



The Claws of Evil

Books Reviewed:

[The Claws of Evil \(The Battles of Ben Kingdom\)](#) [1]

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~~Not a Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

4

The future of the world is at stake (again); or at least, for starters, late Nineteenth Century London. The scale of things is Miltonic. Some of the bad guys, the evil Legion, are literally Fallen Angels who live in the 'Under', the sewers and tunnels beneath the City streets. Their shock troops include the harpy-like Feathered Men. Their opponents, the true servants of Heaven, The Watchers, appropriately tend to keep to the rooftops of the capital. Among their leaders is the mysterious Weeping Man who, when he casts aside his 'long, square-tailed coat' to prepare reluctantly for war, reveals wings worthy of Gabriel. Many of the foot soldiers, on both sides, are children 'mudlarks and street urchins you might find in Mayhew or in Terry Pratchett's recently published **Dodger**. Mr. Beasley is a little unlucky to be appearing almost simultaneously with Sir Terry, since by chance his hero, Ben Kingdom, shares the streetwise chirpiness of *Dodger* and, indeed, the verbal and physical resilience of Dickens' artful pickpocket.

The narrative flips from one side to the other in this roistering adventure, meeting some colourful characters along the way. There's 'Claw' Carter, outwardly an eminent professor housed at the British Museum, but secretly lusting for world domination. He's an old-time villain, with his boney artificial hand to say nothing of his mastery of Mongolian, Swahili, Mandarin and Gujurati. He lacks only the Judas Coin, the 30th piece of silver; then he'll be unstoppable. Ben has the coin in his possession, though he doesn't know its power; in an effective strand of the plot, the adventures the coin precipitates lead Ben and his widower father into a far richer understanding. Then there are some lively young women on both sides, whom Ben finds disturbingly beguiling, even when they're clearly not to be trusted. Also to be numbered among the angels is old blind Jago Moon, whose wisdom and senses of smell and hearing offer far more than mere sight to The Watchers.

Some of these characters have magical gifts and here's where things are a little confused 'the theology is a bit rocky, if you like. The relationship between The Watchers and the established church stretches credulity, so that the interplay between Ben's London and the historical city of the 1890s doesn't stand comparison, for example, with Pullman's carefully crafted parallel worlds. It may also not have been wise to decree that the birthday of Ben, the Chosen One, the Saviour of the World (provided he resists temptation) should fall on Christmas Day. That begs more questions than it answers.

Such reservations may be dismissed as tedious by readers swept along by the plot towards what ought to be a

cataclysmic battle around the sewers and rooftops of the City. In fact, perhaps because this is (again) the first of a series, the author has to hold something back for later books, so the final fight in this episode is more of a skirmish than an Armageddon. Nevertheless, there is much colour, humour and pathos in this welcome first novel from a writer described in the blurb as an ex-lawyer, traveller and now primary school teacher. How he manages to write with such invention and energy alongside the day job is cause enough for congratulation.

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