



The Anvil of Ice

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The first volume in The Winter of the World fantasy trilogy, this novel of a young boy's rise to power is set in a world where an ice age threatens a brilliantly imagined world similar to our own.

The Anvil of Ice Details

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From Reader Review The Anvil of Ice for online ebook

Joshu says

Not too long ago I was asked to provide some recommendations for a reading list for someone. I went to my shelves and started pulling out some classics, some of my favorites, and other just plain important books. Zelazny, Donaldson, Jordan, Sanderson, Rothfuss... I was picking out some stuff with which to provide a pretty good foundation. And then I got to this book. The description of it started with, essentially, "And this is something I've read so many times it's falling apart."

Michael Scott Rohan is an author that basically nobody else I know has ever even heard of, but is a name that really should be on the lips of anyone that is interested in original fantasy by an author that clearly cares a great deal about every word that goes on a page. The first time I read Rothfuss I was blown away by the precision and care that was clearly evident throughout his writing. It just wasn't something that I really had found in many other places. Rereading Rohan's books recently, I was struck by just that same feeling. The language is descriptive, painting a picture of a time long before our own.

Where so many authors will reach out for creating their own world from the ground up, Rohan has rooted his in an interesting realm of pseudo-historical fiction. Imagining what the world could have been like during an ice age. What if the great glaciers were driven by a malevolent will, and mankind was barely holding on, barely holding back the inevitable crush of cold? It's into this world that Rohan delves, both as he builds his own variant, and as he seeks out the actual anthropological record of mankind, so as to weave it into his story.

Where many authors take a very in-your-face approach to magic in their books, Rohan has opted for something somewhat more subtle. Aside from the Powers that guide and shape the world, the magic system he's gone with is one based around metalworking. It's the smith that serves as the keeper of knowledge and arcane arts in his world, and it's the tale of one smith in particular that the series seeks to tell. We watch a peculiar coming of age tale, as the protagonist comes into power and skill, only to end up dealing with the consequences of what it can mean to have both without the knowledge or wisdom to use them appropriately.

There are a few things about the book that do occasionally get to me, unfortunately. The way it is written is as if it were merely someone reading about it to the reader (a book about a book about something that happened?), albeit where the source material isn't necessarily complete or always accurate. This style is useful in that it lets Rohan deal with some time warping where he needs to advance the story timeline by leaps and bounds in just a few pages rather than add a couple hundred pages...but it does feel artificial and forced at times.

Some of the action sequences are also conveyed at something of a cursory level as compared to the descriptions of the world in which they take place. While great care may be taken with describing the setting, the movements of the figures fighting within it sometimes boil down to "and he had superior strength because....because Smith, so he wins."

Despite the above, The Anvil of Ice introduces readers to a unique take on a low-magic fantasy setting that is like very little written before or since. It's one of those hidden gems that exists in the genre; the type of book that nobody seemingly has read, but every student of the genre should not be without.

Overall: 8.5/10

Hyarrowen says

When it comes to fantasy, there's Tolkien, and there are the rest. This series is the very best of the rest in my opinion; there's nothing 'generic-fantasy' about it.

Set in an interglacial period in our own Earth's history, this is the story of the struggles of a group of friends as they try to defeat the powers of the Ice. There's the same haunting sense of the weight of history, the same glimpses of things half-seen, half-known that I found in Tolkien; plus a carefully worked out system of magic that's completely convincing. Moreover MSR has done his research on palaeoenvironments, and it shows - right down to the trees and flowers. I loved the description of the black grouse and their courtship dance. Half a sentence but he's got them down to a T!

I've got two sets of this series and a book on Wayland the Smith I bought for background reading. To sum up: it's one of my desert island books.

Jan-Maat says

A three volume fantastical adventure series set during an ice age. The first two books are your typical map adventures (like The Lord of the Rings) ie the author draws a map & the novel consists of the characters moving from point A to point Z, via the rest of the alphabet, each letter designating a separate geographical location where the characters enjoy a suitable adventure (eg in the forest, in the mountain, in the abandoned city, at the seaside etc).

Alternatively it's really just your traditional apparently humble lad has hidden gifts and will rise over three books to triumph over bad guys kind of story but with extra blacksmithing involved. However the ice age setting and the use made of myths (Wayland the Smith and Rusalka for instance) appealed to me.

The Forge in the Forest was quite a nice fantasy book. The heroes established in the previous volume set off on a quest through the ambivalent forest realm which turns out to have first obvious and then subtle dangers. The ending felt a little rushed, but that's the worst I've got to say about it.

The debt to Wayland / Wieland saga becomes very clear in the final volume of the trilogy, The Hammer of the Sun as this is simply a free novelistic retelling of that myth, but with extra glaciers and appropriate levels of blacksmithing.

Izzy Corbo says

I wasn't overwhelmed with this story, but appreciated some of the scenes (although some of the scenes were head slapping--the romance was a bit ridiculous!). I think I may read this again next year and the other two books to complete the trilogy as I was intrigued with the setting of early man as the backdrop. I really enjoyed the concept of magic-crafting, literally as blacksmithing objects into magical properties.

Carl says

This is one of my favorite books ever. Well, I read it in 6th grade, and it could just be that it hit me just so at that point in my life so as to make it one of my favorites forever, but still. MSR has put together an amazing combination of myth/folklore (and he really did his research! Or so I see now that I'm a mythologist), prehistory, and modern fantasy. I've reread this book more times than anything except *Lord of the Rings*, and maybe *Chronicles of Narnia*. I like this first installment best, I think. A sort of fantastic bildungsroman (well, not really)-- or a coming of age story at any rate, in which the one coming of age realizes just how special he is (after humble origins-- a kolbitr, to use the Icelandic phrase), enters into the study of and takes steps towards the mastery of arcane powers, etc. This book is so influential for me that I can hardly write a review for it, any more than I can for *Lord of the Rings*. Which I should really do sometime. This series (the *Winter of the World*) was the source of a quest of my own during jr hi and hi school, as I bought the first book in 6th grade, finally found the second maybe 3 years or more later, and finally found the last either at the end of high school, or right when I started college. I suppose that makes the whole thing a bit more exciting for me, as the key moments in the maturation of the main character could be taken as a sort of parallel to my own life, which was obviously full of changes during the period I read the books.

Okay, to close off this disjointed review, some final reasons I recommend this book:

-- wonderful coming of age story, does the whole wish-fulfillment narrative of "rags to power, if not riches" better than anything I've read, and maps well onto the life of any kid capable of reading something like this at an early age-- though I don't recommend it just for children, and some parents might not appreciate the sex scenes, which get steamier with each novel.

-- gets magic right in a way rarely done-- maybe reminiscent of much of Tolkien's magic, in which it is a craft, a skill, arcane learning, not necessarily occult learning. Tying it to smithcraft is genius! Wow, I still wish I had time to make a forge and trying making something on my own! My first attempt at a fantasy novel, back my freshman year in highschool, I totally ripped this off, and probably will again. By attaching magic to material culture (and not just with smithcraft) he grounds the supernatural just enough in this otherwise very nicely and accurately painted prehistoric culture (well, pre OUR history, anyway). I'm glad this series, along with Tolkien, was my introduction to magic in fantasy-- Harry Potter may be fun, and may be set in a world closer to ours, but the magic does not have flesh on it's bones, like this does.

-- Like I said in my review of Orson Scott Card's novel *Speaker for the Dead*, this could be considered "anthropological" in a way-- only now it is anthropological/archeological/mythological- fantasy. A very nice combination. I don't think MSR is a professor in my field, but he's done a lot of research in it, and has published at least one book in my field-- and certainly these novels have all the depth and clarity of vision and anthropological realism that you find in Tolkien. Meaty.

MMMMmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm.....

-- The perfect length! Does not get overblown, like Robert Jordan's Wheel of Time series (though I did like that), though it has just as epic a storyline-- and somehow manages to make it feel more "real" at the same time that it is more "mythic"-- both of those terms being horrendously ambiguous, I realize, and what mythologist hasn't cringed at contemporary uses of the word "myth"-- but I feel like that's the best way I can explain it.

Antoine says

Epic fantasy spliced with native American, classical, and germanic mythology and set during the ice age. Good, but somehow creepy and unpleasant at the same time. Cold. Too cold.

Finrod says

While Michael Scott Rohan sure isn't one of the famous names of fantasy, he's also one of my favourites, and this first book of "The Winter of the World" imho a true masterpiece.

This series is set in our own world, but during the last Ice Age, on the West Coast of North America, realistically described mixing fact and... fantasy, and clearly thanks to a huge amount of knowledge and research on mythology, paleontology and ecology by the author.

But you don't need to be a nerd/scientist type to appreciate this book, as it's also a wonderful adventure and bildungsroman with real, morally ambiguous, characters who change and grow during the book(s).

Magic is "real", and while this book isn't that similar to Tolkien's works, at least superficially as deep down, in their "philosophy" there's more in common, the two authors use magic in a similar, constrained way (and this is one of the reason I like so much both of them), and here magic is appropriately linked to smithcraft (as in many traditional cultures in the "real world").

Beside the naturalistic descriptions and the main characters, another favourite of mine in "The Winter of the World" are the Neanderthals as sort of dwarves ("duergars") and great magesmiths who live underground to avoid conflict with the invading *Homo sapiens*.

It's a pity Rohan is absolutely unknown here where I live (Italy) as his books have never been translated to our language...

Wade says

It is possible to forget that the modern fiction novel is a relatively new development. For a very long time, narrative fiction was written in a distinct style with long sentences and dialogue that bordered on the unrealistic. I know some authors did this because they wanted a sense of theatre in the writing, whilst others did so because that's what they were taught.

I suspect Michael Scott Rohan is one of the latter. Anvil Of Ice is meant to be an epic high fantasy story. The hero of utterly unknown parentage has some amazing powers but must be trained how to use them. Along the way he encounters mystic powers and eventually must face down one of them. The underlying story is well researched with a good mythology and the characterisation is generally very strong. However, the style of narration feels archaic with long passages of description that still manages to skate over detail. And it is difficult to get close to the characters.

But the journey is well paced and the climax is satisfying.

Kate says

I love this book so much. It was one of my favourites when I was a teenager. Rereading as an adult, the feeling of the book is far more mythology than fantasy and I think that is where my love of it comes from. It feels like an *old* tale retold rather than modern fiction.

The tale is set during the last ice-age, where the creep of the ice across the land is driven by malign powers who want to see the earth purified by the cessation of all life. There are other powers who oppose the ice, but are not necessarily friends to Humans and Duergar (Neanderthal humanity).

The tale tells of Alv, a foundling who after his village is destroyed takes up with the Mastersmith and comes into his powers as an apprentice smith. Smiths in this society are magic-workers, mages who can use their craft to create items of power to control minds or shape. Alv inadvertently does evil with his craft, and on seeking to redeem himself undertakes an apprenticeship with Duergar mastersmiths in the Hollow Hills where they live away from humanity. He uses his skills to undo the harm he did and in the process helps to save one of the human cities which is threatened by those in thrall to the ice.

This is a very short synopsis of what is essentially a book with some complex themes and a beautiful way of telling them. What are especially interesting are the appendices in the back of the book which discuss aspects of the story from an academic historical point of view, for example discussing the two races of humans, and talking about the migration of people from the east of Northern Asia to the west of North America. It makes for a really solid and well thought out basis for the story, adding to the feeling of myth rather than fiction.

I think Michael Scott Rohan is a very underestimated writer, and his Winter of the World series definitely stands up as a fantasy/mythology classic, it reads as well now in 2014 as it did in 1986!

Nikki says

The Anvil of Ice reminds me of a lot of other fantasy I've read -- A Wizard of Earthsea by Ursula Le Guin and Magician by Raymond E. Feist, for a start -- in its narration and in the way it begins. Some parts of it I found very interesting and different: the whole idea of the Ice, for one, which I want to know more about.

On the other hand, Kara bothered me. She was introduced in a flash; Alv/Elof cares about her all in a flash; she never seems to do anything significant to the plot. Obviously there are two more books in the trilogy, but she seemed somewhat superfluous in this.

I found the gods here interesting, too, and wanted more about them: we learn very little about them, all things considered. I do like the way we don't get infodumps in this book: we *don't* know the whole history of the world, the whole mythology of the gods.

Another slightly annoying thing: racial stereotyping. All Ekwesh are evil, hurrhurrhurr -- without any further thought than that. I do like subtlety in my fantasy. Again, perhaps something that's resolved in the other two books, or at least alleviated. I will be picking those up at some point: I am intrigued, though it took me about half the book to feel really enthusiastic.

Karin says

Absorbing and uplifting

So believable and told in such a skilled way that it seems more like a true history than fiction. Well crafted and whole characters, flaws and all, bring the reader along with them without once faltering.

This is my go to book series whenever I feel low, lost or hopeless. I've no idea how many times I've sought solace within it's pages, only that the writers craft wielded so powerfully, just like the craft of the smith, still draws me back every time.

Highly recommended.

Andrew says

A veritable classic, this is on my annual read list. Gloriously technical details follow the story of Alv the foundling from his rude thrust into adventure, swirling into world-changing events to culminate in his maturity as he seeks his desires, both noble and base.

A close patterning of Norse tragedy and myth, if you've seen "Ring of the Nibelungs" or know the background legend, much will be familiar. While high fantasy, the protagonist remains essentially human, and is prone (all too often it seems) to fall victim to his own weaknesses and flaws. While on one hand this is satisfyingly realistic, on the other, frustrating as he seems to never learn from his mistakes, nor learn to think ahead. It's hard to empathise with a character so impetuous and at times unlikeable.

Overall a satisfying read, most will be attracted to the highly-detailed descriptions of smithing and metalcraft. The other characters get plenty of stage, but are essentially static. A charming classic of the era, more sophisticated readers of the genre will probably tire of it's single focus and traditional style.

?Ruth? says

Although the book is well-written, for me it lacked a touch of passion or zeal to make it come fully alive. There is more narrative and descriptive prose than dialogue and in places it felt rather like an old Viking saga, with shades of the Sorcerer's Apprentice running through it. I rated it 3.5 stars and may well try another of the books in this series at some time.

Simon says

What really stands out about this series for me is the way magic and black-smithery are combined. The way the main character goes about crafting the various artifacts he forges and imbues them with magic is most intricately described.

That elevates it above the average fantasy series it might otherwise have been.

Sam says

A fantasy book that doesn't read like Tolkien and manages to create an interesting and varied world that you want to spend more time in.

The story moves well and keeps you interested with an almost episodic nature that gives you a tour of the world that the author has created. I do feel the author could have expanded a little on the world, however - considering this is the first book and you're in a new world. Heavy exposition would fine I think and given you a bit more texture and background. The Appendix is useful for this, but it would have been nicer for this to be threaded through the story. A minor complaint but I just didn't 'know' the world as well as I'd have liked.

The main character develops really nicely and isn't the usual blank canvas that sci fi and fantasy deploys to aid the reader's escapism. In fact, he's a really great character IMO, especially as the story progresses. The supporting cast is also well formed but I felt that the antagonist falls away a little too easily and you don't really connect with him, especially towards the end of the book. This what drops it down from 5 stars for me, especially as they talk an awful lot about the antagonist and because he features so heavily at the start of the book.

But these are relatively minor complaints: if you're into fantasy are looking for something a little more grounded and gritty than most of what is out there this is a great read. It's a slower paced book in some ways with less a focus on action and adventure and more exploration and discovery, with a sense of mystery and intrigue for the reader and the characters.
