




# BOOK REVIEW

Book Title	<b>Iconoclasts Book 2 Sin Eater</b>
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Stars	

There is a sweet spot in all good fantasy stories where world building and characterisation meet; Mike Shel knows that place well. He's found it again in the second of his Iconoclasts series.

His world is a place where religion and magic combine to create a society riddled with corruption, cruelty and menace. Its inhabitants worship gods which serve specific purposes, their priests imbued with magical abilities to address those purposes using prayer. It's an interesting philosophical paradigm, for magic to be a product of prayer, there are lots of atheists who would have lots to say about that!

Good world building, I was once told by a writing tutor, should always flow from the macro to the micro level. The premises that underpin its landscape and its society should manifest themselves in every aspect of life and that's what Mike has got so right here.

An evil god has corrupted the foul, crazed queen of this society. But this corruption penetrates far deeper, the stench of this corruption can be sensed everywhere, in people's actions and disregard for others. We see this in the opening chapters as violence manifests itself, and by doing so, illustrates a pervasive sickness.

It is into this world we meet the characters who will play their roles in trying to heal this sickness. What makes the story so successful, where it hits this "sweet spot", is in the faults and weaknesses of these people. There are no heroes here, nor are there anti-heroes in the grimdark tradition either. They are normal folk committed to helping others by finding the remedy, despite their own insecurities, guilt and shame.

We meet Auric Manteo, the protagonist in the first book again, along with his daughter Agnes. They are primarily (though not entirely) the narrators of the story. They are complex people who reflect the intricacies of the world, both tainted by its corruption and trying to do their best despite it. People damaged by events caused by this world-wide sickness.

For me, the strength of this book lies in the characters forged in this way. It examines the human condition from a position of expertise; Mike Shel is a clinic psychologist who has worked with survivors of trauma. For this reason, each person is explored with such intelligence, sensitivity and insight. In some reviews of Aching God I struggled to understand how anyone could believe characters lacked depth, were no more than ciphers. I think they must have missed the subtlety. In this story, we gain consistent insight, not just into the minds of Agnes and Auric, but the wealth of characters who support the narrative. Each one has a distinct identity and is a product of the wider world at large.



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Finally, I liked this book for one more reason. It is an intelligent, thought-provoking essay on us, as a race. You don't need to look too deeply to see the allegories that comment on organised religion, humanity's dependence on the concept of higher beings in order to cope with a world with its own corruptions and sicknesses. This world mirrors ours and leaves the reader with opportunities to reflect on it.

Yet it is a fantasy and, in addition to making us think, we are taken on an exciting, thrilling adventure where monstrous creatures lurk, waiting to pounce and thwart the actions of our protagonists.

As all very good books should do, it has left me profoundly affected by its story. I like a good adventure but this story gave me something extra, it made me think too. I'm hoping the ending provides a follow-up, because there is so much of this world that needs exploring and I can't wait to see where it goes next.