

Review: The King's Justice and Augur's Gambit by Stephen Donaldson: Review by Allen Stroud Stroud, A.

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Review: The King's Justice & Augur's Gambit

The UK publication history of Stephen Donaldson's two novellas was quite a troubled one, resulting in a delay before the hardbacks arrived in this country after being published in America in 2015. Most of this is documented on Donaldson's blog, which gives an interesting account from the author's perspective.

However, matters appear to have resolved themselves and two beautiful mini-hardbacks arrived in the UK midway through 2016, signalling the arrival of new fantasy from Donaldson after the conclusion of his Thomas Covenant chronicles in 2013.

The King's Justice and *Augur's Gambit* are standalone stories. They might share a fictional world, but there is no specific reference I can detect that infers this.

The King's Justice is a third person present narrative that right from the first page, invites comparison with Stephen King's *The Gunslinger*. A stranger rides into town on the scent of a terrible crime. He brings with him the authority of the King, and the right to dispense justice (hence the story's name). The investigation brings with it a sense of danger and menace, as Donaldson does not follow fantasy's populist theme by providing a clear-cut binary of good and evil. In fact, there are echoes of his Gap series in this story, in that there is a layer beneath the obvious in the agendas of all sides. There is also a strange sense of disconnection, brought about by the writing and the nature of the characters. This gives the story something of a cinematic quality as you feel you are observing, rather than being involved.

In many ways, Donaldson's writing lifts the lid on some of Grimdark's posturing. His fantasy work has always been dark and gritty, but often billed as 'Tolkienesque' and is compared owing to its epic qualities. *The King's Justice* contains less of the expositional weight of Donaldson's chronicles, but does project depth beyond its own narrative and leaves room for further exploration of the magical constraints upon the protagonist Black, and his uneasy relationship with the King. The story is graphic in parts, but has less problematic content than some of his previous narratives, but the characters are just as abrasive as always.

By contrast, *Augur's Gambit* seems to draw its inspiration from Donaldson's Mordant's Need novels. The political games of Queen Inimica Phlegathon DeVry of Indemnie are similar to those of King Joyce of Mordant. Both sovereigns have the foresight to see the doom of their kingdom's and contrive a political game in which they make themselves weak to flush out their enemies.

The principle character of *Augur's Gambit* is the Queen's Hieronomer, Mayhew, whose first-person narration delivers the narrative. In contrast to the perspectives of Terisa and Geraden of the previous work, Mayhew's position, close to the Queen lends the story an additional urgency. The changing power relationship between them is central to the narrative, and Donaldson demonstrates some deft work in being able to preserve the weak and self-critical characteristics of his narrator, whilst building him up to take charge of the events that beset him and the realm. In the end, it is to Mayhew, the Queen turns for her solution and his answer is a clever, if grim surprise.

Like the Mordant novels, there is a fairy-tale quality to the writing of *Augur's Gambit* that allows some of the consequences of its conclusion to be obfuscated in a qualified, 'happy ending'. However, if the reader considers the death, suffering and mutilation brought about by the scheming and strategising of DeVry and her barons, it does make you wonder why any individual would want to be ruled over by a monarch who requires a bloodletting for her kingdom to survive in its static hegemony. In this, Donaldson does present two solutions, both of which are flawed. Perhaps a third

might have been explored? Or indeed a comment on the outcome given to demonstrate that the writer also understands the terrible doom of the world he has created.

Both novellas are available to buy in hardback and ebook.