



Arcanum

Simon Morden

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A thousand years after Alaric the Goth crossed the Alps with his rough alliance of northern tribes and wild, spell-wielding shamans to crush the Roman empire, Europe has become an almost civilised place.

Despite the wars that wash across the continent, the little mountain kingdom of Carinthia remains untroubled and untouchable. Rich through trade and centuries of peace, it owes its success to being the home of the Order of the White Robe, whose legendary hexmasters can destroy whole armies by turning the field of battle into a glittering lake of lava.

Magic is Carinthia's wealth, its protection and its way of life. So what does a magic kingdom do when it runs out of magic?

Arcanum Details

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From Reader Review Arcanum for online ebook

Peter Grimbeek says

This book went along very well up to point where the author kills off the last two practitioners of magic, magic oozes out of the world, and the story line becomes a cross between a tale of scientific endeavour, a political thriller complete with spies, and an historical romance.

To my mind, magic is at centre of every fantasy story, and minus the magic, this story was no longer of that genre.

I was very disappointed and stopped reading not long afterwards.

I've read almost everything else Simon has written (and published) and he excels in creating dystopic near and far futures. Perhaps his scientific training got in the way of the fantasising, though I would have thought stories that include highly functional AIs and highly advanced aliens (see his other work) were also fine fantasies, albeit of the scientific kind.

Argus says

Okay, let's get this out of the way. Is the book good? Yeah, it's pretty good. Go read it. There. Now, something oddly specific and spoiler packed.

So, the point of this book is that it's normal Earth history, but with magic. And a lot of it is the Nordic/Germanic styled stuff, like dwarves and giants and their weird version of unicorns. There's also Jews, who are not magic.

Now, the Jewish population actually plays a huge part in the story, but I just want to question some of their logic here. I get that most religious followers don't ever really take a critical look at their own faith, but COME ON. They live in a world where there are literal gods and literal actual magic, but they still worship a monotheistic Abrahamic deity. One that has never been proven to actually exist.

Now, I get that most religious people deal with this every day, but those people don't have the disadvantage of living in a world where it's implied that Thor himself just passed through town last month. This is just the weirdest little quirk, and I wanted to draw some attention to it.

Aside from that, the book is fine. There's a lot else for me to say about it, but most of that would just be me going "hey, isn't it interesting how you can never tell who the main character is because so many people DIE?!"

And then just a list of names, and despair.

And we don't want that.

Jim Kahn says

At first this was a very compelling and enjoyable book set in a strangely realistic, gritty alternative historical

setting in medieval Europe. As the book progressed however, the author abandoned all pretense of being realistic and instead detailed a series of completely implausible battle scenes, including one where a 13 year old boy with a broken collar bone and an old hunter somehow fight off a mob of hundreds. Maybe it is a personal issue, but I require a certain amount of realism in my fantasy in order to suspend belief. This book started channeling GRR Martin, and ended up thoroughly Terry Brooks. I was very disappointed, having become emotionally involved at first and then feeling obligated to slog through a completely uninspiring 400 pages to see it through.

Jonet says

I enjoyed this. It's a really long book, and proceeds at a much more leisurely pace than the Petrovitch series, but the story remains compelling from beginning to end. There are a few minor pacing issues, but the battle scenes are very well done and the characters are very believable.

It's more alternate history than high fantasy, and it's a great change of pace from the standard "merry band of heroes get together and go on a quest to save the world".

Benjamin Kahn says

Gee - a great book up to when the last two hexmasters die. I was really enjoying it. Then it kind of lost its way. A lot of boring debates between characters. The whole meeting of Buber and the dwarf king made no sense to me, nor did the dwarves suddenly rising up and deciding to invade other lands basically because they were growing and were suddenly uncomfortable under the mountains. The characters became a little too much - Buber became unstoppable, Sophia goes from being a sheltered daughter to a great warrior, tactician and leader, Felix becomes a man of the people - I was actually rooting for his death at one point. And the tacked-on romance between Sophia and Buber at the end seemed very contrived.

And they can't seem to find anybody to complete any of the tasks but the handful of characters we already know. Who should build the fortifications to repel an attack? Should we get a builder liked we mentioned in a previous chapter? No, let's just get Buber, the old woodsman. Surely he knows a lot about building! Based on his resume of fighting magical creatures in the woods, who would know better? Who better than the princess consort to walk into a waterfront bar to recruit a crew of sailors? And when those sailors who have worked on a barge their whole lives can't operate it without magic, who but a former apprentice librarian would you choose to take charge of the boat?

Are there no other qualified people in the whole country?

Morden quickly abandons several plot lines that looked promising - Nikoleta and Buber are banished ... Wait! They're forgiven! Nikoleta is the only one still able to practice magic. Will she be a threat to Felix and the kingdom? I don't know, let's just kill her. Allegetti is manipulating the young prince? No, he quickly comes out as a traitor and is killed as collateral damage in the battle between the two magicians. All these twists that look like they could be interesting are summarily dismissed.

The second half of the book also is a little too chock-a-block with serendipitous outcomes. City's water doesn't flow? Hey, we just happen to have a fully-functioning old Roman water system buried under the city. Badly outnumbered by huge dwarven armies? The dwarves gave us gunpowder! And we just happen to have

an ex-sorcerer who knows how to make more! And a smith who's looking for a challenge!

The whole dwarf army is ridiculous. Their decision to attack, all the time they spend building vehicles which are eventually useless and more of a hindrance than anything, the fact that despite their superior numbers, they can't even make a dent in the Carinthian ranks. The vehicles themselves - here is a race of people who have spend their whole life underground working with stone and metal. They've started growing and now they are clumsier and their vision is noticeably weaker - but all of a sudden, they are master carpenters and woodworkers? It just didn't make any sense. I didn't buy it. And the clumsy trap that they tried to spring on Felix with the box was ridiculous.

I also found it strange that for all the talk but the regular Carinthian citizens about how strange the Jews are for only having one god, there is almost no talk about the Carinthians engaging in any kind of religious observance. No priests at the prince's funeral, no pre-battle prayer - the Carinthians may find the Jews strange, but they don't really see to follow any strong beliefs of their own.

All that said, I did find the first half of the book very enjoyable. I liked the characters initially. I thought the battle with the Teutons was great. I loved the opening scene with the giants - too bad this wasn't really developed at all. I liked the idea of one sorceress with magic still - and very powerful magic. I would have loved it if Morden had built on these instead of just letting them drop. Why does she still have magic? What will she do with it? These were more interesting questions then where he eventually ends up going. And the "the bridge exists because people believe in it" might have been interesting if he had continued with that instead of letting it go by the wayside.

Ultimately, half a great book, half an annoying one. So I give it a 3/5 - straight down the middle.

Mark Kearney says

Really grew on me this book, would give it 4 1/2 stars if I could, not quite unputdownable but a really good read

Stefan says

What happens when the magic goes away? More specifically, what happens when a small but strategically located region that has relied on its hexmasters for centuries is forced to deal with the sudden disappearance of its all-powerful magic? Simon Morden explores the answer to these questions in his new fantasy novel Arcanum.

So far, Simon Morden is best known for his neo-cyberpunk trilogy-plus-one starring Samuil Petrovich. The original trilogy won the 2012 Philip K. Dick Award. I bounced off its first book Equations of Life (my review) and never went back, but decided to give Arcanum a try anyway, mainly to see how the author would handle this very different genre. Despite some reservations, I'm glad I did.

Read the entire review on my site Far Beyond Reality!

KthaeH says

I got a few hundred pages into - more than halfway through - Arcanum before I gave it up as a lost cause. What started out as a promising high fantasy/counter factual history tale petered out into utter boredom and I just couldn't make myself continue.

The basic setup is that one principedom in a quasi-medieval Europe has access to powerful magic that supports the economy and provides for absolute security without the need for a functional military - two big advantages, in other words. Additionally, the powerful magicians provide for amenities such as public waterworks and sewers, as well as clean, safe indoor lighting, freely available to everyone. All they ask is the lion's share of tax monies, absolute obedience to their dictates, privacy, and not to be bothered by any administrative burdens. A prince is left to deal with mundane concerns.

The setup of course is that the magic gives out. And the prince who has never had to do much to ensure prosperity, public health, or the security of the state proves utterly incapable of leading in a crisis. Unsurprisingly, he's an incompetent with an inflated sense of his abilities and acumen. In short order he dies in battle, leaving a twelve-year-old heir to govern in that crisis. That's where the insurmountable difficulties start with this novel. No twelve-year-old, let alone a newly orphaned one with little experience of even the small amount of governance his father had to manage, is going to lead effectively through a national crisis. So yes, this is one of those stories in which the reader is expected to believe that a barely adolescent child behaves with the wisdom of a seasoned adult.

And not just in matters of judgment, courage, and diplomacy. No, we're to believe that the pre-pubescent prince is romantically inclined towards a bookish woman twice his age whom he's known for only a few days. What's more, she returns his interest! And not only does he trust her with matters of state, but she's entirely worthy of such trust. Now, a twelve-year-old interested in a 24-year-old I can almost believe. A 24-year-old woman interested in a twelve-year-old boy is either utterly ridiculous or beyond creepy, and Morden obviously wasn't aiming for the latter.

The story flirts with many interesting concepts, but ultimately fails to give them enough lift to make up for the plodding story line. The most interesting character in the story was (seemingly) killed off early on. Character motivations don't stand up to close examination, and the middle of the book provided no real impetus to keep reading.

Susan Harp says

Well-written. But I expected something amazing to justify reading 735 pages,

Fuzzleton says

Arcanum doesn't start out as a painful read, but it becomes one.

The book is set in Carinthia, a country isolated and wealthy from the strength of it's magical Order of the White Robe, who remove any of the Kingdom's problems with unparalleled magical aptitude.

The setting of Carinthia is initially rich and full of interesting concepts - Vanishing unicorns, Giants marauding passing merchant caravans, wagons that travel on magical wheels with no need for horse or driver. The world is creative and quite alive.

On to the characters:

Nikoleta is fascinating. She is an adept of the Order, with the lifelong aim of becoming the first female of the order's highest rank, a hexmaster, even as she doubts the Order's virtue and true purpose

Prince Gerhard is busy trying to raise his son to embrace German culture in a world that won't stop changing. He calls the Order to aid him in fending off the invaders, and when they do not answer, dares to challenge them and question an age old and mutually beneficial power dynamic. He is an interesting character - unapologetically assigning his enemies to death by torture, while seeming otherwise light-hearted. He wonders if he grew to love his wife during their arranged marriage and plays "Hide the sausage" with her merrily.

These events and characters are all principal early in the book, but the story suddenly shifts focus.

It is no longer about an invasion, a troubled prince, a magician struggling against her orders hierarchy and age old mysteries.

As the setting loses its magic, the story becomes long-winded and tough to get through. It's almost impressive, on a meta level, but still difficult to read.

A few hundred pages are spent on fixing underground plumbing, cataloging the library and inventing the scientific principle, introducing characters with no traits to replace the myriad characters with no traits that were lost - (with the exception of 'brave' and 'smart', which are characteristics shared by every named character)

My greatest pet peeve that made this story a chore was Allegretti, the Italian swordmaster and nemesis of the early story. He has hundreds of pages establishing his mysterious motivations and influence over Gerhard's son Felix - an influence over which he is universally despised - and yet his entire arc has a miserable payoff.

Ah, but from an unexpected source - the same betrayal! Another trusted character from early in the book befriends the prince, and begins to challenge the German way to benefit their own agenda and change the Prince's mind constantly to meet their standards.

This second villain is not a villain at all - she is soon betrothed to the 12 year old Felix, and none of the characters who hated the swordmaster Allegretti - a man with martial and political expertise - hold the same aspersions against the untrained and inexperienced Sophia Morgernstern, despite committing the same crime with less cause. She is adored by every character universally, and is a Mary Sue of constant positive traits and wisdom.

Every character with depth leaves the story, and the magic is dead in more ways than one. I identified with each bland character learning to move on in a dull world, because after long soon I too was struggling through the slog and trying to make it to the end.

This book ends at around page 370, and can be considered mediocre. Pleasant, even.

The rest is a challenge, and reads like writer's block. Most of the cast read like a name generator padding out tvtropes' article on "informed ability".

Mostly, I just miss the wit and humour from early in the story.

I congratulate Simon Morden on the early half of his book, which was thoroughly fun and made me laugh and think.

I congratulate Simon Morden on the second half of his book, for finishing it. It reads like that was difficult.

Eric Smith says

Heroes, fools, madmen and betrayers this story has them all. Set in an alternate Europe of the past where magic was real and was part of daily life this novel tells the story of what happens when a fundamental piece of civilization collapses and leaves ordinary people to pick up the pieces. While there are some parts that feel a bit slow at times near the start they provide for good character development and serve to make it so the stakes feel more real as the story continues. The consequences for decisions for both characters both liked and hated feel real and the danger to all players on the stage is legitimate.

I thought I might have only given this novel three stars but about half way through the momentum picks up and things begin to get moving pushing everything towards a well written and fairly epic conclusion so four stars it is. It is a good stand alone read despite feeling at times like it may be the start of a series and while some readers may get slowed down in the beginning it is worth the read.

Stewart Tame says

Nice! Where most fantasy novels would have ended, this one is just hitting its stride. A tagline for this book would probably go something like, "How far would you go to preserve your way of life?" One day in Carinthia, the magic stops working. Self-powered carts and barges no longer transport goods. Lights in street lamps and buildings cease to function. The prince must raise an army and fend off invaders as hexmasters are no longer capable of destroying them at a glance. I know what you're thinking: "A society that bases its entire way of life around a nonrenewable resource? That's absurd!" This is fantasy though. Obviously this couldn't happen in real life. Anyway, it turns out that the magic can be renewed, but only at a terrible price. Most books would stop after the whole Should We Bring Back The Magic question gets resolved, but Arcanum has set its sights higher, and what happens after that point is even more interesting than what came before. This book is full of wonderful characters who have to deal with some tough questions. It's really less about the magic and the fantasy and more about nation-building. Best of all, it's one volume. Not a trilogy. Not a sprawling multi-volume epic. One book. That's it. Now how often do you see that in fantasy literature? Check it out. You'll be glad you did.

Michelle Morrell says

Set in an alternate earth where magic has long been the substitute for technology, this novel deals with what happens when the magic is gone. It is structured like a typical high fantasy novel - rulers and serfs, magicians and mundanes - with a tinge of post-apocalyptic fever. It started out quite strongly, but really faltered in the

middle, the pacing and characterizations stopped working. I persevered, but the characters stopped feeling true (especially the 12-year-old boy with decades of sudden wisdom) and there are too many books in the sea.

I don't normally count unfinished books towards my yearly total, but by God, I spent 10 days and 450 pages on giving this a try. It counts.

Sarah says

Arcanum is the kind of historical fantasy that makes me love historical fantasy. While I loved the book overall, the even blend of positives and negatives made it incredibly palatable. The small world contains an epic story that shows how a small group of people can make a huge impact. Morden deals with a lot of uncomfortable situations with poise and ease. He really brings this dark time period to life, and makes me wish that I could climb up a mountain and find a unicorn. No matter what a book suffers from, that's the best compliment I could give it. Arcanum makes me want to live in that enchanted world. Arcanum made me hungry. I want more.

Read my full review here:

<http://www.bookwormblues.net/2014/02/...>

Marcin says

Alpine passes surrounding Carinthia's palatinate from the southern Italian warring city-states, northern hills and plains and river borders hosts of Bavarian and Vien Germanic common powers, all kept at bay by a magical shroud of invincibility offered by the Order over the people residing in Carinthia. But what happens when magic that dissuades enemies from thinking of crossing into the palatinate's lands and palatinate citizens from changing the effortless established order of business burns out? What happens when arcane element that the people depend on for daily tasks, functioning of nigh-on everything around them and their protection simply disappears. From unicorns to magic lights, the arcane gives way for the mundane. A "new" old way of life the citizens have not been following for centuries... Chaos happens, and shit... Suddenly inviolable country may fall prey to all the neighbouring more mundane-experienced countries. It can also break from inside out as the people start to realise how crippled they have become. So what happens when a daring ambitious prince gets a chance to show a big host going south that the now-faltering previously-indomitable power of Carinthia is still there and is enough to repel any attacker? You might have guessed it all shatters Carinthian reality. The help comes from book-lurking Librarians and ostracised Jewish communities in the form of both young & bold and old & wise protagonists that start to help the citizens adapt to new reality. There are obstacles of grievous, grim, in-your-face and shadowy natures, but still the good people must remain strong for the Carinthia to prevail.

What makes this book interesting is the way the arcane addicted and conditioned humans are suddenly thrust into the mundane world, where one needs to work the land for food with own hands and farm animals, pull the carts, ride the horses and row the boats to transport themselves and their goods where they are needed, wield the swords and hold the shields themselves to defend against danger, use their wits to manage everything. Fortunately, there are some protagonists that answer the call for help and support during the transitions, from inner revolts, through social and economic challenges, to full scale wars. These heroes are

interesting, rich and characterful, almost endearing, the setting is understandable and pretty encompassing, the plot, though somewhat linear and presumably predictable, is actually quite gripping and offers a few sudden twists that break the established schemas of epic adventures. Sure, the fate of universe, Earth or even only Europe is not actually at stake, being limited to just a small area smacked in the middle of convenient trade routes and ambitious, powerful or rich kingdoms thriving on the import/export economics, but the way that the characters see it, this small piece of continental Europe used in ancient Roman times as a hub between Italians and Germans is their whole universe and as the story unravels it is depicted as such, slowly developing with the people's common sense to show how miniscule in the grand scheme of things this actually is. The way the palatinate deals with the troubles coming from within and outside its borders shows the evolution the inhabitants still need to go through in a limited stretch of time to prevail and not be destroyed. All the ingredients of the great book recipe are there then.

So what are the issues I found that led me to not give it 5 stars? There are some threads in the plot that seem almost too obvious. Then, all the neighbouring countries having something against the Carinthia are not that interested in testing the mettle of the now magic-deprived people so ripe for conquest. Surely, when others lived without magic, they must have had spies or other sources of knowledge that could easily unveil any problems the Carinthians are facing and thus making them easy target for the taking. Furthermore, when librarians slowly uncover technological advances previously forgotten or deliberately hidden by the edict of the Order on the lands of the palatinate, it seems many of the recipes, components or instrumentalities have already been known and used one way or another around, eg black powder/gunpowder used by mining specialists does not seem to have been tested as an offensive incendiary and explosive solution. While others had been restricted to knowledge in books and standard civilisation's advances that took centuries, it takes a short time for the magically conditioned backward country to not only reach their neighbours' level but leap ahead of many of them almost over night. These are, however, small plot devices that I find a bit too twisted just to suit the story development. As for technical issues of the book/writing style itself, there are quite many sentences with either modal or regular verbs lost, leaving eg. subject and past participle and reader's idea which word to use to make sense of a sentence in the context of the paragraph. Other cases are when some verbs seem to be repeated when negatives are used, eg. predominantly something like "can't he can do", "he can't can do", "he can can't do" etc. In some cases this can be almost lost between the words, but when this is a part of a character's thinking process described by Morden to explain the actions they take, plan for, or have already taken, the small differences between "after all he can't understand that" and "after all he can understand that" paint drastically distinct personas of the characters described in the book at certain key moments.

So, if you can overlook such matters, this is a really good, though sometimes simplistic for heroic purposes, book that just cries for ever more depth and plot twists. There is, however, quite a potential to show more of the universe depicted therein through the eyes of the lost hexmasters and voyages of huntmasters, possibly forming other books placed in the fantasy to real history universe of Europe of Middle Ages.
