

Review of *Black Sun*

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Roanhorse, Rebecca. *Black Sun*. Saga Press, 2020.

Rebecca Roanhorse's epic fantasy novel *Black Sun* (2020) was received fondly by readers and won the Hugo Award for Best Novel in 2021. The book is the first part of the *Between Earth and Sky* series with its sequel *Fevered Star* (2022) already out. Drawing upon Polynesian and pre-Columbian American cultures, the novel explores the theme of embracing one's destiny and ideas of celestial balance, sacrifice, vengeance, and justice. In a thrilling story that invokes a fresh, magical world, Xiala, a sea captain belonging to a mermaid-race, oversees the transportation of Serapio, the Crow God, across time for a celestial event called the Convergence in the city of Tova. Serapio was ritually blinded by his mother and trained by three capable tutors to prepare him for what awaits him in Tova. Xiala's crew must be convinced of their mission with half-truths and she does not know Serapio's true power until the very end.



Guided by the watchers and the sun priest, the people of Tova are not expecting the reborn Crow God to land on their shores. The four Sky Made clans of Tova—the Golden Eagle, the Water Strider, the Winged Serpent, and the Carrion Crow—exist mostly in peace except for the mournful Carrion Crow clan who have not forgotten the Night of Knives, a massacre of its members by the priesthood that led to the rise of Serapio as the Crow God. Naranpa, the sun priest who has raised herself from poverty to the highest echelons of the priesthood, and Okoa, the warrior prince of the Carrion Crow clan, are the other two major characters in the narrative.

The political intrigue in the fantasy world that Roanhorse builds makes the story interesting. The conflicting interests of the Sky Made Clans, Naranpa's feeling of alienation inside the priesthood, and Serapio's ambiguity towards his own power drive the narrative. The character of Serapio is a fantasy archetype, but he is an unlikely villain consumed as much by a thirst for vengeance as he is by a similar desire for justice: "...vengeance can be for spite. It can eat you up inside, take from you everything that makes you happy, makes you human" (350). Serapio considers himself to be the Crow God, commanding his flock of crows to attack, serve, and intimidate anyone who crosses him. Serapio's loss of eyesight grants him a greater vision with the help of 'star pollen,' which he relies upon just as Xiala relies on her song to calm the seas and influence men. As a seafaring Teek, Xiala is good at leading her crew but is treated as an outsider

because of her race. The character of Xiala makes readers confront their prejudices, overturning gendered expectations. There are other women in the story such as Naranpa and the Matrons of the Sky Made Clans who serve as leaders, while men serve as warriors or 'knives.' Such characters help readers understand the otherness felt by marginalised groups to some extent.

The landscapes in the novel extend from the Obregi Mountains to the Crescent Sea, and to the Cities of Cuecola and Tova. The descriptions of the places are sparse but are fleshed out in conversations and some illuminating phrases. At the beginning of each chapter, the location of action and days in relation to the Convergence is mentioned, situating the narrative for the reader. The Convergence is an eclipse event that takes place when three suns align in a single line and are obscured by the moon completely. Members of the priesthood undertake ritualised practices, including the Day of Shuttering when they strictly stay indoors. The title of the novel itself invokes this solstice event in which the sun disappears during a period of cosmic alignment. The indigenous way of narrating is to place it alongside temporal and regional markers populating the story world. Roanhorse does this with ease and an elegance that makes the novel immersive.

Compared to N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy, Roanhorse's first novel allows for magical thinking that does not centre the apocalyptic tone too prominently. Jemisin's novels carry the weight of a post-apocalypse, but Roanhorse crafts vivid characters and an exciting narrative with the Convergence revealing Serapio's true power. The vengeful destruction that Serapio unleashes can be seen in two ways. The massacre of the Night of the Knives can be seen to justify Serapio's anger, but Serapio does not feel like he belongs to the Carrion Crow clan at all, having been brought up as a weapon. With an anti-hero at the centre of the narrative, Roanhorse weaves a memorable story that can be taken forward in interesting ways. The ambiguity of Serapio's character compares to Jemisin's female protagonist in her trilogy, although the latter is a much more complex character due to her maternal role, and her duty in saving/re-making the 'broken' earth.

The characters of Serapio and Xiala are set up as binary opposites in terms of the powers they wield. While Serapio summons the shadow into him, Xiala casts her song out into the world. These oppositional forces allow for a balance in the narrative and an interesting juxtaposition that is also gendered. Xiala's queer sexuality and Serapio's chosen celibacy allow for their companionship to develop in a striking way. Towards the end of the novel, Serapio's destiny is realized in some sense, with consequences, and Xiala is left to wonder at his power. Roanhorse sets up the two characters to respond to each other and their conversations reveal the differences in how they think about their respective journeys. While Serapio feels like he has been brought up for a purpose, Xiala lives from day to day with a mission to get her crew across the Crescent Sea to Tova and reap the rewards of such a journey. Roanhorse's novel also invokes the idea of befriending pain in relation to training the mind and the body, with Serapio's tutors teaching him that sacrifice is essential to fulfil one's destiny.

The novel is a good example of speculative fiction that values diversity of characters in terms of race, gender, and sexuality. In a world that increasingly recognizes the importance of inclusive thinking and representation, Roanhorse's novel makes for a satisfying read that shows us how indigenous life can be portrayed in a fascinating manner. The fantastical world that Roanhorse developed is sure to inspire more speculative fiction writers to come up with similar works that will show how various indigenous people have lived in conjunction with the natural world, with knowledge of celestial events and clans that protected and fought for their kin.

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