

REVIEW: THE WARLOCK IN SPIKE OF HIMSELF BY CHRISTOPHER STASHEFF

by Lester del Rey

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Once upon a time it was almost impossible to find a book by an unknown writer in the fields of science fiction or fantasy. The author either had already established himself with shorter works or his novel had been serialized in the magazines long before it appeared in book form.

This no longer holds true. From even a hasty scanning of the shelves, it is obvious that a great many writers today are breaking into print initially in books. Delaney and LeGuin built their reputations outside the magazines and many more current examples exist.

It is still a happy occasion when a first appearance represents both good writing and a gift for story-telling, however.

The Warlock in Spite of Himself, by Christopher Stasheff (Ace, 75¢) probably has the year's worst title and it is the work of a writer unknown at least to me. He also, unforgivably, combines science fiction and outright fantasy in the same story. On top of that, the publishers make the book seem one of those repulsively mechanical attempts at humor in a singularly unappealing blurb.

Nevertheless, this rather fat book is a cracking good tale and a well-integrated story, told with a smooth command of the language. After the first few pages even the humor quiets down to a gently effective sense of fun.

The story takes place on Gramarye, a world colonized and then lost to the records. But apparently this planet was settled by rich and eccentric members of the Society for Creative Anachronism who were determined to recreate feudalism in all its aspects.

Rodney and Fess—an epileptic robot horse—are sent to Gramarye to bring some measure of democratic government into its' medievalism.

They soon find evidence that other forces are tinkering behind the scenes, trying to create either absolute dictatorships or total anarchy. The young queen is willfully busy alienating all her lordly friends by experimenting with a feudal welfare state.

Rodney naturally winds up in the middle of things. His general attitude is properly science-fictional, as are many of the trap-pings. Even such things as time machines don't phase him and his wizardry is based solidly on technical tricks.

But at least half of Gramarye works by magic. There are witches galore and elves all over the landscape, all mixed up in the government. There is even a group of fine, upstanding ghosts who dutifully haunt an ancestral castle. And Rodney is recognized by all as a genuine warlock. Maybe he is, despite his protests.

In the end most of the magic elements become integrated into the science framework. But it isn't one of the horrible "logical" endings that so often ruin science fantasy. The Little People are far more than mutations and the ghosts remain honest ghosts.

The mixture should not work at all—but somehow everything comes together into a good and satisfying adventure. The story is not a major one or particularly significant but it's more fun to read than anything I've seen by a new writer in much too long a time.

There's room here for a sequel, since Rodney really should be proved an authentic warlock eventually. I hope Stasheff is working on it.