



# BOOK REVIEW

Book Title	<b>The Gutter Prayer</b>
Author	<b>Gareth Hanrahan</b>
Date	<b>January 2019</b>
Stars	

This is a dense, complex novel. It is sublime in its writing. It is highly original in its concepts, which leads back to why its dense and complex. It's been described already as 'ground-breaking' and I have no reason to argue with this. As a debut novel it shows what an amazing talent Gareth Hanrahan is and what enormous expectations now sit on his shoulders for book 2 of this series!

A dense and complex novel. Why? Because of its world-building primarily. The city state of Guerdon is riddled with crime and corruption. Law is maintained by the corrupt Watch but also by the Alchemical Guild and their Tallowmen, once-human "candles" who hunt with impunity and almost superhuman powers. They provide the first illustration of Hanrahan's original thinking. This world has an almost steampunk tone but it's more like a glancing nod to it. There is a battle for control of the city going on but these forces I've mentioned are only part of it. Below the city are other, far weirder, creatures. There are ghouls who feed on the city's corpses as well as a hivemind of enormous worms capable of sorcery. And, if all that isn't enough, there are gods. Numerous pantheons of them. (And here I'll halt any further detail so as not to generate spoilers.)

The protagonists in this story are like pinballs, bouncing from one of these forces to another as they struggle to work out identities and overcome the endless problems Hanrahan has dumped on them. Because that's what he's done. Each one has, metaphorically, a huge cross to bear. We follow a young man who has contracted a disease which is slowly turning into him a lump of rock, he relies on an antidote which can only ever contain the spread of the disease. It's a pitiful struggle but compensated by his readiness to maintain that struggle and do the right thing by his friends. Spar is a good man faced with the impending doom of becoming a living statue.

Then there's Rat. A young ghoul. He feasts on corpses. Not your conventional hero. Ghouls also have abilities that allow them to do more than humans but who, like Spar, acknowledges his own deterioration as he will become more feral as time goes by and he descends (literally) to live below the city.

Finally, there's the main character, Cari. A young woman with drawbacks that I can't define in any real detail because of spoilers. Suffice to say she is feisty, highly impetuous and incredibly brave.



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One of the things that I loved about this novel is the humanity of its characters. As you can see from these brief descriptions, everyone has huge faults that you might expect would have turned them into bitter and angry types who wouldn't struggle against the odds. Despite the dark, foreboding and inhuman world of this book, humanity sheds its light in the darkest places – and there are seriously dark places here.

I mention this because the role of religion is a significant factor. It has generated wars for as long as anyone can remember. The gods themselves are either weak and distant, or eager to bring about mayhem and murder. So are their disciples. Within the novel, setting up the second in the series, are references to the Godswar which is being fought beyond the boundaries of the Guerdon. However, when you look at the motives of almost everyone in this story, they are driven by religion and normal people suffer because of it. I can't help but wonder if this concept is driven by the author's Irish background because it could also define his island's heritage very easily.

I'm not going to talk about the plot. I can't. So much of it is woven into discoveries the reader makes along the way. I've been tempted to mention several key moments or characters but realised that doing that leads to a string of spoilers! But the weaving metaphor is appropriate because the narrative has been edited together so tightly that there isn't a second where the pace drops and something isn't happening to drive the story on. I find that incredible because there are so many highly original concepts getting hurled around here!

My only quibble is with the climax, which left me confused. One particular paragraph, the denouement itself, I read three times and still felt perplexed. It felt as though we were expected to accept something that hadn't been firmly established and so felt rather contrived. That may be down to me missing something obviously. The same thing applies to Rat in the final chapter, his transformation isn't clearly explained enough for me, and that also felt rather contrived. But these are very minor niggles.

I have to comment on the writing style. Hanrahan's use of the present tense in his third person narrative brings urgency and intimacy. His prologue defines the city itself as a character, he picks this up in the epilogue too. It's so fitting to do this because Guerdon IS a character, just as rich and complex as the human and non-human ones we meet. Its rich in description, highly evocative in its allegories and the images they generate. It's a writing style to bathe in and leave feeling enriched.

As I began this review by saying, as a debut author, Gareth Hanrahan has firmly established himself as someone who has shaken up the fantasy genre. His work is exciting, highly original, beautifully written and full of humanity.