



Knights of the Borrowed Dark

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Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

Crosscaper Orphanage stands on the westernmost tip of Achill Island, County Mayo. It may have a Director whose dislike of children matches that of Wackford Squeers or Mr Bumble, but this Orphanage is neither Dotheboys Hall nor the Workhouse. There's a well-used library and, it seems, some of the teachers care conscientiously for the 250 inmates. Best friends and long-term residents Denizen Hardwick and Simon Hayes, both aged 12, are avid users of that library; Simon is seriously into detective fiction, while Denizen is more eclectic. *Love on the High Seas* stands next to *The Politics of Renaissance Italy* on his bookshelf though, handily enough, he has a special interest in fantasy. Life at the Orphanage has fed the boys' natural intelligence and enabled them to become highly articulate (perhaps beyond their years), with a sturdy self-sufficiency which events will test to the limit. Given Dave Rudden's own verbal agility, readers may also be tested by this debut novel ? and then rewarded by exciting and complex pleasures, including the idiosyncratic imagery embedded in the narrative. Take these characteristic examples, which could have been chosen from almost any page: ?the director looked like a heron rescued from an oil-slicked beach ? hunched and slow and miserable?; ?The sound slid from her lips like a tide of grime, a rough-static snarl of hunger?. When things become tense or violent, as they often do, the language responds: ?Denizen caught a blurred glimpse of something huge and spindly, a bent-spine mantis of spavined gears, faces split by shining teeth.? Even in more relaxed passages, we might find, ?... fat waddling cars that sang like bumblebees? or ?the man smiled like a cat burglar.?

Mercifully, and skilfully, pretension is avoided by the undercutting comic perspective of Rudden's third person narrative and by the voices of several of the characters, including Denizen. He has already learned to protect himself through irony, even scepticism. Without those qualities he would have been hard-pressed to make it through more than a chapter or two, for from the outset this is fantasy fiction where the stakes could not be higher. All over the world, the battle is again building between the malevolent powers of the Tenebrous and their age-old opponents, the Knights of the Order of the Borrowed Dark. Humankind lives in blithe ignorance of this struggle, yet were the Knights to falter - and here in Ireland it looks as though they might - then life-as-we-mortals-know-it would crumble into oblivion.

Denizen finds himself plucked from the security of Orphanage life and his friendship with Simon to be caught up in the great conflict in Dublin, where a small cadre of Knights, led by a woman claiming to be his Aunt, is bracing itself for a cataclysmic showdown. In the satisfying tradition of, say, *Lord of the Rings*, the men and women of the warrior band have complementary skills and personalities. Denizen must learn his knightly arts rapidly, often from surprising sources

as bargains and alliances are made and broken, loyalties tested and betrayal threatens to undermine everything.

There's an intoxicating quality about the risks Rudden takes with plot and language, especially in the ingenious evil of the monstrous enemies and the graphic violence of the hand-to-hand fighting which mostly requires swords and cross-bows and only once, the devastating use of a gun. No hi-tec frivolity here, but there is extreme pace and shocking excitement; and always tempering this heightened drama is that grounded, very 21st Century, comic perspective. Readers will surely believe this conflict matters and that ? when physical prowess falls short - the use of spells and magic is credible and not an easy authorial escape from a tight corner. As Ursula Le Guin's **A Wizard of Earthsea** demonstrated almost fifty years ago, readers' acceptance is won when they recognise that magic depends upon skill and self-knowledge, that it costs, and that the abuse of powers will damage the user.

There is a welcome promise of a series to come.

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