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Fantasy & Science Fiction

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BOOKS

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Prince of Ayodhya: The Ramayana, Book One, by Ashok K. Banker, Warner Aspect, 2003, \$24.95.

The Guin Saga, Book One: The Leopard Mask, by Kaoru Kurimoto, Vertical, 2003, \$22.95.

The Guin Saga, Book Two: Warrior in the Wilderness, by Kaoru Kurimoto, Vertical, 2003, \$22.95.

The Guin Saga, Book Three: The Battle of Nosferus, by Kaoru Kurimoto, Vertical, 2003, \$22.95.

The Anvil of the World, by Kage Baker, Tor, 2003, \$25.95.

Tooth and Claw, by Jo Walton, Tor, 2003, \$24.95.

J. R. R. Tolkien seems to be everywhere these days. And it's not just the hugely popular films and all their attendant detritus — television

commercials, plastic figurines, video games, collect-'em-all cups at fast food joints. Tolkien's shadow has fallen long and hard across the field of fantasy fiction since the mid-1970s, with the appearance of Terry Brooks's *The Sword of Shannara*, Stephen Donaldson's *Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*, and David Eddings's *Belgariad*. The defining features of most fantasy written today — complexly imagined alternate worlds (complete with maps), elves and dwarves and trolls, artifacts of magical power, fateful struggles between good and evil, the basic trilogy format — trace their ancestry back to *The Lord of the Rings*, one way or another. The rise of Robert Jordan has only cemented the dominion of the "Tolkienesque."

The old don would be shocked (and, I think, dismayed) to see what his work has wrought.

I'm a great admirer of Tolkien's grand epic, but I have to admit I'm bored by the efforts of his literary

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grandchildren. Fortunately, they haven't squeezed everyone else out — not yet. But it can take a bit more work to find something unusual.

Tolkien drew for inspiration on the myths, legends, languages, and landscapes of northern Europe, and Tolkienesque fantasy has continued to depend (often at second and third hand) on that background for its settings and details. So one obvious place to look for relief from the usual formula is in fantasies that mine other cultural veins for their raw materials. Ashok K. Banker's *Prince of Ayodhya* is the first volume of what he calls a "twenty-first century retelling" of the great Hindu epic *Ramayana*, which would seem to promise a very different fantasy experience.

The *Ramayana* in the form we know it first coalesced in the fourth or fifth century BCE, but it clearly harks back to India's legendary age, around the twelfth century BCE, when the peoples and kingdoms that would later dominate the subcontinent were not yet solidly established. It is to ancient India something of what the *Odyssey* is to ancient Greece.

One of the keys to good fantasy fiction is the coherence and internal credibility of the imagined world of the text, and by starting from an

existing work of literature with a fairly well-defined cultural and historical milieu, Banker's got a great head start. He doesn't have to make it all up on his own. Unfortunately, he squanders that advantage; he doesn't make enough use of the richness of his source material.

The poem recounts the tale of Rama, prince of the Kosalas and avatar of the god Vishnu — his exile from his father's court in Ayodhya, his union with his destined bride Sita, her abduction by the demon-lord Ravana of Lanka, and Rama's war on Lanka to recover her. Banker has retained most of the essential characters and elements (it's hard to be sure, since this is only the first volume of Banker's version), but he has refashioned the story in some very significant ways. As *Prince of Ayodhya* begins, the lord of Lanka is already plotting to invade the human kingdoms with his demon hordes. Ravana has spies in Ayodhya, and sends a shape-shifting *rakshasa* to try to kill Rama's father, Dasaratha, the king. Rama's exile comes about not merely as a result of intrigues between Dasaratha's wives, but as part of the mage Vishwamitra's plan to thwart the Lankan invasion.

Like any ancient literary work, the *Ramayana* is the product of a

time and tradition radically unlike our own, and it certainly requires some adaptation and interpretation on Banker's part to render it as a novel. The trouble is that Banker's changes have made a distinctively different sort of story into something that feels depressingly familiar. Banker's Ravana becomes just another Dark Lord threatening the world with destruction, and his Rama seems not a semi-divine presence but merely another wizard-counseled warrior to stand against the tide of evil.

This disappointment is made the more severe by Banker's habit of mixing unmistakably inappropriate vocabulary into his prose. Throughout *Prince of Ayodhya*, we stumble over terms such as "tight abs," "morphed," "doable," and "topside" that belong (if at all) in a novel set today, not in a fantasy world based on an ancient epic. Similar lapses mar the cultural background that Banker presents. If the *Ramayana* has any natural setting, it's the very early Iron Age, yet Ayodhyan weapons frequently feature steel. The scribes of the Ayodhyan court write with quills on parchment scrolls, like medieval European monks (in fact, as far as we can tell, the ancient Ayodhyans may not have used

writing at all). And the palace contains a painted portrait of Vishwamitra which Banker refers to as a "canvas," though such a material would scarcely have been in use then.

It's not a question of historical accuracy — Banker is of course free to imagine any details he likes for his version of the story — but again, when he chooses to depart from his model, he most often heads in a blander, more generic direction. Banker essentially offers us a Tolkienesque *Ramayana*.

This is not to say that *Prince of Ayodhya* is without its pleasures, and even hints of unusual atmosphere. It's interesting how the vast lifespans of mages like Vishwamitra pass almost without comment, accepted by the characters as the way their world works. Some of the scenes of Dasaratha and his first wife, Rama's mother Kausalya, convey both genuine feeling and a sense of otherness, of a different thought-world. After Rama heads into exile midway through the book, we get more moments like this: "Without needing to be told, they prostrated themselves at his feet to receive his ashirwaad, then sat facing him in the cross-legged lotus posture, the traditional yogic stance of shishyas receiving vidya from their guru."

That's a sentence that has some rhythm and colorful detail, in which the unfamiliar terms feel organic and unforced. Banker gives us just enough such nibbles to make us wish he had stuck more closely to his model, and produced a fantasy more notably different from the others beside it on the shelves.

Kaoru Kurimoto's hugely popular *Guin Saga* doesn't draw on any non-European cultural reservoir for its background or flavor, but its inspiration does come from a distinctly non-Tolkienesque source. The author traces her literary heritage to the sword-and-sorcery of Robert E. Howard and other writers of the old pulps — a brand of fantasy that's been all but eliminated by the children of the *Rings*.

In fact, though it's just now appearing in English, Kurimoto's long-running series began in 1979, before the wave of Tolkien followers had crested, and the name of Conan had not yet become inseparable from that of Schwarzenegger.

Kurimoto's hero is as fearless and ferocious as Howard's Cimmerian, though he's rather more mysterious. Guin has lost most of his memory, and he's cursed with an irremovable leopard mask that hides his features. Or is it a mask?

Kurimoto plays it coy (at least through the three volumes that have appeared so far). Perhaps Guin is some sort of demigod, and the leopard features are his own.

In the first volume, *The Leopard Mask*, Guin befriends the twins Rinda and Remus, last survivors of the royal house of recently conquered Parros, and the action barely lets up after the first few pages. Guin battles soldiers from the conquering army of Mongaul, but the three are taken prisoner to Stafolos Keep, under the command of the fearsome Black Count Vanon. There they encounter the mercenary Istavan, a fellow prisoner, and rescue the girl Suni, one of the wild monkey-like Sem, destined for sacrifice by the Black Count. In the second book, *Warrior in the Wilderness*, their escape carries the five of them down the river Kes and then into the wastelands of Nospherus, where they are pursued by the Mongauli and beset by a variety of horrid creatures. That pursuit continues in *The Battle of Nospherus*, as the fugitives ally themselves with the Sem against the invading forces of Mongaul.

I get a little breathless just typing all that, and it's nothing compared to the experience of reading the Guin books. They're like

Robert E. Howard crossed with manga and a triple espresso — pure adventure fiction without the brooding undercurrent that gives Howard's best work its enduring power. The writing, at least in these early books (Kurimoto has published eighty-eight *Guin* books so far in Japan), is somewhat rougher-hewn than even that of the old pulp writers. The tone changes wildly, from somber and even lyrical to shrill and jarringly colloquial (I can't imagine what Japanese word the translators render as "skedaddle"), and the narrative point of view varies just as unpredictably — nearly every character with a name gets some time in the spotlight. But Kurimoto's prose also reveals flashes of tantalizing beauty, such as this: "The campfire wavered, and time began to flow again. In the light of the fire were four creatures of flesh and blood, all walking the threads of Jarn's loom, all mortal."

Such moments, and the naive charm and headlong energy of the story, make the *Guin Saga* a lightweight but welcome break from the ponderousness of the Tolkien school. But it's hard to conceive of the appeal lasting for the author's projected one hundred volumes. Perhaps Kurimoto adds more complexity

and depth as the story continues. She would need to, in order to keep me reading.

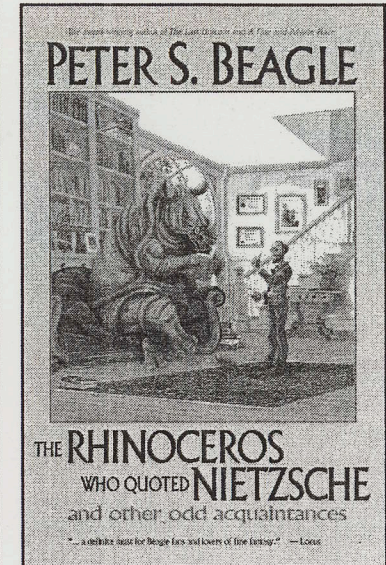
Kage Baker's latest novel, *The Anvil of the World*, doesn't derive from any obvious sources — not a well-established fantasy mode such as Tolkien's or Howard's, nor an ancient epic, nor any existing culture's mythic tradition, nor even Baker's own acclaimed earlier novels about the time-traveling employees of The Company. *The Anvil of the World* is that most unusual and refreshing of discoveries: a fantasy that feels like it sprang from nowhere but the quirky imagination of its author.

Baker's world is a rococo blend of colorfully disparate elements, from costume balls where guests sip beer through straws to assassins attacking from hang gliders. Gourmet cuisine shares the pages with poison-dart blowguns, tiny dragons nesting in sea cliffs like gulls, and a troop of demon bodyguards named Cutt, Crish, Stabb, and Strangel. You never know what *The Anvil of the World* will throw at you next, and that alone would make it one of the most entertaining fantasies of recent years. Toss in Baker's characteristic wit, her smooth and confident prose, and her deft hand at

slipping in the occasional reference to contemporary issues, and you've got a genuine delight.

There's no grand quest here, no unlikely hero coming of age, no ancient evil bent on world domination. Baker's story takes place on a more modest, everyday scale. It centers on a former assassin living under the name of Smith, trying to escape his violent past and anyone who might bear him a grudge. Smith takes a job leading one of his cousin's caravans to the coastal town of Salesh-by-the-Sea, and on that disaster-plagued trip he becomes entangled with a variety of peculiar characters, including the foppish half-demon Lord Ermenwyr and his multitalented nurse Balnshik. Smith sets up as an innkeeper in Salesh, but his troubles are hardly over. Ermenwyr brings a sorcerous duel to Smith's doorstep. Another guest dies, and it looks like one of Smith's employees may have killed him. And the inn's drains are backing up, the safety inspectors breathing down his neck.

The plot zips along and the dialogue is even zippier, but it's Baker's characters that truly capture our affection — they, and Baker's sly, infectious humor, which infuses the text like incense. Some of the best lines go to



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Peter S. Beagle is the author of *The Last Unicorn*, *A Fine and Private Place*, and *The Innkeeper's Song*. He is a winner of the Mythopoeic Fantasy Award and the Locus Award. He lives in Oakland, CA.

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Ermenwyr: "It's a facial toupee," he insists when his beard is revealed as a fake. And later, of his doctor, Willowspear, "He's a Disciple, you know. Has all the sex drive of a grain of rice, so skittish young ladies in need of a supportive shoulder should find him irresistible."

It's a tough trick to balance a tone like that with the apparatus of fantasy, but Baker manages it nearly flawlessly. *The Anvil of the World* recalls the best of Roger Zelazny's lighter side, the stories of Dilvish the Damned or his 1993 novel, *A Night in the Lonesome October*. It's unlike any other fantasy of the past decade, and that should be recommendation enough.

Jo Walton's *Tooth and Claw* is a fantasy as distinctive and unpredictable as Baker's. In her previous novels, Walton brought an interesting perspective to the well-worked ground of Arthurian fantasy, but in *Tooth and Claw*, she has produced something utterly *sui generis*.

Walton has a clear model, the "sensitive Victorian novel," especially the works of Anthony Trollope. And she plays all the notes, with a story of family quarrels, disputed inheritances, class anxiety, and marriage proposals

galore. Where she departs from her model is in that all her characters are dragons.

On its face it sounds like the sort of idea one comes up with over drinks — something much more amusing in concept than it ever could be full-blown — but Walton makes it work. In large part her success is due to the intricate social world she creates for her dragons — it's similar enough to the Victorian to allow the story to work, but it's got a credible basis in the biology of her dragons.

She doesn't have them living in stately Victorian country houses or wearing trousers and bustles. Her dragons's homes are cave-like, and they go about without clothing (except for jewelry and hats). They dine messily on raw haunches of beef and mutton. Some of them breathe fire. But they do all this with the air of decorum and propriety appropriate to the English lawn tennis set.

Walton's tale begins with a dispute over the will of Bon Agornin, a dragon of the minor gentry. For dragons, the inheritance is more than just the patriarch's hoard, it's also his very body, since dragons only grow by eating the flesh of other dragons. Agornin's grasping son-in-law Daverak insists on a large share

of the body, despite the objections of Agornin's sons Penn and Avan, and Avan determines to take Daverak to court for redress, though Daverak's much loftier social standing almost surely dooms his suit. Meanwhile, the local parson Frelt has his eye set on Agornin's daughter Selendra, while Selendra finds herself falling for her brother Penn's liege lord, Sher Benandi, hopelessly out of her league. And so the plots are launched, and become increasingly tangled as they go.

As in the novels it recalls (and in other recent pastiches, such as Charles Palliser's *The Quincunx*), we can't help but get caught up in the undeniably contrived twists and turns, and yearn for it all to work out right, with justice served, the wicked punished, and the right couples paired off and comfortable at the end. There's still something seductive about stories like this, something that hooks us beneath whatever layers of jaded world-weariness we might have acquired.

It's a rare book that leaves me wishing it were twice as long, but *Tooth and Claw* is one such. As I neared the end I found I didn't want to leave Walton's dragons behind. I wanted to see more of their comical law courts, I wanted to witness a

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performance at the theater, I wanted to see how the growing movement for social reform worked out. But then, once finished, with all the plot strands neatly tied up, I thought I could do without a sequel. *Tooth and Claw* has a kind of perfection just as it is, as does *The Anvil of the World*. These two books prove not only that inventive, original fantasies are still being written, but that the compulsion to produce three or more volumes is a curse on the field. As they say in show biz, "Always leave them wanting more." Fantasy writers should take note. ♪