



BOOK REVIEW

Book Title	Age of Assassins
Author	RJ Barker
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Stars	

I wasn't certain I was going to enjoy this book. The opening is bleak beyond words. I'm not just talking about the landscape but the implied (and sometimes explicit) references to life and death that exist upon that landscape. I almost stopped reading it was that bad.

The good news is that this desolate opening is brief. Life remains hard and cruel but there is plenty of action and characters with sparks of humanity which redresses the balance so I was pleased I continued reading.

In his interview after the story finishes RJ Barker says he imagined the story as a 'murder mystery with swords and magic'. This is certainly a good description. For me, it was as much a 'coming-of-age' story of Girton, the teenage assassin with a club foot.

The early chapters had me comparing Girton's cruel treatment by his young peers to Harry Potter. The poor boy suffers at the hands of these cruel boys and cannot fight back because it would give away his real identity. But this soon changes as deaths occur and every character in the castle becomes a suspect. The story morphs into political intrigue whilst maintaining its focus on Girton's reaction to adolescence.

The world in Age of Assassins is one of the truly imaginative creations in this story. It's a place soured by magic which possesses a very different form to JK Rowling's. This magic is destructive, driven by blood, potentially uncontrollable. Those in power do everything they can to kill anyone who appears to be using it. Or so it appears.

Girton is a wonderful character and RJ Barker gives us a strong and clear voice of this young lad who has never had a childhood or any friends. His Master, who has trained him to be an assassin, is kind but as she points out several times, she's overlooked his change from boy to man. There are touching moments where Girton gets to experience what it's like to be a teenage boy, particularly when he meets stable girl Drusl who he falls in love with. There are also very sad moments for him too, as befits this cruel world. All the characters are well defined, some truly villainous, such as the heartless Queen Adran who is straight out of any number of fairy tales.

This is the first book in the series and I enjoyed it immensely. I shall certainly read the rest to find out what happens to Girton and his Master next.