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Review: The Wilderking Trilogy

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The Wilderking Trilogy
Jonathan Rogers, Broadman & Holman Publishers

The Bark of the Bog Owl, 2004, ISBN: 0805431314

The Secret of the Swamp King, 2005, ISBN: 0805431322

The Way of the Wilderking, 2006, ISBN: 0805431330

Reading Level: Ages 10 to 18 (Grades 5-12)

Description

In *The Bark of the Bog Owl*, readers meet twelve-year-old Aidan Errolson and his family of brothers and a father. As the youngest, Aidan has the menial tasks to perform, but his actual work does not deter his dreams of greatness and becoming a hero in King Darrow's army. Alone in the field aided by his imagination, Aidan can conquer any foe while banishing the relative boredom of tending sheep. It is during one of these phantom escapades that Dobro Turtlebane, destined to become Aidan's shadow and lifetime companion, literally drops from the trees to enjoy a friendly squabble. Dobro, the hee-feechee, becomes a central character in the remaining episodes of Aidan's life, saving the skin of the "civilizer" on more than one occasion and providing plentiful portions of comedy in the process.

Although Aidan is seen simply as the youngest of the all-male clan with little significance except to his father, Bayard the Truthspeaker sees the young man in a far different light. Throughout his long life, Truthspeaker's wisdom and age have been highly respected in the kingdom of Corenwald. However, when the longhaired prophet arrives at Longleaf Manor and announces that Aidan is indeed the long heralded Wilderking, reception to the news is met with disbelief from Lord Errolson and scorn from older brothers. No one, including Aidan takes the sage's proclamation seriously. However, time will tell. This first installment of the saga ends with Aidan back in the pasture, but with the light of destiny upon him while Dobro appears and disappears like a friendly spirit.

The Secret of the Swamp King finds Aidan experiencing a wider world outside his family estate with Steren, son of King Darrow, firmly established as his friend; Dobro Turtlebane is never forgotten nor far removed. Although, conventional wisdom might indicate that the feechee boy from the swamp would prove less valuable a companion than the son of a king, readers must visit the swamp and the castle to determine the worth of friendship. As the shepherd-king David of biblical repute finds himself in a lengthy and confusing period of training for the promised fulfillment of prophesy, so does Aidan. Sent by King Darrow into the Feechifen Swamp on an impossible errand, Aidan finds adventure, becomes immersed in the culture of the legendary feechees, and rightfully earns the name of Pantherbane, along with the respect of the primitive folk who live there. (Imagine an entire society of Jethro Clampetts from *The Beverly Hillbillies* or the Darlings from *Mayberry RFD* with a constant desire to fight—just for the fun of competition, and voila--there are the Feechiefolk.)

Joining the ranks of the fiercely independent, hilariously honest, childlike race grants Aidan immersion into unspoiled virtue, loyalty, courage, and lifts him out of the life of a “civilizer.” Never failing in his love of family, country, and allegiance to King Darrow, Aidan is given an opportunity to build character that would not have been possible in his native culture. Powerful lessons lie here about the bumps and bruises of coming of age and the influence of peers.

A chant learned by most of the school children introduces the final book of the trilogy, *The Way of the Wilderking*. All prophecies painted in the patriotic poem point to the life and heroic deeds of Aidan Errolson. However, no one but Bayard the Truthspeaker seems to make the connection—unless we could count King Darrow who is coming with an army of thousands to the Feechiefen Swamp to capture the “traitor.” Eighteen-year-old Aidan behaves in a manner uncharacteristic to this point in his life—he runs. Strangely, his flight is to save King Darrow as well as his feechie friends. Aidan knows that the swamp is no place for an army. Much to his dismay, he is followed by Dobro who decides that it is time for him to branch out into the civilizer world.

Although this final book is replete with nonstop adventure, danger, loss, and death, it is also peppered throughout with Dobro-humor that is of the laugh-out-loud quality. Again, imagine Jethro in Times Square, or attending a play on Broadway, not understanding the concept of drama, except as it appears in real life. In the finale to the series, Rogers draws together loose ends of relationship, morality, and prophecy, building to the inevitable crescendo. Treachery of the blackest sort is revealed while honor is upheld, and redemption unfolds for the undeserving.

Fantasy plays its most profound role as good overcomes evil in a memorable scene made more powerful as it reflects a cosmic sacrifice known throughout time and eternity. No witchcraft, no wizards, no wonders help along our hero or those who have chosen to follow him. Sustained by faith and obedience to the life that has been chosen for him, Aidan takes on the cloak of a warrior and leader. Along the way, lessons have been learned through friendship, courage, and loyalty that have prepared him for exactly this moment.

Critique

This series is highly recommended for tweens and teens in the dangerous act of maturing. Although girls are few and far between, they play a lifesaving role when they do appear. Loosely based on the life of the shepherd-king David of the Bible, there is no Bathsheba. The setting seems to be the swamps and backwaters of Georgia and Florida, with names of characters, and laws of status derived from the early Celts. (In fantasy, anything is possible, as long as it is consistent, and Rogers has made readers feel at home in both feechie swamp and manor house.) Virtue and integrity serve as beacons, without any didactic lessons to dampen the fun of the journey. Either Aidan or Dobro may be considered as a role model, although Aidan’s sense of hygiene is the much preferred of the two.

As a long-time fan of fantasy, this reviewer gives this series five stars for all that is solid, funny, and sacred in the fight between good and evil. We can only hope that Dr. Rogers has more of the same quality awaiting his genius.

Descriptors

Fantasy

Speculative Fiction

David of the Bible

Virtue

Integrity

Loyalty

Friendship

Courage

Jonathan Rogers