



Speculative Faction Book Review

Book Title	Choir of the Damned
Author	Steven Mckinnon
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Stars	

Impetus. It's what a top quality, third novel in a trilogy needs. 'Choir of the Damned' has it in spades. This is a story driven by an urgency to resolve a variety of apocalypses. These major catastrophes began in *Symphony of the Wind* (SPFBO finalist). They worsened, almost destroying Dalthea, in *Wrath of Storms*. A sceptic might ask, where do you go from there?

Steven Mckinnon's answer is to widen the story to take in his entire world and increase the number of catastrophes. It's a brave step. It requires additional world building and the introduction of new characters. We all know how that can slow a story down. Not here!

Our rag-tag band of saviours begin the story disheartened, lost and, in the case of Damien, knocking on death's door. Each one battles with their past, Mckinnon's characters are all damaged beyond repair. Their motives are key, they need to do the right thing. For Damien it's a question of atonement. For Serena it's curiosity as she searches for answers to her heritage. For Gallows? He's determined to protect Serena, he's got nothing else to live for.

One of the things I've enjoyed most in this trilogy is the depth of characterisation. Not just in our major protagonists but in relatively minor characters too. They're given backgrounds and motives imbued from the world in which they live. It has forged their resolution, their desire to put things right or their lust for power. But they are always intensely believable.

The other factor, crucial to sustaining the impetus I mentioned? You need to engage with them. You cheer on those trying to do what's right. You long for retribution to strike those doing wrong. Mckinnon spends significant parts of the narrative on relatively minor characters building these characters because, at some point, that investment pays off. I'll illustrate with Morton Brunswick whose actions are pivotal at one point but they happen *because of who he is*. He (and us) are led to that moment of fate. He's a wonderful piece of characterisation that represents Mckinnon's ability to find pearls in the strangest places.

Impetus also comes from the quality and style of writing. Here Mckinnon uses a rhythm-disrupting, staccato style to his fight scenes. We witness events in second-long snatches of action, blink-and-you-miss-it. Characters die in a single word. It's brutal. Visceral. It forces you through events at such speed you aren't sure what's happened. It's the realism of war. Yet, elsewhere we languish as places and people develop to give us chance to catch up and find realism through politics, culture, geography and history.

Choir of the Damned is epic in every sense but this is no behemoth, slow and cumbersome. It drives into oblivion without brakes. Only afterwards, when you've caught your breath, can you appreciate what a stunning story this is. Steven Mckinnon provides us with a masterclass in trilogy writing. You really need to get this book!