

Imaro

CHARLES SAUNDERS. *Night Shade* (www.nightshadebooks.com), \$14.95 paper (224p) ISBN 1-59780-036-8

Mixing quasi history and legend, Saunders's episodic heroic fantasy, first published in 1981 and now greatly revised, introduces Imaro, a black African in the heroic mold of Robert E. Howard's Conan the Barbarian. Set in the sub-Saharan equivalent of Howard's imaginary Hyborea, this origin story, the first in a projected five-volume series, tells how Imaro (who seems to run afoul of sorcerers as readily as Howard's barbarian did) is falsely accused at the conclusion of his manhood rite, exiled from his tribe and transformed into an embittered, homicidal wanderer in a landscape of savage beasts and savage men, yet retains, as such heroes usually do, a certain chivalrous decency. The unusual setting more than makes up for the routine plot. Saunders alone has appreciated the potential of Africa as a backdrop for heroic fantasy. (Mar.)

MASS MARKET**Penelope and Prince Charming**

JENNIFER ASHLEY. *Leisure*, \$6.99 (384p) ISBN 0-8439-5606-2

Unremarkable Penelope Trask has always loved fairy tales, but never expected to live one; unfortunately, Ashley's one-dimensional characters wouldn't do a nursery rhyme justice, much less this foray into fantasy romance. Everything changes for this ordinary young woman living in an ordinary 19th-century English village when Prince Damien Augustus Frederic Michel of the far-off kingdom Nvengaria rides into her life and claims an ancient prophecy naming her his princess. Naturally, there's a drawback: in order to fulfill the prophecy and regain control of his kingdom from a usurper, the prince must marry her immediately. Even more troubling, Penelope must travel alone with the brash Damien, whom she does not trust. The plot

becomes increasingly fanciful en route to Nvengaria, as they encounter assassins, magic spells and an attack by a logosh—a shape-shifting half-human, half-beast. In the meantime, fueled by the prophecy's magic, passion between Penelope and Damien escalates—and escalates giving the story a pedestrian pace that suggests Ashley, known for her acclaimed *Pirate* series (*The Care and Feeding of Pirates*, etc.), has not yet shaken off her sea legs. (Apr.)

For Better or Hearse

LAURA DURHAM. *Avon*, \$6.99 (272p) ISBN 0-06-073904-5

The weddings and woundings continue in Durham's second slapstick romp (after *Better Off Wed*) starring Annabelle Archer, owner of Wedding Belles wedding planning service in Washington, D.C. A posh reception at the Fairmont Hotel is abruptly preempted when Annabelle finds the head chef skewered on one of the event's enormous ice sculptures. Enter Detective Reese, the handsome police officer from Annabelle's first murder 'n' matrimony, and his new competition, Ian, leader of the band scheduled to play the reception. Kate, Annabelle's assistant, heads a long list of wild associates who want to help Annabelle clear the name of her friend Georgia, prime suspect in the murder. As more chefs drop dead of unnatural causes and an array of hellacious brides and mothers-of-the-bride pile up in Wedding Belle's appointment book, Annabelle and company juggle the resulting pandemonium and glean clues from every direction. The final pages bring the entire puzzle into focus, and the answer to whodunit is clever enough to keep most readers guessing. Durham's band of merry miscreants makes up a crackpot—as opposed to crackerjack—team, but the combination works superbly. (Mar.)

The Kill

ALLISON BRENNAN. *Ballantine*, \$6.99 (416p) ISBN 0-345-48523-8

The latest from Brennan (*The Hunt*) is a satisfying romantic thriller that pits a smart, gutsy heroine

against a serial killer more than three decades into his brutal career. Olivia St. Martin, a scientist with the FBI, is stunned to learn that new DNA evidence has exonerated Brian Hall, the man she helped put away 34 years ago for her sister's murder. Olivia's research reveals that her sister's true killer may be responsible for the rape and murder of almost 30 young girls, including two recent slayings in Seattle. When her supervisor refuses to involve the FBI, Olivia travels to Washington herself, posing as a field agent, to join Seattle Police Det. Zack Travis's investigation. As Zack and Olivia try to find a missing girl before she becomes the next victim, they discover the chemistry between them and soon share more than a case. A subplot involving Hall's quest for revenge adds depth to the novel and propels it to a tense conclusion. While it lacks the nail-biting of top-notch romantic suspense, Brennan's effort should provide adequate escapist fare for fans of the genre. (March)

Dates from Hell

KIM HARRISON, LYN SAY SANDS, KELLEY ARMSTRONG AND LORI HANDELAND. *Avon*, \$6.99 (416p) ISBN 0-06-085409-X

Failing to capitalize on what should be a sure-fire concept, this quartet of paranormal romance novellas falls prey to the usual suspects: lack of cohesion, formulaic characters and flimsy plots. Harrison kicks off the book with a prelude to her *Hollows* series, an exposition-heavy tale of confusing office/vampire politics, in which a vampiric homicide detective looks for a way to get ahead at the office apart from letting the boss into her jugular. Harrison's over-the-top atmospheric make for a jarring transition to the light touch of the second novella, Sands's farcical story of young researcher-cum-shapeshifter Claire, who attends her high school reunion as two different people: herself, accompanying schoolyard dreamboat Kyle, and hunky Hollywood actor Brad Cruise, a favor to her dateless best friend Jill. Nestled in between Sands's slapstick and Handeland's passable closer—about a tough-as-nails demon hunter out to