective over the Clan Mackenzie in the original Emberverse trilogy, even if they were only briefly migratory.

If there was one major issue I had with the book overall, it was the ending. It wasn't bad per se, but it just felt rushed. I will try to be as vague as possible to avoid spoilers, so if you haven't read the book yet and you're worried I will give something away, I recommend skipping the next paragraph and just go to the conclusion.

Anywho, one character discovers her brother, who was missing and presumed dead, is alive and under the spell of the bad guys. This could have been an intense, emotional scene, but weakened by the fact that we really didn't know much about the brother and some more time sharing how he was important to the character and giving a couple more pages to the emotional trauma the character was experiencing would have made the ending all the more powerful. Additionally, after the issue with the brother was resolved, that same character comforts another character who just got his hand chopped off by saying she thinks his son would make a good husband. Perhaps given the context of their culture and relationship this is a perfectly normal conversation...but wouldn't it be a more appropriate conversation for when he is recovering in a hospital and feeling bad about losing his hand? Again, it wasn't a bad ending, it just felt rushed.

Despite the usual issues that come with long-running book series and my own issues with the ending, The Desert and the Blade still earns a recommendation from me. Stirling continues to impress me with his world-building skills, while featuring strong, yet complex, female characters in speculative fiction. The next book in the Emberverse is going to be titled Prince John and I assume its going to involve Órlaith's younger brother helping a John Birmingham, who is the king of Darwin battle bad guys in the South Pacific (alternate history is weird). Tune in next year for that review.

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### **Ceh131973 says**

This series is one that I always come back to. It is like meeting old friends. I have watched Stirling create this world since the original plane crash and now I am entranced by the adventures of the grandchildren of the original characters. The story keeps evolving. Although sometimes it gets a bit too supernatural for me the story and the characters keep me hooked!

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### **David Miles says**

A slow-moving but extremely entertaining read. Stirling invests heavily in character development and his descriptions of battles are second to none.

Love the concept and the series. Every time I finish one of his books, I cannot wait for the sequel, and this one was no exception (dammit).

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### **Taylor Ellwood says**

In this book, Stirling gets his groove back. The character development and action will keep you reading. The story is fast paced and the challenges the characters face are enough to keep you reading. This is a much needed improvement on the previous book. I like that Stirling draws on other characters that were developed in the anthology.

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### **Ivan says**

I read about 100 novels and about 100 more other titles (comic books collected in trade paperbacks, anthologies, non-fiction titles, stuff like that) in a given year, and those are mostly titles that were published in a current year. About 10% of those novels tend to be exceptional. Others not so much. That gives me ten or twelve novels from which I choose my absolute favorite in a given year. Sometimes the choice is hard or even impossible. Sometimes none of these novels left me with an impression strong enough to consider any of them absolute best. Anyway, most years I wait till the end of December - or even the end of January next year - to pronounce my own Best Novel(s) award.

This year I'm doing that early.

The Desert and the Blade is a redemption of a promise made in Golden Princess. To be perfectly honest, I loved Golden Princess - the previous book in the series), but it was lacking in some ways. It was all about the preparation for the journey, not the journey itself. Now that the Desert and the Blade arrived, I can safely say that more than any other part of Change series these two books should be read as one novel divided in two parts. The recently published anthology set in the Change universe was also tied into the story, although those readers who didn't read it need not to worry. Stirling has flawlessly included some of the protagonists from the best stories in the anthology, Harry Turtledove's "Topanga and the Chatsworth Lancers" and Diana Paxson's "Deor", and has teased possible spin-offs dealing with their adventures that take place between events described in the Change anthology and the Desert and the Blade. This would be more than welcome, since the year-long wait between Stirling's novels starts to be harder to bear with each new book.

### **POSSIBLE SPOILERS AHEAD**

Stirling has really grown into A-list author with this one. I would rank him perhaps a blade width (pun intended) beneath his more famous colleague from the Critical Mass writing group, George R.R. Martin. His control of the story is now flawless and characterization excellent albeit still done in broad strokes, using almost cliches - but doing so in such a masterful way that the reader is not offended but rather amused with authors shenanigans. Once again, he gives homage to several important Fantasy and Science Fiction authors - Martin himself and his Game of Thrones not the least of them.

Anyway, except technical near-perfection of the writing style, language and genre manipulation, this novel boldly increases the "magic level" present in the world. In the previous novels we had "events" that could be explained as mass hysteria, simple hypnotism or even coincidence. During Rudy's part of the series we've encountered Entities that could be anything from aliens to projections of collective unconsciousness of the human kind.

But in the Desert and the Blade the readers encounter large-scale magic for the first time, raging from some serious protective magic to magic of mass destruction at the very end of the novel, along some kind of not-so-spontaneous combustion.

The author also teases the possible evolution (or devolution) of humankind into orcs or elves. I don't really know what to think about the possibility of Eaters becoming real orcs, although I guess they are close enough already.

END SPOILER

This one is really the best of the series. Excellently written and plotted, with added bonus of some excellent world-building, this novel manages to delight and hypnotize its reader, without overwhelming him (or her) with large cast of characters, since those are handled deftly and with gentle touch so that the reader can adjust to different points of view and absorb the additions to the ensemble without any difficulties.

The wait will be hard to bear.

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### **Charlie says**

I feel like these books were starting to drag out and get repetitive and cliché. But then this one came along and I liked it a lot better. Though I do agree that less time should have been spent on the subjects of the first half of the book and more with the second half and the strange tribes of Southern California. Also fwiw the chatsworth lancers could have easily killed all the topangans a decade or two before the book with one red ember and a good Santa Ana wind. But that wouldn't have made for a good story so that's ok.

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### **Ron says**

Another quest book for another sword. But this quest is quickly done so that the main characters can carry the story on to new parts of the globe. But this does not mean that there are not the required dangers and fight scenes required of an Emberverse book. If you like the series, you are likely to enjoy this book.

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### **Fredrick Danysh says**

The Great Change occurred two generations ago devastating the world. The ruler who led the Great Quest has been murdered by a spared prisoner of war as was the Japanese ruler who was on his quest. The two female heirs of these fallen leaders are on their own mission to recover a magical sword for the Japanese in the wilderness that used to be California. Evil from an alternate plane is still about.

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### **Brandon Kurtz says**

I found this entry in the series to be as engaging as the previous books, generally. The characters and locations are certainly interesting. My one major criticism is that the pacing seems off. While the events in the first part of the book are covered in extreme detail, it seemed like the last bit wasn't given the same space. It's almost as if the author ran out of space and started being more economical with his words and writing shorter scenes. In some cases, the reader thinks there's going to be something significant that happens, and the whole thing is over within 5-10 pages. That's not necessarily a bad thing, but it does seem "off" when compared to the first part of the book.

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### **Warren says**

#### **Superb questing**

The Desert and the Blade is another superb novel in the Change series. We start after the High King Artos has been killed and the transfer of the Sword of the Lady to his daughter Princess Órlaith, who it turns out, is quite capable, despite her age, and is someone who has been learning at her father's knee. Of course having the sword does not hurt. She teams up with the Empress Reiko (who also lost her father on the shores of Montival) and her entourage to first visit Portland and mom, who is grieving her loss and is now the High Queen until Órlaith becomes of age and becomes High Queen. While there the two young royals conspire to go on their own quest for Empress Reiko's sword, the "Grass-Cutting Sword," an ancient sword that has been lost and according to dreams in in the southwest of the former United States (Mojave Desert).

Gathering a group of young faithful's, and a sea captain with a ship in Newport, the two royals and their entourage head off down the coast. The High Queen Mother does not approve and tries to intercept them and turn them around. Others are en route to join the royals and will meet them in former San Fran (which is controlled by eaters). There is an epic battle to blood our new heroes and point out the though their Father and Mother had beaten the Prophet and eliminated that threat, a new one has risen...from Korea (where the rumor of the survival of Kim Jung Il through the change and his transformation to the same, or similar, evil as the Prophet). The Koreans under the spell from Kim have been at war with Dai Nippon since the change and in fact sent ships against the Emperor as he tried to come to Montival in search of the Grass Cutting Sword. The Korean influence in the story is heavy filling in for the Prophet and portends the plot for the follow on novels.

The Band of Questers head south, meet new settlements, expand Montival and have more epic battles...some small, but all significant. This is a good read...even with the Japanese lessons.

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