



Not Less Than Gods

Kage Baker

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On a dark evening in 1824, a lady is offered a ride home in the carriage of a dark and mysterious stranger and a boy is conceived, to the strains of Beethoven's brand-new setting to the Ode to Joy. Groomed from childhood to become a perfect British hero, young Edward Alton Bell-Fairfax proceeds uncertainly through public school, a career in the navy, mutiny and court-martial before discovering his true place in life. There is, in Whitehall, a comfortable and slightly shabby club called Redking's. Downstairs from Redking's, however, is concealed the London headquarters of the Gentlemen's Speculative Society... a centuries-old fraternity devoted to the development of what its members call Technologia. Their goal is to bring about a Utopian paradise of science, through the manipulation of men and governments. Edward, as one of their agents, sets off on an odyssey across 19th-century Europe, encountering on the way flying machines, self-propelled carriages, and an Underground Galvanic Railway... and learns that the Society, in its various disguises, is everywhere.

Cover art by J.K. Potter

Not Less Than Gods Details

Date : Published by Subterranean Press (first published December 31st 2009)

ISBN : 9781596062832

Author : Kage Baker

Format : Hardcover 328 pages

Genre : Science Fiction, Steampunk, Fiction, Fantasy, Time Travel

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From Reader Review Not Less Than Gods for online ebook

Samantha says

Interesting backstory on the origins & early escapades of Edward Bell-Fairfax, who figures in the later Company novels with Mendoza. Not quite as well structured as some of the other novels, and it ends somewhat abruptly, but still a worthwhile read for those who enjoyed the Company series. You can read this without having read all of the other entries in the series.

Brenda (aka Gamma) says

No Mendoza, no romance, and the humor is lower-key than some of the other Company books. Those are pluses for me.

I really like the books that go into Company secrets, but this isn't one of those either. That is, the Company is never mentioned directly. We spend a brief time with Edward in his childhood and then follow as he's taken in by the mysterious Gentleman's Speculative Society. It starts to seem like a spy novel set in the mid 19th century. The techno-gadgets might seem like it's a James Bond type story, but Edward seems more like he belongs in a light steampunk John le Carré novel.

Edward isn't going to spell out his thoughts and feelings as he gets his first faint glimpses of what's going on. It's all laid out on the pages buffet style (take what you want). This is a big plus for me, and makes me want to rave about the skill of an author who can do it. I didn't care about Edward before this, but now I want to read the whole series again.

Four stars are because I really enjoyed reading this. The 5th is because I can't get it out of my head. Free will and Frankenstein's monster—or maybe any of us.

Lady Knight says

"The Company" has long been a favorite series of mine and when I heard about this 'extra' chapter, I couldn't wait. Unfortunately this volume just doesn't live up to the rest of the series. It is an interesting take on the spy/assassin genre and does have the promised elements of steampunk and mysterious societies. What's missing here though is more of a plot! I honestly felt that all the characters did was globe trot, killed the odd 'bad guy' and moved on. Where's the greater plot? Okay, I know it was just supposed to provide some background for Edward, but I honestly expected more. It is a pity that it was Ms. Baker's last book. She's written much, much better material.

Mark says

Not Less Than Gods
By Kage Baker

Publisher: Tor / Tom Doherty and Assoc
Published In: New York City, NY, USA
Date: 2010
Pgs: 319

REVIEW MAY CONTAIN SPOILERS

Summary:

Edward Alton Bell-Fairfax, the issue of a secret society's meddling in genetics, is raised a bastard in an absent adopted family situation. The society takes care of his needs and forces him along the paths that they want him to follow: schooling, Navy, etc. On his return from the Navy, the society initiates him in full, training him for the missions that they are going to need his mighty skills for.

Clockwork opponents and steam-powered vehicles as a Victorian world prepares for war, Bell-Fairfax finds himself a cog in a machine playing a game of centuries and power.

They've created the most dangerous man alive...and he's an idealist. Control may be an issue.

Genre:

fiction, alternate world, time travel, alternate history

Why this book:

The blurb on the cover.

This Story is About:

duty, honor, and the doing of bad things in the service of good causes

Favorite Character:

Favorite has to be Bell-Fairfax. He is the central, main character. He is the hero, after a fashion.

Least Favorite Character:

Hobson the drunk. How he hid his shortcomings from those who trained him isn't explained, but he had to have already been when he joined the Society.

Character I Most Identified With:

Ludbridge. He does his job. He does it well. He doesn't suffer fools lightly.

The Feel:

The story feels a bit like standing on top of a tinderbox about to burst into flame must be. It's Stephen King level anxiety, but that's the kind of feeling I got. I would compare the feel behind this story to the feeling I got when reading *The Stand*. Not that horror lurked around every corner, but that these characters travel through a world on the verge of a shattering war.

Favorite Scene:

When, while on patrol, Bell-Fairfax finds a willing partner for an afternoon delight in a Greek bazaar shop.

Settings:

London; Beirut; Jerusalem; Africa; the Gentlemen's Speculative Society HQ; Istambul; Sebastopol; a deep Earth railroad; Aalbourg, Denmark; St. Petersburg

Pacing:

The pacing is awesome.

Plot Holes/Out of Character:

N/A

Last Page Sound:

Definitely need to read more of these.

Author Assessment:

Really liked the story. Will be checking out more by this author.

Editorial Assessment:

Well edited.

Did the Book Cover Reflect the Story:

Very steampunk. Nicely done.

Hmm Moments:

The sum feels greater than its parts. None of the scene leapt at me, but in total, they hang together very nicely.

Knee Jerk Reaction:

really good book

Disposition of Book:

Irving Public Library, Irving, TX

Why isn't there a screenplay?

It would make an excellent movie. But I doubt it would be made since it trolls the waters that the League of Extraordinary Gentlemen explored and it will be difficult getting a studio to invest in a movie of that type again.

Casting call:

I could see Patrick Stewart as Ludbridge.

Ewan McGregor would have been incredible as Bell-Fairfax.

Oliver Platt could have been Hobson.

And though it would be a small part, Ian McKellen as Richardson, the butler who took care of Bell-Fairfax in his youth when his adopted parents promptly disappeared after his coming to live with them. Small, but important part.

Would recommend to:

genre fans

Phoenixfalls says

This is an odd book, a standalone Company novel that I think would actually work better for someone who does not know the series than for those of us who know and love it (which might explain the very lackluster reviews I've seen of it online).

Not Less Than Gods is written in a third-person omniscient near-objective mode, meaning the narrator knows everything about everyone in the story but rarely delves into their thoughts and feelings, staying detached. Despite what the jacket would lead you to believe, it never enters Edward's head -- he is a cipher to those around him and to the reader. I resented this mode at first -- it seemed to leave a great gaping hole in every scene -- but the introduction of Rabbi Canetti reveals that this was a very deliberate choice on Baker's part and one, in fact, that I believe would make the book for those who have not read the Company novels (and have the eyes to see it).

To one who has not encountered the Company before, this novel has a central theme -- the danger of creating a monster and then giving it a soul. It is a Frankenstein tale, plain and simple, with Dr. Nennys as Dr. Frankenstein and Edward as his monster -- a subtler monster than Shelley's, but just as horrifying to the average bystander and just as innocent. We the reader cannot see Edward's perspective for this to work, however, because he does not know that he is a golem; the objective tone Baker uses reinforces her message.

The novel still is not entirely effective; I think it would have been stronger had Baker dipped more into the ancillary characters' heads, and it is rather slow starting and episodic throughout. It is also more steampunk than I expected, paying far more attention to the workings of all the wondrous machines than were really warranted by the story. But I think that if I did not know the Company novels already, I would have been quite moved by the climax as Ludbridge watches Edward realize what exactly he is.

However, I do know the Company novels, and I have met Edward before. I know his history already. Most importantly, I know how much more of a complete person (as opposed to a golem with a soul) he is than this book gives him credit for, so I am resistent to giving him the pass that this book provides him on all those shady ethical issues. With all that extra knowledge, I was left almost entirely cold by the novel. I wanted, instead, the novel that the book jacket led me to believe this was -- a real dip into Edward's psyche before Mendoza ran into him in California, something more realistic psychoanalysis than allegory. Or, at least, something with a bit more humor and action, some of the dashing zest for life it seemed Edward had (in amongst his raging egomania).

So all in all I'm frustrated by this novel, but I nonetheless hope it does well, and it would be very nice if it finds an audience outside of Baker's core Company fans.

Tom Loock says

I consider myself a big fan of Kage Baker and her **Company**-series and have now read all those stories and novels.

Though this is classified as the 9th book in the series, the connection to the series is very thin indeed - one major character (Bell Fairfax) and a perennial villain plus the unspoken implication that the 'Gentlemen's Speculative Society' is a forerunner of 'Zeus, Inc.'

On the positive side, this is a nice enough steampunk novel and it connects the Company to the women of Nell Gwynne. Sadly the plot is a straightforward line of stringed episodes without any real drama and after

300+ pages I still do not care about any of the four main characters ...

Kara says

Part of my disappointment may be because that, due to the author's untimely demise, this might be the last book I ever get to read by her, which makes everything so much worse. I blame the chemo and the cancer for clearly wreaking havoc with her ability to write a subtle, well crafted story that blends all sorts of history and science fiction along with strong characters and subtle re-workings of old themes, because none of that happened in this book. Again – not blaming the author, because I know she ~~can~~ could do better.

The book is basically James Bond in the Victorian era - complete with all the gadgets, girls, exotic locales, international thugs, over the top plots, secret government agencies/societies.

You will be completely lost if you haven't read all her other Company works, and if you have read her other Company works, you won't be very satisfied by this piece of the puzzle - it simply slightly fleshes and puts together out a lot of pieces that have already been presented throughout the series. Also, she seems to have simply copied and pasted parts of her book on Alec's childhood and just changed the names – and the parental abandonment theme was done better there.

Also, this might be because Baker planned on doing more books to directly follow this one, the story arch doesn't feel complete. We are presented with a man full of idealism and naïveté - but we never see him become the cool jaded character we know he will be later in the series. The book failed to deliver on a lot of points, but this one was the worst.

Edward is compared to both the Golem (by a walking stereotype) and to Frankenstein monster, but its like being hit over the head with a mallet – again, none of Kage Baker's usual subtlety. Those creatures knew they weren't human to start with – but Edward is convinced he is human, even when presented evidence to the contrary. Which, I have to say, the scene in the bar where he hypnotizes someone into having a drink was one of the few well written and captivating spots of the story.

Basically, I am so very sorry.

Donna says

Edward Bell-Fairfax, a young man with unique abilities, joins a secret society focused on advancing technology, then travels around Europe getting information and meeting other branches of his group.

This is my first time reading Kage Baker. I enjoyed the overall style of the book and thought the world was really interesting, but I had some issues with the plot and characterization.

The pace was odd and repetitive. Things started off well enough, with Bell-Fairfax's backstory and training.

He's likeable but a little flat, possibly because he's just so damn good at everything. The man's only real challenges are internal, he struggles a little bit with his differences and a little more thoroughly with the ethics of his behavior and work. But I don't know if those personal quibbles are enough to balance out that he's big and strong and fast and perceptive and attractive and smart and thoughtful and kind. The other main characters are largely filler. One is there to train him, because as a young operative he can't be the leader. The other two have specialized jobs, but as characters they provide an average society member and a sloppy one to contrast Bell-Fairfax with.

The story had some great moments of tension and intrigue, but it followed such a constant pattern that it became predictable. Our morally-questionable heroes arrive at an exotic locale, do a little light spying, encounter members of the local branch of their society, and get introduced to a big, steampunkish machine. The only real variation was the occasional appearance of the bad guys, who were talked up into more of a threat than they turned out to be. The pace isn't helped by the fact that it's so exposition-heavy, these folks spend a lot of time sitting around and talking.

I know the focus of the secret society is technology, but it got tiring in terms of the story. Every time the gang faced a problem, someone would pull out a brand new trinket to deal with it. Their secret tech made them automatically better than any of their opponents, and what the tech couldn't accomplish, Bell-Fairfax could. Fun gadgets in a steampunk setting are supposed to be exciting, but at some point I started seeing the new toys as more of a drag on the story's momentum than anything else.

As with any alternate history, the events and locations of the book relate to real-world events. This book could have done a much better job at explaining the significance of the team's actions. The plot will still be understandable, but readers without some knowledge of European history (specifically the Crimean War) will miss quite a few references and may even end up muddy on the reasons for the orders that the group is given. There are times when I like subtle little nods at history, but they're best used sparingly. I guess you could make the argument that readers who don't know the references will be on the same occasionally-confused ground as the characters, it's just less satisfying that way, though.

I'm still rating this one three stars, because for all its faults, I enjoyed the world-building, the introduction of the group, and their early scenes on the journey. I also appreciated that the author was trying to work with some deeper themes through Bell-Fairfax's character, though I don't think the book was entirely successful in that respect.

I won this one from the Goodreads giveaway program.

Leah says

An enthralling exercise in moving the plot forwards, a story with no antagonists (not really), and very little to push the characters on, apart from a vague sense of duty and the thrill of science and secrecy.

Although it says it is the first Company novel, it clearly isn't, and probably means more to someone who's read other Company novels. Despite its lack of what one might call traditional plot, it is nevertheless compelling in its scene setting and technological slyness. The farce of Victorian gentlemen on a grand tour covering up a dark secret mission was eminently enjoyable and remarkably lacking in hysterics.

While the characters were developed in their own ways - Bell-Fairfax's curiously limitless abilities, Hobson's

unfortunate penchant for drink - they weren't the foundation on which the book was built, tending to blend into one another a lot of the time. It really reads more like an in-the-know prequel for those who do know, and an interesting view in the window, for those who don't. I flew through it, and would definitely read another in the series given the chance.

Steve says

I picked this book up on my library's new fiction, but not rental shelf. It is about book 14 in the Kage Baker's "company" series. I don't plan on catching up on the books in this series.

The book involves a secret society that is about saving the world, with chapters across the world. There is a loose plot, but the book is about the characters using "technoligica" in part given to them by a time traveling future member who tells them what is going to happen in terms of war and even investment tips. One of the characters is somewhat of a golem (look that one up for yourself). He can speak and does have a soul however. This book does not make my recommended list.

Stefan says

Your reaction to the announcement of *Not Less Than Gods* by consistently excellent SF and fantasy author Kage Baker will probably depend to a large extent on how familiar you are with her *The Company* series. If you haven't read any of the Company novels or collections, the story of the Gentlemen's Speculative Society (GSS) and one of its operatives, Edward Alton Fairfax-Bell, sounds like an interesting and entertaining steampunk novel. However, if you're familiar with the Company series, your reaction to a novel about "Edward's creation and recruitment by the GSS, his training, and his first mission" will probably be more of the "I want it and I want it NOW!" variety, with the number of exclamation points determined by how enthusiastic you are about the main series. (I limited myself to one, to avoid the impression that this review was written by a teenage girl. Mentally, please feel free to add a few more.)

In a nutshell, the Company series deals with the operatives of Dr. Zeus Inc., a 24th century company that has discovered the secret of time travel and naturally decides to use it for corporate profit, sending quasi-immortal cyborgs back in time to collect lost art, extinct plants and so on.

One of the things I like best about the Company series is the way the information is slowly revealed throughout the series. For example, the excellent first novel in the series, *In the Garden of Iden*, at first reads like a more or less self-contained story about Company botanist Mendoza, but it takes on a completely different meaning when you read the later books in the series, because there's a huge story arc building up throughout the series, with layers upon layers added to the plot and the characters as the revelations build up.

The two stand-alone Company novels Kage Baker released after the completion of the main series, *The Empress of Mars* and *Not Less than Gods*, have a completely different impact depending on how familiar you are with the series, because fans already know the entire story and are now being filled in on specific aspects of it — in the case of *Not Less Than Gods*, the early life of Edward Alton Fairfax-Bell, who makes his first Company series appearance in Mendoza in Hollywood. In that sense, it's a bit similar to *The Life of the World to Come*, but about Edward rather than Alex Checkerfield. Even though it feels like a prequel, using that term doesn't make much sense in a series that deals with the nature of time travel.

Even if you haven't read any of the Company novels, *Not Less Than Gods* is still a very entertaining read. Kage Baker includes enough hints about the nature of the Company to make sure that new readers will have a broad idea of what's going on — or at least as much as the main characters do. Even without this, the novel is a rollicking adventure story set in the Victorian era, about a small group of GSS agents traveling across Europe and the Middle East, causing havoc and (in the process) affecting history in several ways. They're armed with an array of — for that period — advanced gadgets and weaponry, a distinct appreciation for alcoholic beverages, and a good dose of jolly-old-boy British witticisms. Young Edward is a fascinating character, different from his peers in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, idealistic, tortured, and brave. As always, Kage Baker's prose is delightfully sly, always sounding as if she is sharing a subtle joke with her readers, gradually drawing you in as she unfolds the plot.

As a long-time fan of Kage Baker, I was extremely pleased with *Not Less Than Gods*. If you're in the market for an excellent SF series, I'd probably still recommend starting with *In the Garden of Iden* first, but *Not Less Than Gods* is a solid addition to the Company series and works surprisingly well as a standalone novel.

(This review was also published on www.fantasyliterature.com --- come check us out!)

Wealhtheow says

Years ago, Kage Baker began the Company series, which followed near-immortal time-traveling cyborgs in their adventures throughout human history. Yes, they were as much fun as they sound--and exhibited an excellent grasp of history and a gift for tragedy, as well.

This book, not so much. It's a prequel to *Mendoza in Hollywood*, but is best read after *The Children of the Company*. The problem with this book is the cheeky, irreverant humor is missing, and the sense of impending doom is gone. And even by the end, I didn't have much idea of the characters' personalities. Edward himself is a fascinating man, but this book provides no new insights to him. The plot itself is episodic, with no narrative tension--Edward is told to go places and do things, and he goes and does them without much, if any, problems. I never felt worried about whether his mission would succeed or not, because I never got a good idea of what it *was*, or why it mattered. Overall, this was a disappointment, and only worthwhile if you really need more Company in your life.

Eva Folsom says

OK, I know it's not exactly fair to grab the ninth book in a series--and a prequel, no less--and to judge it as a standalone book. Which I did. But seriously, I'm not sure exactly why I even finished this one. The characters were entirely unappealing, there were no women characters (unless you count the "characters" whose sole function was to have sex with the protags, or the brothel madam who has about four lines), and there was no point to the book, plot-wise. The story failed to have rising tension, but was rather a series of loosely-connected, boys'-adventure storylets. In these adventures, the characters are never actually challenged, and any "adversity" is easily vanquished by the trio of Marty Sues and their magic technology. All in all, an exceedingly dull read.

Kathi says

This book, a kind of side novel to the main Company series, tells the story of Edward Bell-Fairfax, one of the key characters in the main series. Taking place prior to Edward's first meeting with Mendoza, we learn of his childhood, navy service, recruitment into the Gentlemen's Speculative Society, and development as a GSS agent. We also see how he struggles with his violent tendencies, his idealism, and his astonishing abilities.

Kaethe says

This is one I missed in my earlier reading. It fills in the backstory on Edward Alton Bell-Fairfax, describing his early life and preparation for use by The Company as part of a nineteenth-century British brotherhood of secret agents, armed with clever tech and a team of clever chaps. We're even introduced to a women's auxiliary.

As much as I love the steampunkish intrigue, the travel, the adventures, I do have a problem. For all that Baker can come up with fascinating scenarios, she just can't conceive of women as being useful outside their traditional roles. The auxiliary consists of clever, fierce, charming, and resourceful women who's primary purpose is sex. It's oddly stereotypical, where Bell-Fairfax is an early Bond. Either suffering from a lack of historical precedents or a failure of imagination, or both, Baker just can't seem to imagine a women collecting valuable intel as, say, a laundress, or barmaid. Still, it's pretty much the only problem I have with the series.

Mostly a fun romp, with enough moments of serious reflection to keep it from feeling all froth.

Library copy.
