

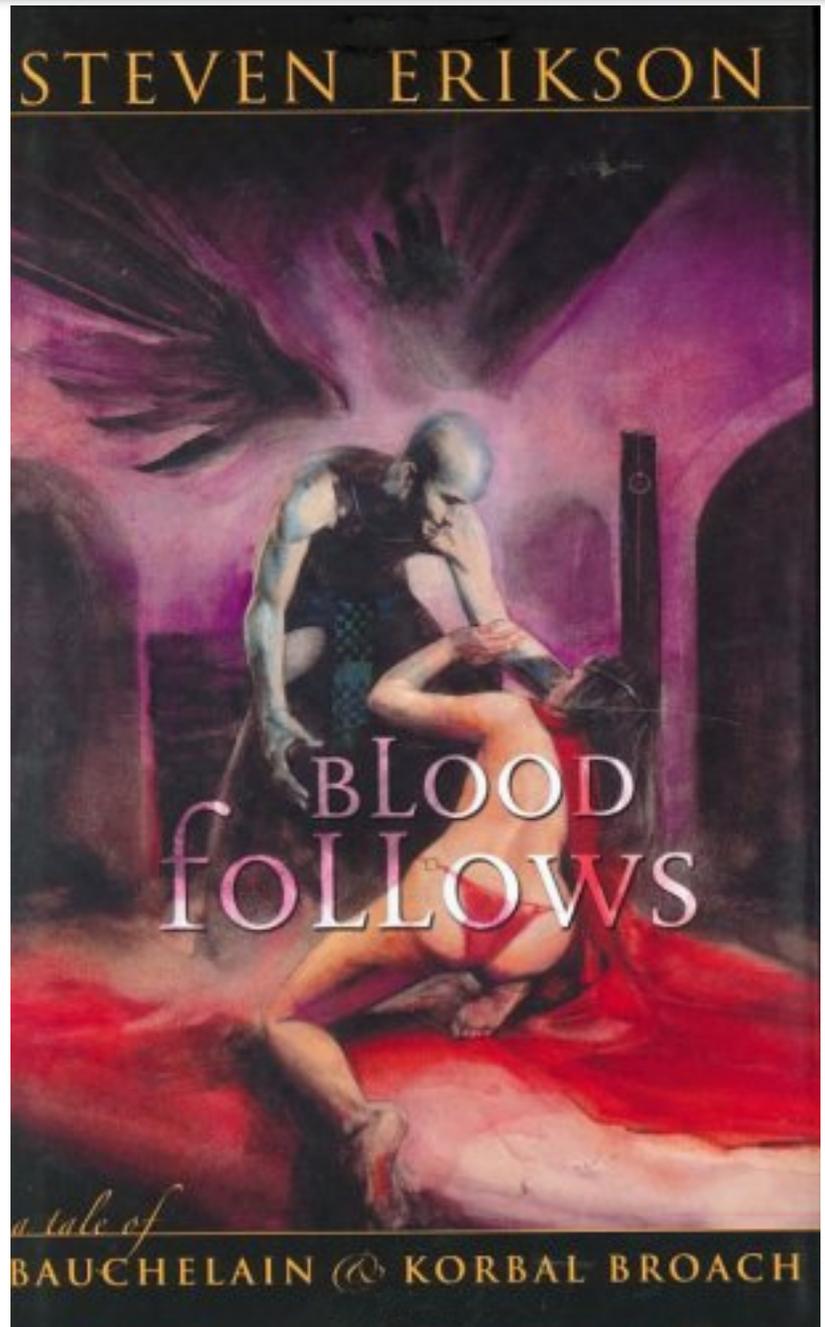
Blood Follows – Steven Erikson

Review by Scott Andrews

The vast majority of epic fantasy writers in the last twenty-five years have broken into the field with novels. As such, any short fiction by most of the top-selling authors in epic fantasy has been exceedingly rare. Robert Silverberg's two Legends anthologies filled this void with novellas written by popular epic fantasy authors, set in the same

worlds as their novels. These anthologies showcased the work of recognizable authors such as Robert Jordan, Raymond E. Feist, and Tad Williams, all in conveniently sized portions. Perhaps more important, Legends also exposed the epic fantasy novel readership to the short fiction format that started the genre, under such classic fantasy writers as Robert E. Howard and Fritz Leiber.

English/Canadian writer Steven Erikson emerged in 2000 as a monumental new presence in epic fantasy. His Malazan Book of the Fallen series is planned to cover ten novels, and it features perhaps the most thoroughly detailed epic fantasy setting ever put to paper. With the recent British publication of the sixth book in this utterly epic saga, and the American release of the third, Night Shade Books has reissued hardback versions of two earlier Erikson novellas set in the same sprawling world. Both of them feature two characters from the third Malazan book, Memories of Ice: the necromancer



Bauchelain, and his companion Korbal Broach.

Blood Follows, the first of these novellas, takes place in the city of Moll, called “Lamentable Moll” by its inhabitants. Despite the book’s label as a tale of Bauchelain and Korbal Broach, the story actually focuses on the hardscrabble family man Emancipor Reese

and the city guard sergeant Guld. The most recent in a string of grisly murders drives the plot, with Guld investigating the killings. The pace of the novella drags through the early sections as Reese talks regional politics with two tavern companions, then trolls the city looking for a new job. Guld inspects the scenes of several new murders, and the crowd of onlookers provides interesting minor characters as suspects. Meanwhile, Reese takes employment with Bauchelain and wonders if his new master might be involved in the killings.

Although both are billed in the title, Bauchelain never emerges beyond the level of a supporting character, and Korbal Broach appears only at the climax. This leaves Reese and Guld as the main characters, and they only hold the reader's interest adequately. Reese's tavern session and drunken wandering fill the first quarter of the novella, but hold little value for the later plot. Reese's personal connection to the murders, with his previous employer one of the victims, is never exploited to get him involved in that plotline. After he joins Bauchelain's employ, he does suspect his new master, but he never acts on that suspicion. As such, Reese ends up merely being an observer, showing the reader the fascinating oddities of Bauchelain and Korbal Broach, but with little drive of his own.

Guld encounters many colorful suspects in his investigation, including undead spirits, a seller of dolls sewn from skin, and two rouges who telepathically train rats to explore barrows. Yet in hindsight, these suspects provide far more background information than any misdirection or clues to develop the mystery. The character interactions in the mystery also contribute little to this plotline, save one conversation Guld has with Bauchelain during the climax.

Without a series of deepening clues, or any entanglements involving the characters, the murder mystery falls flat. The tension never escalates beyond the horror of the crime scenes. The resolution features several new and disparate elements that do not logically emerge from the few clues offered in the narrative. The climax answers all the questions, but in a jumbled manner that makes the previous scenes feel as though the author wasn't certain where the mystery was headed.

Erikson's supreme strength, the thorough vividness of his fantasy setting, dominates Blood Follows. The odors and the grit of Lamentable Moll are palpable. The scope of the world feels limitless. Perhaps from his professional training as an anthropologist, Erikson understands that in real cultures, the new elements grow up alongside the old. He shows this universal concept in the ancient barrows that pock the city, their original builders so long departed that the current city dwellers have no idea who they were.

The novella ends with Reese accompanying Bauchelain and Korbal Broach to sea, fleeing to lands unknown. The lack of focus on these title characters and the new expectations in the ending make Blood Follows feel more like an introduction to these characters rather than a full tale about them. As such, readers looking for a short but complete story set in Erikson's world may be disappointed. However, Erikson does continue the story of these three companions in a second Bauchelain and Korbal Broach novella, The Healthy Dead.

One other important issue with Blood Follows is the cover price. The reissue edition is only available in hardcover, with a price of \$25. At only 125 pages, printed in a large font and including several illustrations, Blood Follows

does not offer the same value as an anthology of multiple novellas, or as one of Erikson's 800-page Malazan paperbacks. Perhaps Night Shade Books will consider releasing a less expensive paperback edition.

Steven Erikson deserves praise for pausing from his epic saga to write these short fiction tales in the same fantasy setting. Despite the uneven mystery plot and the high cover price, Blood Follows allows readers to experience Erikson's vivid world in an easily digestible length, and it should expose readers of his epic novels to the elegance of the short fiction format.

