

Fulfilling this fantasy requires a lengthy initiation

Review

George Williams

17 November 2007

The Australian

Fatal Revenant

By Stephen Donaldson

Gollancz, 736pp, \$49.95

FANTASY is not for the faint-hearted. Not only do fantasy authors tend to produce trilogies, they also write at great length. Stephen Donaldson is a case in point. *Fatal Revenant* is more than 600 pages long, with its predecessor *The Runes of the Earth* more than 700 pages. These are the first offerings in his new four-book series entitled the *Last Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*. It is preceded by two trilogies, *The First Chronicles* and *Second Chronicles*, which together run to more than 2500 pages.

Fatal Revenant should not be read as a stand-alone book. It follows on from its predecessor. Moreover, the intricate plot and characterisation will be fully appreciated and understood only if the reader is familiar with both earlier trilogies. While *Fatal Revenant* contains a prologue setting out what has come before, it is not forgiving to the uninitiated. This raises the question of whether *Fatal Revenant* is worth the effort.

The answer is undoubtedly yes. *Fatal Revenant* is the latest in an unbroken line of books that has established Donaldson as the best living exponent of the fantasy genre. His *Chronicles of Thomas Covenant* is one of the few true classics in a field littered with too many pale imitations of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*.

Donaldson's books stand apart because he subverts the clichés of the genre. Rather than a heroic lead character, Donaldson invented Thomas Covenant, a stubborn leper who refused to believe in the magical world, the Land, to which he had been transported. His disbelief formed the key theme of Donaldson's early work.

Covenant was able to wield wild magic through his white-gold wedding ring, a metal unknown in the Land. This meant he was capable of saving and damning the Land, things he often did in equal measure.

This set-up provided an intriguing basis for a fantasy series that enabled Donaldson a depth of characterisation not seen before in the field.

The first Covenant book, *Lord Foul's Bane*, was published in 1977, with book six, *White Gold Wielder*, published in 1983. A long hiatus followed before the *Last Chronicles* began with *The Runes of the Earth* in 2004. The series is expected to conclude in 2013, with Donaldson's ambition being to unify the entire saga.

Fatal Revenant continues the standard of Donaldson's earlier works. It is again set in the Land, a place marked by wondrous and cryptic beings and dependent for its salvation on a person transported from our time and place. In this series the saviour is not Covenant but Linden Avery, his companion from the *Second Chronicles* who possesses Covenant's white-gold ring. Avery is riddled with power and self-doubt and is driven not by a desire to save the Land but by the hope she

can save her son, Jeremiah, from the clutches of the evil Lord Foul.

Many series suffer from the problem of the unnecessary sequel. What started as a fresh and imaginative vision too often becomes stale at the fourth or later book. Fantasy is especially prone to this, with authors preferring to stick to one lucrative idea rather than striking out in a new direction. Some series have become especially bloated, including two of the most popular in recent history. Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time* and Terry Goodkind's *Sword of Truth* series have both reached book 11. The latter has apparently finished, while the former was due to conclude at book 12, something denied due to Jordan's recent death.

Like Tolkien, who wrote about Middle-earth for most of his life, Donaldson has again shown there is life in the Land. While Avery is not quite as compelling a lead character as Covenant, and many of the creatures and ideas will be familiar, Donaldson does inject a lot of new ideas. These include time travel, which enables Avery to travel 10,000 years into the past. There she interacts with heroes, events and a history only hinted at in earlier books.

Donaldson excels in realising his imaginative creation of the Land and those who populate it. He has also succeeded again in using the fantasy genre to explore larger questions. One example is how *Fatal Revenant* is laced with contradictions. A key character, Esmer, has fantastic powers, but also a divided lineage that means whenever he aids Avery he is equally compelled to betray her. A related theme is whether good can be accomplished by evil means. The perils and choices that confront Avery bring this question repeatedly to the fore.

Donaldson places Avery in a series of desperate situations. She is often exhausted, ignorant and even at the edge of despair. She meets this by developing an inner strength that Donaldson explores as an inner dialogue. Indeed, his attention to this dialogue is as well developed as his rich descriptions of the places and events around her.

If anything is missing from *Fatal Revenant*, it is humour. While this absence aids the serious intent of the work, an occasional lighter shade to offset its dark themes would have been welcome. Notwithstanding this, *Fatal Revenant* is a worthy addition to a classic fantasy series. Donaldson has confirmed why he is regarded as a grand master of the genre.

George Williams is a sci-fi and fantasy aficionado who dabbles in constitutional law.