

A BRILLIANT MADNESS: THE SLOW BURN OF BRANDON SANDERSON'S *STORMLIGHT ARCHIVE*

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A Review of Sanderson, Brandon. *Oathbringer*. Tor Books, 2017. *Stormlight Archive* 3. Novel.

Let me start with a disclaimer: I am an avid Brandon Sanderson fan. This is in part due to the thoughtfulness that Sanderson puts into his writing and world-building. From 2007 to 2013 Sanderson set out his 'three laws' of magic-writing which I strongly believe that all Fantasy authors should follow (J. K. Rowling fans, take note; Rowling's conception of magic is incredibly flawed.)

The first law: "An author's ability to solve conflict with magic is DIRECTLY PROPORTIONAL to how well the reader understands said magic" (original emphasis).

The second law: "Limitations > Powers" [...]. As he explains further, "It isn't what the heroes can do that is most important to who they are, but what they have trouble doing."

Sanderson's magic has rules. It has weaknesses. It does not involve a bit of wand-waving and a *deus ex machina* mechanic that conveniently delivers the hero from danger (again, take note Rowling fans). His magic is logical while fantastical.

But it is Sanderson's third law that demonstrates a principle that is especially important to the Fantastika field: "**Expand what you already have before you add something new**" (original emphasis). As he clarifies further, "your job as a writer is to look at how the changes you've made will affect the world as a whole." The greater Fantastika writers are those that are conscious of this idea. For instance, Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) is particularly brilliant in its awareness of how a small change (removing binary notions of gender) would transform the entire society (fans of Kameron Hurley's *The Mirror Empire* (2014) or *The Stars are Legion* (2017), pay attention). Fantastika authors truly shine when they deal with a single novum that has immense impact on the rest of the world. And here is the true beauty of Sanderson's work: the awareness of how magic transforms *everything* – economy, religion, even clothing; and not in the stereotypical 'wizards should wear cloaks' manner (my last cheap shot at Potter fans)¹, but rather how does a cloak actively aid or thwart a wizard's use of magic? The *novum* is where Sanderson focuses his attention and dedicates loving detail to its exploration.

It is with this background that I approached *The Stormlight Archive* (of which *Oathbringer* is the third book) with eagerness – and some measure of trepidation. The series was preceded by

the announcement that many of Sanderson's trilogies and stand-alone stories were in fact connected and thus all in the same universe. In view of his well-thought-out laws, how was it possible that these seemingly disparate magical systems all came from the same universe? Given the current craze with franchises, it was hard not to see this as just part of some marketing gimmick. At the time of writing this review, the *Cosmere* universe is expected to become some forty books when it is completed and there are also rumours of a multi-film deal being signed. However, it should be acknowledged that Sanderson always planned for a connected universe with the intent to reveal the links between these seemingly disparate series after a few of them had already published.

So I settled down to read the first of the series, *The Ways of Kings* (2010). And I hated it. (Well, perhaps hate is too strong of a word, but given my passion for Sanderson's work, I was more than a tad disappointed with this mammoth endeavour.) It was too complicated; too detailed; too big. And given that I specialise in Epic Fantasy, I am no stranger to complicated, detailed, big EPICS.

But then I re-read the novel in preparation for the sequel, *Words of Radiance* (2014), and I admitted that, perhaps, I was too quick to criticise. It was a perfectly respectable work of Epic Fantasy Fiction and, while not my favourite of Sanderson's series, I was looking forward to the third instalment. By 2016, the short story collection *Arcanum Unbounded* was released and was instrumental in revealing the secret connections between the *Cosmere* universe. Reading the collection made me excited to re-examine the *Cosmere* collection. So, in preparation for the release of *Oathbringer* (2017), I once more sat down to re-read *The Way of Kings* (1007 pages) and *Words of Radiance* (1087 pages) with this background in mind. And *this time* I was blown away by the brilliance of Brandon Sanderson. The metaphorical lightbulb turned on and I could see the hidden web of connections at play. As an academic I live for those moments where a difficult concept suddenly *makes sense* – in that one bright, shining, eureka moment. And this is precisely what Sanderson manages to do with his novels time and time again. The reader waits for that twist, Aristotle's "Recognition," that 'ah-ha' moment where all is revealed. While Sanderson usually manages to do this neatly by the end of each novel, the *Stormlight Archive* is a different game: a slow burn that reveals itself only when you sit back and see the forest for the trees.

Although you can read the series without reading the rest of Sanderson's *Cosmere* writings, *Oathbringer* itself is probably difficult to read as a stand-alone novel. As with many Epics, the series begins with a prologue. Here, magician knights (the Knights Radiant) decide to abandon their post and lay down their cause. This act effectively removes magic from the world. The rest of the series takes place several centuries later and explores the gradual re-emergence of Radiant power. Meanwhile, the plot itself focuses on a long-running war between a humanoid and a nonhuman race (the Parshendi or Parshmen). There is also strife and double-crossing between various houses from the humanoid side which prolongs the war. (The emphasis on finding honour in the middle of a decade long war seems reminiscent of Homer's *Iliad* and the confrontations between Agamemnon and Achilles.) And to further add to the theme of stagnant war, the events of the first book involve the problems of extreme class disparity and the efforts of slave revolt during the midst of these battles.

The war itself is triggered by the assassination of the king by the Parshendi during a celebration of a peace treaty between both races. However, though the Parshendi take culpability for the assassination, the reason behind it is left unclear and a key part of the series (and Sanderson's work as a whole) is uncovering and slowly examining the backstory and history of this secret race. In a sense, another key theme to the entire series is the idea of recovering lost or hidden knowledge. This theme occurs on several levels: with the slow re-emergence of Radiant power and their attempts to comprehend this lost knowledge; with every main character in the narrative hiding or repressing their personal backgrounds (motifs of madness and darkness also emerge, as the reasons behind these repressions are likewise suppressed); and finally, with several 'Dark Age' styled generational gaps which have led to a blanket lack of awareness of not only entire races, but natural and supernatural geographical phenomena as well. The *Stormlight Archive* deals with the gradual emergence of these hidden histories from the minutiae to the macro.

As the third book in an epic series, *Oathbringer* starts off after a lot of major events have already occurred. The war has pushed past its series of static battles and launched into even greater destruction. Radiants and Radiant power has been revealed in the world. The 'bad guys,' in true Sanderson fashion, have turned out to be not so evil, and indeed sympathetic and relatable. The series has also been leading for some time toward a discussion on the guilt of colonisation. This crystallises further in *Oathbringer* as the central hero Kaladin joins up with a group of Parshmen. While the second book began to have Parshendi as point of view characters, Kaladin's observations of their actions as 'normal' (events such as playing cards or simple bickering) humanises these former slaves further. But, as Kaladin struggles to convince others that Parshmen are not truly evil, one cannot help fearing an underlying dread that the series is headed towards an inevitable genocide. Hopefully Sanderson manages to twist the plot in the manner that we have become familiar with.

There are some gratifying moments in the novel, passages that I re-read again and again simply as guilty pleasure. For instance, Kaladin's reveal of his magical abilities is pure escapism for me. (Who doesn't dream of revealing to friends and family that you have superhuman magical powers?) As various members of the narrative's motley crew gain magical abilities, the story is rife with further escapist moments.

But these moments are neatly balanced against the darker sides, the 'weaknesses' of magical abilities. Magic 'awakens' when broken people try to come to terms with their identity, making themselves whole and forming bonds with the spirits around them. This redemption comes not once, but repeatedly, as a Radiant must swear five Ideals – oaths that are individual and specific to each struggle and journey.

The struggles of the core characters are weighty, and at times emotional. Shallan's complete descent into madness was not entirely unexpected. On one hand, Fantasy heroes going mad are almost clichéd now; J. R. R. Tolkien did it with anyone who touched the One Ring (*The Lord of the Rings*, 1954-1955) while Robert Jordan continued the tradition with his exploration of Rand

al'Thor (*The Wheel of Time*, 1990-2013). Yet Sanderson manages to build layers of the character in a way that is at once fresh and yet equally disturbing and worrisome. Shallan's love triangle with her counterpoint male heroes might risk being a touch problematic (as Epic Fantasy rarely depicts strong female leads without pushing them into a supporting role as love interest), except that the nuances of this love triangle further reveal facets of her madness and acts to strengthen the layers of her character. The reveal of Dalinar's backstory through the use of jumps in narrative time is especially well-crafted. Given that Dalinar has holes in his own memory, the slow reveal of these lost pieces works well structurally as the reader learns the backstory alongside the character. In a sense, Sanderson seems to encourage his reader to re-read these narratives, as the structure of re-gaining lost memories also works in parallel to the reader's own re-reading of the texts. Given the length of each novel (*Oathbringer* is 1248 pages),² Sanderson seems to keep rushing all of his endings in the *Stormlight Archive*, but it seemed particularly abrupt in *Oathbringer*. I imagine this is in part *due* to the length of the book; a longer ending would have likely seen us in the 1500 page range – which is unfathomable for a novel, even an Epic one. The *Stormlight Archive* is planned to be a ten-book series: the series will be broken up into two parts, with the last five books a sequel series of the first. So if you are gearing up to read *Stormlight Archives*, get ready for the long haul! Is this a book that will take multiple re-reads of the series to enjoy and appreciate? Given the sheer amount of pages published so far, I sincerely hope not. But, if like me, you are a masochist that enjoys reading Epic Fantasy, by this third instalment you will likely be eager to re-read the mammoth collection in order to catch every tiny detail that you have missed the first time around. In this, perhaps, a true fan of *Oathbringer* is a bit mad as well.

NOTES

1. For the record, I do not hate Rowling's *Harry Potter*. I think it does an admirable job of telling a coming-of-age story balanced with a critique of absolute power. But I feel that her rules of magic are more escapist than actual 'rules.'

2. The series is so big that the UK publisher has split each book in the series into parts one and two as individual novels.

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BIONOTE

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