



Valiant Dust

Richard Baker

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Horatio Hornblower and Honor Harrington fans will find a new hero in Sikander North, first in a new military SF series with elements of colonial diplomacy and explosive action.

In a new military SF series, Richard Baker begins the adventures of Sikander North in an era of great interstellar colonial powers.

Sikander Singh North has always had it easy until he joined the crew of the Aquilan Commonwealth starship *CSS Hector*. As the ship's new gunnery officer and only Kashmiri, he must constantly prove himself better than his Aquilan crewmates, even if he has to use his fists. When the *Hector* is called to help with a planetary uprising, he'll have to earn his unit's respect, find who's arming the rebels, and deal with the headstrong daughter of the colonial ruler all while dodging bullets.

Sikander's military career is off to an explosive start but only if he and *CSS Hector* can survive his first mission.

Valiant Dust Details

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Author : Richard Baker

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From Reader Review Valiant Dust for online ebook

David says

The first Richard Baker novel that I read was Zero Point, a tie in novel to the TSR Alternity Star Drive RPG. It was brilliant, and I consider it criminally underrated. It featured one of the best descriptions of brain computer use and personal AI I have ever read, among many other wonderful ideas.

After that, I would run into his work in tons of RPGs and tie in novels, but Zero Point would remain in my mind constantly.

It was a pleasant surprise to see that he is starting a new military sci fi universe with a decidedly colonial outlook, so I was psyched over Valiant Dust. It hit my worldbuilding and military sci fi sweet spots, but it also touched a more personal heart string through its analysis of colonial surrogacy.

Valiant Dust introduces us to Sikander Singh North, who is an officer in the Aquilan Commonwealth Navy, yet he is not Aquilan himself. He is Kashmiri, born and raised in a star system surrogate to the Aquilan Commonwealth. He has to work twice as hard to prove himself to his Aquilan peers, since institutionally, they consider Kashmiri, and other colonial territories, to be backwaters and primitive cultures in comparison to their culturally enlightened super power selves. From early on in the novel, he has to fight bigotry and unfair judgement over his skills, yet it is his unique world view as coming from a colony that proves to be the turning point to the conflict they find themselves caught up in. This has personal resonance to me.

I am from Puerto Rico, you see. We were first a colony of Spain, and then were passed on to be a colony of the US as spoils of the Spanish American War. The history of our colonial status is complex and multilayered, but in resonance with the novel, soldiers from Puerto Rico have fought for the US in every world conflict since World War I, and have had to work twice as hard to prove themselves. Puerto Rican soldiers have distinguished themselves throughout the entire globe, and have a reputation for fierce loyalty and combat prowess. Yet, they have to suck up a hell of a lot of grief for being from a US territory and not the mainland.

So, the novel resonated with me for its worldbuilding, its characters, its politics, military tactics, and for Baker's well researched touch in demonstrating what Sikander had to endure to prove himself.

If you are a Honor Harrington fan, you might find a few elements with similar flavors, yet Valiant Dust quite clearly stands on its own.

Also, it is quite a fine start to what I expect to be a huge payoff as a series, and I can't wait to see where Baker takes Sikander next.

Jessica Strider says

Pros: interesting characters, high attention to detail, diverse cast, nuanced politics

Cons: more military minutiae than I personally like though less space battle action than military SF fans may be looking for

His Highness Lieutenant Sikander Singh North, Nawabzada of Ishar, is assigned to the Aquilan Commonwealth starship Hector as its new gunnery officer. Well aware that few Kashmiris serve in the Commonwealth officer corps, he must prove himself to his new crew members who look down on the colonial system of his birth.

Amira Ranya Meriem el-Nasir, niece to Sultan Rashid and Crown Princess of Gadira is concerned by the politics of her home world. As a colony of the Republic of Montreal, Gadira has made great strides in modernizing. This has increased the power of the Beys, but many of her people have lost jobs, and religious insurgents fearing for the traditions of their people are becoming more powerful.

With tensions mounting, the Hector is sent to Gadira to protect the commonwealth's consulate and commercial interests even as another major power works to destabilize the planet's government.

There's a lot going on in this book, predominantly the examination of pre-WWI style colonization. We see this from Sikander's view, as someone whose country is modernizing but still has economic and political issues, as well as with Ranya, whose country is caught in a clash of colonial interests. Aside from insurgents, we're not shown much of how big events impact 'little' people, but it's quite interesting seeing the various power plays at higher levels. It's easy to see who the players are with regards to their historic influences, though I'm not sure to what extent the details of the book are influenced by real history.

There's a lot of nuance with regards to how Sikander is treated and how he reacts to those around him. He's constantly aware of who he is and what that means in the larger picture of his service, his home world, and himself. But the book doesn't harp on issues, it examines them and shows the reality of the different situations, then moves on as time passes and conditions change.

There are three point of view characters, and I really enjoyed seeing the two mentioned above (the third isn't a character we're meant to like). The characters must deal with a variety of issues, which keeps them feeling fresh and fully realized.

There's a high attention to detail - much of it military in nature. Personally I found it a bit much though I suspect military history buffs will enjoy learning more about the ships, armaments, tanks, etc. being mentioned. Fans of military SF may find that there's less military minutiae and action than they'd like, as the main focus of the book is on the politics and character based drama rather than military strategizing. The book uses generally realistic physics for its one space battle, which was fun to read.

While they were sometimes hard to follow I enjoyed the variety of titles used (I found it fascinating that titles often changed depending on the speaker as well as the location).

This book has a high amount of world-building and politicking and minimal military action, and I enjoyed it a lot.

Judy Lesley says

Valiant Dust gives readers the chance to meet the main character in a new series in the military SF category.

Lieutenant Sikander Singh North is in the Aquilan Commonwealth Navy, just starting his assignment aboard the starship CSS Hector. North's home planet of Kashmir has not developed technologically because of their isolation from other groups of planets so he has chosen the navy of the Aquilan Commonwealth for his career. North is accompanied in his military service by his body servant who also acts as his secretary and security detail. The Hector receives orders to travel to Gadira II, a planet similar to North's own Kashmir in its technology development. It turns out the Aquilan warship isn't the only one in orbit around Gadira, a ship from the Dremark Empire is already there.

This first book's focus is quite heavy on the political side of planetary relations as well as intolerance of religious beliefs. There are several action scenes, especially the big battle that covers almost 25% of the final pages. Sikander North comes across as somewhat of a spoiled rich boy, but the author does try to tone it down enough so I didn't resent Sikander as much as I had feared. Obviously Sikander is the hero of the piece so he gets to act the hero part but I'm hoping he will pay a little more attention to military protocol in the next book. Being willing to go against military orders is necessary for these types of characters to exist but it would be nice if Sikander North defied convention in a more graceful manner. I've rated this story as 3 stars to leave room for improvement in the second book, Restless Lightning, scheduled for release in late October 2018.

Glen says

I won this book in a goodreads drawing.

Rich kid gets a berth on a spaceship and has to prove his worth to the crew, while on a dangerous mission. He also gets involved with a rich spoiled girl.

Not bad, but nothing we haven't seen before.

Chris says

copy from Netgalley in exchange for a review

Valiant Dust is a military sci-fi novel, and the first of Richard Baker's "Breaker of Empires" series. Sikander North is a prince. Well, close enough. His family rules a world, and, as he at one point indicates, he's the at least nominal suzerain of a continent. Sikander also has the slightly less glamorous job of being a Lieutenant in the space navy of another power. Because whilst Sikander is a prince, he's a prince of a minor world in the scheme of things, one which is dependent on the patronage of greater powers to survive intact. In order to help maintain that patronage, he's now serving as an officer on a ship largely crewed by his patrons.

Sikander is an individual of several facets. Perhaps the largest, from the point of view of the book, is his role as a naval officer. He's smart, honourable, determined to make a good impression on his new colleagues. That he has unarmed combat training probably doesn't hurt either. In his moral outlook, Sikander feels like an uncomplicated hero: a good man, struggling against those with a less ethical view of the world. In some ways, it's a relief to read about a straightforward good guy, doing the right thing because he believes in it. On the other hand, the antagonists feel a bit more nuanced, willing to cut deals, mislead and politick in order to

achieve their goals. It'd be nice to give Sikander a little more room in his character for this sort of thing. On the other hand, he does have some issues all his own, including some deep-rooted trauma explored in flashbacks. It's not all sweetness and light for Sikander North – he bleeds, sweats and worries as much as the rest of us, which helps bring him a more attainable sense of humanity.

There's a sense of the iceberg about Sikander – with a great deal going on beneath the surface. His supporting cast, including the officers and crew of the ship on which he serves, are given less time to shine on the page, which is a shame. Several have visible edges which would reward exploration; the officer who seems to struggle with reporting to Sikander after an incident in her past, for example, or the one with a prejudice against client kingdoms. These feel like spaces ripe for exploration; in the meantime, they serve as solid foils to Sikander, driving the plot whilst exposing more of his character to the reader.

The plot – well, I enjoyed it. The ship containing Sikander and crew is sent to a world which is also a client state, this time of another of the larger colonial powers. There's unrest bubbling away under the surface, and they're sent to keep a largely-disinterested eye on things. This lets the reader follow Sikander as an observer in another culture, looking at the legacy and effects of colonialism, as well as other social factors – religion and gender roles are both touched upon. That gives us a nuanced backdrop, and emotional investment in the world when everything (inevitably) kicks off.

When things kick into high gear, Baker shines. His space combat has enough of the abstract to let the reader grasp the strategy, whilst carrying enough visceral weight to let the (sometimes bloody) consequences feel real. The battles are both a ballet of radar lights and fast-acting kinetic weapons, and brutal, unflinching affairs where bulkheads blow out and lives are lost in an instant. It's almost a poetry of war. The ground combats are more immediate, but have a grit and grace of their own; in both cases, the tension builds and cracks with equal intensity – and makes for a page-turning read.

In the end, is it worth reading? If you're looking for something new in military sci-fi, I'd say yes. The battles are elegantly done, but they're wrapped in a world which carries greater depths (and explores them further) than might be the usual, and characters who can, given the chance, pour their feelings off the page. It's definitely a compelling story, and a fun read – and the series has a lot of potential.

H.P. Holo says

When David Weber puts a book in your hands and tells you to read it, you do, and so here is my book report on my recent ARC of Valiant Dust by Richard Baker.

In Valiant Dust, Sikander Singh North is an aristocrat-turned-soldier, off to begin his first mission on the Aquilan Commonwealth starship CSS Hector. Sikander himself is not wholly Aquilan; rather, he is from Kashmir, a colonial possession of Aquila that, while economically valuable, does not yet have the technology to construct its own fleet of interstellar warships, and so he serves there to learn how he might better serve his home. As he does so, though, he's in for a bumpy ride. For CSS Hector has been sent to the planet of Gadira II, where tensions between the ruling sultanate and the rebel caidists have long been mounting on the planet, and where forces that aren't supposed to be there have suddenly appeared in orbit...

Valiant Dust is easily one of the best pieces of military sci-fi I've read this year. Its fast pace and its complex, yet efficiently characterized cast make it a fun read, while its streamlined descriptions of far-future

ship tech make it accessible. If you're a reader who has been wanting to try military sci-fi but has been daunted by the overwhelming techno- and military-babble that is so common in the genre, Valiant Dust presents an excellent starting point.

Those praises (and David's recommendation) aside, I have to admit that the cultures involved were what grabbed my attention most. Sikander hails from an Indian-descended planet, while Gadira II is Arabic-descended and Islamic-influenced. The ruling powers of Gadira are liberal enough to be okay, if uneasy, about a princess taking an active interest in military affairs, while the citizenry is variably conservative – though not, it should be noted, necessarily terroristic, except where the story's rebellion is concerned. And even then the rebellion is not religiously-based, but rather rooted in citizen concerns that their rulers are making deals with offworld powers that will benefit the elite, not the common people – or that will eventually benefit the offworlders exclusively, leaving Gadira an exploited, ruined planet. The only actual terrorism in the book takes place in Sikander's past, where he loses much of his family and innocence in a politically-motivated attack. The circumstances surrounding that tragedy – expressed in well-placed flashbacks throughout the book – give Sikander an emotional tie to the aforementioned Gadiran princess (that is, Amira) Ranya Meriem el-Nasir, who lost her parents in a similar manner. (Ranya herself is one of the most engaging characters in the novel. Though a small romance blooms between her and Sikander, it takes a backseat to her whip-smart attention to political details and her consequent involvement in the uprisings that eventually take place. She became one of my favorite characters as soon as she appeared in the book.)

I don't know enough about the intricacies of Indian or Arabic cultures to comment upon how accurate the depictions are – and really, given that the novel is set so far in the future (implying plenty of time for cultural change) the point is moot. However, given that the vast majority of sci-fi and fantasy involves Western-inspired cultures, the fact that this novel puts non-Western cultures front and center in a respectful, detailed, effortless, timeless way makes it an instant gem. I mention the last detail in particular because while this is a novel made up of currently-contentious puzzle pieces – namely complexities surrounding Islam and capitalist/imperialist exploitation – those pieces are handled in such a way that readers will be able to pick up this book 50+ years from now and still be able to find some meaning in it. It doesn't try to provide obvious commentary on any of its components, which in turn makes it one of the more accidentally-engaging political reads I've ever read.

All that said, though, this book isn't trying to be an Important Political Book. What it's trying to be is a hecka fun military sci-fi action book that just happens to have political complexities at its center. The food for thought is there if you look for it, but it's still a great read even if all you want out of it is explosions.

Review originally posted on holowriting.com.

Mogsy (MMOGC) says

3 of 5 stars at The BiblioSanctum [https://bibliosanctum.com/2017/11/12/...](https://bibliosanctum.com/2017/11/12/)

Richard Baker is a name I know mostly from his game design work for Dungeons & Dragons as well as his Forgotten Realms novels, so my curiosity was piqued when I learned that he was kicking off a new military sci-fi series called Breaker of Empires. The first book is Valiant Dust which introduces protagonist Sikander North, a prince of Kashmir who has just been assigned to serve as the new gunnery officer aboard the Aquilan Commonwealth starship CSS Hector. Almost right away, he experiences pushback from some of his

fellow crewmates who either doubt his ability or are disdainful of his background.

Meanwhile, Amira Ranya Meriem el-Nasir, niece to the Sultan of Gadira is growing more concerned for her uncle's safety as her home world is caught up in the middle of a political storm. She meets Sikander and quickly strikes up a friendship with him as the Hector is called upon to quell the uprising and provide aid as the Dremark Empire attempts to exert its influence by destabilizing the planet's government. Unlike the Aquilan Commonwealth, the Empire subscribes to more extreme methods in matters of colonial strategy, sowing chaos in a bid to seize control of the planet from its current masters, the Republic of Montreal.

Mirroring the tumultuous era of Earth's own colonial history, Valiant Dust blends political intrigue and space opera elements to create a futuristic vision of a galaxy fought over by two major powers. Through the eyes of Sikander, readers see how 19th century style colonization has affected his own planet of Kashmir which has experienced much technological advancement under Aquilan rule, though plenty of economic and social issues still exist at all levels. Compare this to Ranya's experience on Gadira, where swift modernization has also led to lost jobs, increasing inequality gaps, and uprisings due to fears that the common people and their traditions are fast becoming left behind.

Featuring characters from worlds influenced by diverse cultures and faiths, the story also closely examines the relationship between those in power and the individual citizen. The first half of the book is also an important look at the way these great colonial powers view their vassals, following the trials of Sikander as he must prove himself on an Aquilan Commonwealth starship crewed by many who are unused to seeing a Kashmiri serving in an officer position. Much of what we read about in the early parts of the story involve him dealing with discriminatory attitudes and other negative perceptions toward his abilities.

Interestingly, while both Sikander and Ranya come from royal backgrounds, their past histories are no less fraught with difficulty and grief, having each experienced a loss in separate politically motivated tragedies. As a citizen of a world that has seen similar colonial battles play out, Sikander is also immediately drawn to Ranya, empathizing with her concerns for Gadira. Unfortunately though, the ensuing romance between them signaled a downhill slump in the story, overshadowing the excellent character development up to this point. After all, Sikander's determination was what initially drove the plot and compelled me to keep reading, and I also loved watching those who underestimate Ranya get skewered by her intelligence and political savviness. Without a doubt, both characters were much more fascinating when Baker was focusing on each of them individually, and I think this is why I ultimately enjoyed the first half of this book a lot more than the second.

There was also less action that I would have liked, with definitely a lot more emphasis placed on the political aspects of the story. The plot was slower to build as a result, so don't go in expecting a grand swashbuckling adventure in space or too many battle sequences. Tensions were largely created by the characters' personal conflicts or through all the feverish political maneuvering between the ruling powers.

If that describes the kind of military sci-fi you like, then Valiant Dust might be a good book to consider. For me, the story started out quite strong before losing some of its steam, but I'm still very much intrigued by the characters and the political situation established in this first novel, and I'm open to the possibility of continuing this series.

Bill says

I had really expected to like this book more than I did. The pacing was very slow until around page 300, at

which point the book finally started working for me. In that way, it was a bit like the Aubrey/Maturin novels that would take a long time to arrive at a well-told battle scene. Alas, North is no Aubrey and there is no Maturin. Baker's imagined human diaspora-based civilization is interesting and should yield opportunities for intrigue and conflict for North in his future assignments. Not sure yet whether I'll follow him. I may give #2 a shot.

Tad says

Valiant Dust by Richard Baker is a promising start to a new Military Sci-Fi series with intriguing characters and a fascinating universe. The series (Breaker of Empires) is based on the colonization of Africa as European powers fought for dominance. Here, Earth long ago colonized the stars but some planetary systems became isolated, leaving them relatively primitive compared to some of the more technologically advanced star-faring empires.

The story is told through the eyes of Sikander North, royalty in his own system of Kashmiri but sent into military service in the Aquilan Commonwealth. On a new assignment as gunnery officer on the CSS Hector, Sikander faces adversity ranging from skepticism of his qualifications to outright hostility.

A sudden change in orders sends the Hector to the planet Gadira. Gadira is led by a Sultan. The Sultanate is under pressure within from rebels who desire a stricter adherence to religious dictates and from without by colonial powers looking to extend their influence in the system as well as provoke the other colonial powers. Sikander must navigate his duty to his ship with the desire to keep peace on Gadira, a culture he strongly identifies with. Tensions between the natives on the planet and between the competing interplanetary powers above it make for an exciting story.

Baker excels at creating political intrigue and simmering tensions. The action builds steadily until exploding into crisply and entertainingly drawn battles both on the planet and in orbit around it. Characterization isn't especially deep in this first novel in the series, but the religious tensions and the uneasy alliances between and among interstellar empires are well detailed. The decision to tell the story through the eyes of a gunnery officer rather than a ship's captain leads to an interesting perspective on the events. Particular one of Sikander North's background. Valiant Dust is chock full of action and political intrigue. It is an exciting story and a great introduction to a new series. One in which I look forward to reading many more adventures.

I was fortunate to receive an advance copy of this book from the publisher.

eyes.2c says

A new star on the space opera map.

An interesting reworking of space opera themes. Recontact by more developed interstellar powers with isolated frontier worlds from Terra and how that plays out. In this case the two major powers are the Aquilan Commonwealth and the Dremark Empire.

The world that is in question, Gadira II, is populated by those of Islamic leanings, adhering to moderate Quranist understandings of that faith.

It seems an agent of the Dremark Empire is setting up Gadira, for planetary unrest and thereby being able to install a puppet government aligned with Dremark's self interest. (Is it all sounding familiar?)

The main character, Lieutenant Sikander Singh North, a gunner officer, is from a similar frontier world, Kashmir. This system has been able to escalate its development under the more moderate Aquilan Commonwealth.

He's not only a member of the star fleet forces but akin to a prince in his own nation, hence his valet, Darvesh Reza who 'functions as Sikander's security detail, secretary, and general minder as well as his body servant.' I am sure Darvesh is going to join the renowned list of select sidekicks so enjoyed in other space operas.

For some reason Sikander's character is reminding me of Roger Ramius Sergei Chiang MacClintock from David Weber and John Ringo's series, Empire of Man. I know completely different characters and situations, still ... I'm intuiting some similarities.

There is a slight romantic interest for Sikander's with the intelligent, astute niece of the Sultan, Amira Ranya Meriem el-Nasir, Crown Princess of Gadir. A romance destined not to be.

Captain Markham, captain of the CSS Hector reminds me of some of the stalwart and fearless female captains from the Honor Harrington series.

The battles are all well orchestrated and described by Baker. It's in these situations of course we see further development of major and secondary characters, as they react under fire.

I look forward to the next in this series.

A NetGalley ARC

Richard Baker says

Praise for *Valiant Dust* from **David Weber**, author of the *Honor Harrington* and *Safehold* series:

Valiant Dust, fantasy writer Richard Baker's first original science fiction novel, is very, very, *very* good. If you read his fantasy, you already know that he is a deft storyteller with a strong feel for characterization. In *Valiant Dust*, you will see that same skill as a storyteller and a builder of characters in an entirely new and extraordinarily well-realized world of interstellar politics, intrigue, and mayhem. His technology and war-fighting hardware provide an exciting framework for the action, but the story is about people, responsibilities, and choices. This is the first volume in the story of naval officer Sikander North, and I'll be waiting impatiently to fit the second one into my crowded reading and writing schedule.

Go read this one, and you'll understand why.

(Disclosure: I am the author. I'm posting here to share David Weber's generous review of my book.)

Margaret says

Ahoy Horatio Hornblower/Honor Harrington fans! Have I got a new book series to recommend to you!!

Valiant Dust is the first book in the Breaker of Empire series by Richard Baker. Yes, so far only one book has been published but the good news is that book two will be released later this month!

Sikander Singh North is a lieutenant in the Aquilan Commonwealth. He is also a Kashmiri prince, albeit

fourth child of the planetary ruler. Kashmir is a colonial system of the Aquilan Commonwealth. Meaning that Sikander has to be better than the average officer if he is to earn any respect from his Aquilan shipmates (sound familiar?).

Here is an excerpt from the Amazon.com blurb: "Sikander's military career is off to an explosive start?but only if he and CSS Hector can survive his first mission." [Note: he is a lieutenant by this point. He had started by attending the academy and then served on other ships presumably as an ensign, etc. When he meets Hector's commanding officer, she asked him about his prior service on the earlier ships.]

This is Mr. Baker's first space opera book. Here is an excerpt from the author's Web site: "Richard Baker is a writer of science fiction, fantasy, and alternate history. He's the author of fourteen novels, including the new military SF novel Valiant Dust....Rich is also an award-winning game designer with more than a hundred RPG, miniatures, and board game credits to his name."

Highly recommended for all space opera fans, especially those of us Horatio Hornblower fans!

Mark says

I had two books on my shortlist for Christmas, and this was the one that I decided against at the time. Still, I managed to get to it in April, and boy am I glad I did. This is exactly my type of novel – mil-SF with a touch of politics, plenty of action, and very interesting characters and setting. Can't wait to read the sequel when it's out later this year.

John Purvis says

"Valiant Dust" eBook was published in 2017 and was written by Richard Baker (<https://richardbakerauthor.com/>). Mr. Baker has published 10 novels. This is the first in his "Breaker of Empires" series.

I received an ARC of this novel through <https://www.netgalley.com> in return for a fair and honest review. I categorize this novel as 'R' because it contains scenes of Violence, Mature Situations and Mature Language. The story is set in the far future. The primary character is Lieutenant Sikander North of Kashmir.

Sikander is the only Kashmiri serving aboard the Aquilan Commonwealth cruiser Hector. As an outsider, he must prove himself at every turn. The Hector is sent to project Aquilan influence at a somewhat backward planet, Gadira II, that is suffering from growing unrest.

They arrive to find a cruiser from a rival government, the Dremark Empire, in orbit. The situation is tense but the two adversaries tolerate one another - for a while. On the planet, the situation deteriorates with violent uprisings. Sikander is introduced to Crown Princess Ranya el-Nasir, who is assisting her uncle, Sultan Rashid, who is the planetary leader.

Sikander and Ranya share more than merely an interest in the local government and military. While not strictly complying with diplomatic norms, they develop a romantic relationship. They get little time to see where their relationship will go as open civil war envelops the planet. At the same time, the tense standoff

between the orbiting cruisers deteriorates into a battle.

I thoroughly enjoyed the 9 hours I spent reading this 342 page science fiction novel. I liked the character of both Sikander and Ranya. I also liked the world the story is set in. It reminds me a lot of the world of "Honor Harrington". I look forward to future novels in this series. The cover art is OK. I give this novel a 4 out of 5.

Further book reviews I have written can be accessed at <https://johnpurvis.wordpress.com/blog/>.

Jeff says

It's too early to determine whether this will be in my Best of 2018 grouping.... but it is good... very good.

Superficially, its just another mil-sci fi with a character that is just too perfect; makes all the right calls in battle, all the ladies (or gentlemen) drop their drawers in the bedroom; etc. etc. These novels are a dime the dozen... some of them are good, some of them are just masturbatory garbage.

However, this is what you get if you want superficiality. If you want something deeper, this novel provides it. While this is early in the series, its quite clear that we're dealing with the SciFi cognate of the Game of Empires that the Great Powers were playing just before World War I. The author is not even close to subtle - in context we're talking about a Sikh from India serving on a British warship somewhere in the Middle East, dealing with espionage by German spies over a French protectorate.... and you know what? It works. The author's dealing with colonialism, and the racism and xenophobia that Indian officers in the British service are serious highlights of this novel.

This novel is perhaps one of the most unique mil sci fi I've read in years - using the same superficial archetypes as all these other novels, the author has been able to sneak in some commentary on colonialism and the impact of it on the "client nations". The potential is there for me to even drop the "mil".

Another thing I was happy to see - PTSD - its rare to see the aftermath of traumatic events in mil sci fi and how it impacts the hero. The author here has struck what seems to my admittedly non-military eyes the right balance of a man haunted by the past but determined not to be defined by and even more determined to see it doesn't happen again.

One last positive comment, my favourite relationship in this novel is between the protagonist and the intelligence officer - they hate each other... but I do see the potential for something akin to a friendship in the future... their hate is dimensional and fits within the context of the colonialism. The intelligence officer sees in the protagonist a barbaric colonial who got where he was despite competency due to political consideration; the protagonist sees the intelligence officer as a racist, xenophobic, and denigrating prick... they're both partially right, BUT....

I'm only giving it 4 stars because of the fact that the deeper aspects are wrapped up in a fairly superficial giftwrap... the relationship between the main protagonist and the female protagonist is just too simplistic for me to buy at this time; the main bad-guy does everything short of twirling his mustache.... but, lets see where, if anywhere, things go...

