

Reviewing Books and Other Literature

Look at the many tools of literary analysis science fiction writer Orson Scott Card uses to review “The Fox,” a fantasy novel by Sherwood Smith on his website as part of his blog “Uncle Orson Reviews Everything” (see below). Though it is a blog and its tone is casual, it discusses *setting and situation, action, the characters and their relationships, the structure of the work, the intended audience and the effect on the audience*. He lets us know a little bit about *the author and the period* (that Sherwood Smith is a contemporary writer). He hints at a *theme* and uses all the tools of literary analysis except *irony, imagery and point of view*.

Uncle Orson Reviews Everything

August 26, 2007

A few months ago, I reviewed Sherwood Smith’s fantasy novel *Inda*, the first volume of a projected trilogy, and I believe I said very positive things.

I recently read volume two, *Fox*, and the achievement of this writer is only getting more remarkable.

So many fantasy novels take place in a space about the size (and with as much variety) as the state of Delaware.

But in *Fox*, Smith opens up the novel into a wide, wide world, with enormous variety. Here we have nation within nation, layers of history, and a real sense that there are kingdoms and empires on several continents, with complex interactions among them, and wide variation in their cultures.

Every group has its own history, its own objectives, its own grievances. And Smith handles the relationships and machinations among them so deftly that you don’t realize you’re being given a course in politics.

The novel begins by plunging into the story about fifteen minutes after the end of the previous volume. I strongly recommend that you reread that last chapter of *Inda* before starting to read *Fox*. Otherwise, you’ll be as lost as I was. As with the first volume, Smith does not define things as she goes along: You’re expected either to remember or figure it out.

But the sense of dislocation is only momentary. Within a chapter or two I was fully reoriented, despite the months between volumes. And what a ride this new book is!

Though the international politics is deftly handled, what matters most is that the personal stories are believable and compelling. The close-in core of *Inda*’s companions; the second core of characters surrounding Prince Evred; the potential rival to *Inda* for leadership of his anti-pirate pirate fleet, *Fox*; and the most mysterious character, a warrior mage named Ramis who seems able to control space and time—all are richly created, sympathetic, and real.

Nor does Smith infinitely postpone decisive action, the way so many writers of long series do. No, when it’s time for something to happen, it *happens*, and Smith flings out the consequences with reckless abandon. It’s often quite breathtaking how daring she is.

Naming and vocabulary are, as always in this series, a challenge. *Inda* goes by the nom de guerre of “Elgar the Fox,” perhaps intending that he be confused with his ally and rival, whose name is Fox.

After a while, titles like *sierlaef* and *harskialdna* begin to sound like natural words, and family names like *Montredavan-An* and personal names like *Indevan-Laef Algara-Vayir* become not just pronounceable, but freighted with all kinds of meaning. It’s as if we enter into the culture, like immigrants who finally catch on to the language.

Sexuality in these books is a bit utopian (in a libertarian sense) and denies much of human evolution -- it's a world in which sexual activity is largely separated from mating and child-rearing, and sexual orientation is accepted no matter which way it turns.

But nothing is ever pornographic. You don't necessarily give this book to pre-adolescents, but nobody is going to learn the facts of life from it, either. As always, the best suggestion, if you have a fantasy-loving teen, is to read it yourself and then discuss the issues raised by the books in an intelligent way. It works far better than banning a book at keeping your child's moral lens clearly focused.

In the past few months I've started reading more than a dozen fantasy novels or series; I haven't reviewed them here because they were, to put it kindly, a waste of my time, and I didn't bother finishing them.

By contrast, I didn't want *Fox* to end. I savored every paragraph and continued to live in the book for days afterward.

I keep thinking that if I write a good enough review, the publisher or author will relent and let me read the next volume early. Like now. Please.