

THE COVENANT RISING: Book One of the Dreamtime

STAN NICHOLLS. *Eos*, \$14.95 paper (416p) ISBN 0-06-073889-8

Weak characterization undercuts British author Nicholls's otherwise alluring fantasy, the first in a new sword-and-sorcery series with a well-conceived setting. Prince Melyobar, the mad ruler of Bhealfa, a small state caught between two large empires, believes that Death is an animate creature intent on stalking him. Long ground under the heel of the powerful in Bhealfa and the two empires, a few rebels are looking for ways to create a more egalitarian society. Enter Reeth Caldason, a brooding, nearly immortal swordsman straight out of the movie *Highlander*, looking for a magician who can help remove the curse he's under. Instead, Reeth ends up stuck with an inept and earnest magician's apprentice, Kutch, who may have hidden talents that will enable both Reeth and the rebels to get what they want. Unfortunately, the supporting characters—notably Melyobar, who's built a mobile palace in his attempt to outrun Death, and Serrah Ardacris, a crack soldier in the army of the empire of Cath Tampoor turned reluctant rebel—are far more compelling than the clichéd Reeth and Kutch. Still, Nicholls has the makings of a truly interesting series, and hopefully will do better in book two. *Agent, Howard Morhaim. (Jan. 4)*

FYI: Nicholls is the author of *Legion of Thunder* and other titles in his popular *Orcs: First Blood* series.

SCHISM: Part One of Triad

CATHERINE ASARO. *Tor*, \$25.95 (464p) ISBN 0-765-30951-3

Tensions escalate between the Skolians and their enemies, the Aristo Traders, in Nebula-winner Asaro's dizzying yet accessible SF soap opera, the 10th installment in her Skolian Empire saga and the first in a sequence exploring the childhoods of some of the earlier books' major players. Young Soz secretly applies to become a Jagernaut, a member of the Skolian elite fighting force, against the wishes of her father, Eldrinson. Soz's high scores and powerful psychic abilities guarantee her entry, but when her brother Althor comes to collect her, Eldrinson disowns them both. Soz's brother Shannon runs away, and when Eldrinson sets after him, Eldrinson is kidnapped and tortured by nasty Aristo Trader Vitarex, an event that presages war. Meanwhile, Soz, brilliant and difficult, excels at school, driven by her hatred of the Aristos and what they did to her father. There are plenty of exciting firefights, but the novel's focus on emotional connections, forgiveness, love and growing up will appeal more to a female than a male sensibility. YA readers will identify with the mostly teenage protagonists. *Agent, Eleanor Woods at Spectrum Literary Agency. (Jan. 3)*

THE WARRIOR-PROPHET: The Prince of Nothing, Book Two

R. SCOTT BAKKER. *Overlook*, \$25.95 (640p) ISBN 1-58567-560-1

The Holy War fomented by the mysterious prophet Maithanet between "the two great faiths of Inrithism and Fanimry" in *The Darkness That Comes Before* (2004), the critically acclaimed first book in the epic fantasy trilogy by Canadian author Bakker, explodes in this compelling, if overly long, sequel set in the medieval world of Eärwa. Like many a traditional historical chronicle, the book mentions a plethora of people and places only in passing, but the all-too-human tale of love, hatred and justice, centered on the sorcerer Drusas Achamian and the monk Anasûrimbor Kellhus (aka "the prince of nothing") and their respective harlot lady friends with hearts of gold, Esmenet and Serwë, keeps the pages turning. The final cinematic scene, of a vast landscape filled with enormous armies, nicely sets the stage for book three of this daringly unconventional series in the Tolkien mold. *Agent, Chris Lotts at Ralph M. Vicinanza. (Jan. 12)* mage-ship will likely leave YA fantasy readers hungry for more. (*Tor*, \$27.95 480p ISBN 0-765-31213-1)

Mass Market

THE TROUBLE WITH VALENTINE'S DAY

RACHEL GIBSON. *Avon*, \$6.99 (384p) ISBN 0-06-000926-8

"There [is] nothing like one whole day devoted to lovers to make a single girl feel like a loser," muses Kate Hamilton, the heroine of Gibson's frothy new romance set in Gospel, Idaho. When Kate's advances are rebuffed by the sexy man sitting next to her in a bar on Valentine's Day, she feels the sting of rejection—which is soon compounded by humiliation when she learns that the stranger is Rob Sutter, owner of the sporting goods store located next to her grandfather's grocery. Both Rob and Kate have skidded to a halt in Gospel—Kate after her work as a PI unwittingly armed a man with information to track down and kill his family, and Rob after his pro hockey career was derailed by a gun-toting psychopath. Instead of exploring this weighty material, Gibson focuses on such lighthearted frolics as whipped-cream fights in the aisles of Kate's grocery store. Because Rob remains literally and figuratively behind the wheel of his Hummer and Kate never fully faces her own demons, their romance lacks emotional heft. Gibson also portrays Gospel's elderly citizenry as cartoonish, rendering what could have been a poignant romance between Kate's grandfather and Rob's mother as condescendingly sweet. The novel begins and ends on Valentine's Day, and the rest of the story never transcends the holiday's reputation for false promises. *Agent, Claudia Cross. (Feb.)*

TO DIE FOR

LINDA HOWARD. *Ballantine*, \$7.99 (384p) ISBN 0-345-47625-5

Howard brings her usual high level of intelligence and flair to her latest tale of romantic suspense (after *Kiss Me While I Sleep*). Successful health club owner Blair Mallory is the only witness when a troublemaking member gets shot behind her North Carolina gym. Since the killer may not realize that Blair hasn't seen his face, she needs police protection—but her difficulties only escalate when Lt. Wyatt Bloodworth, with whom she had a short but intense relationship several years earlier, is assigned to the case. Still smarting from Wyatt's unexplained rejection, Blair resists his macho self-confidence; Wyatt in turn is irritated by her refusal to follow orders, even as he succumbs to her feisty charm and potent sexuality. Their investigations promptly reveal a major suspect, but the attacks on Blair continue even after the alleged killer is apprehended. As they consider a new array of possible murderers, the pair (aided and abetted by their colorful families) conduct a spirited battle of the sexes. Blair's chirpy asides on everything from underwear to men will wear on readers by the middle of the book, when the plot's momentum stalls. Still, Blair's surface fluffiness and underlying savvy make her an engaging narrator, and the book's witty Southern "take" on womanhood will amuse readers in the region and beyond. *Agent, Robin Rue. (Jan.)*

THE DEVIL TO PAY

LIZ CARLYLE. *Pocket*, \$6.99 (384p) ISBN 0-7434-7004-4

Sensual and suspenseful, the newest entry in Carlyle's Regency-era Devil series (following *A Deal with the Devil*) contains plenty of heated romance and an engaging heroine who lives two lives. By day, Sidonie Saint-Godard is a respectable young widow, but at night she becomes the seductive Black Angel, robbing wealthy men who mistreat women. Sidonie, the illegitimate daughter of an aristocrat, is painfully aware of the plight of unwed mothers and believes she can right society's wrongs by robbing vain men to help the women they harm. Her successful run falters when she targets the marquess of Devellyn, the notorious Devil of Duke Street. Disguised as a lusty street trollop, Sidonie seduces Devellyn, but the encounter kindles real passion, which complicates matters when Sidonie learns that she stole not only items of monetary worth from Devellyn but also something of sentimental value. Tension escalates sharply as Sidonie, realizing that Devellyn is in a vengeful rage, unwisely risks returning his items. Other revenge seekers close in on Sidonie until Devellyn's proposal becomes the only solution to guarantee her safety and reputation. A few contrived plot twists bring about a satisfying denouement, but this is a small flaw in an otherwise lively and absorbing romance. *Agent, Nancy Yost. (Jan.)*

