Magician by Raymond E. Feist

This one takes me way back.

It’s quarter of a century since my teenage self first picked up this book, and it mesmerised me. Even now, I can still remember sitting at my desk in my bedroom, reading the scene when Pug unleashes his powers for the first time at the arena on Kelewan, being so engrossed in the siege of Crydee that I got off the bus a stop too late.

Hopefully I’m not giving much away, as I’m assuming most fantasy fans have read this one. It was ‘core text’ for me back in the mid 1980s, when almost every night was spent playing Dungeons and Dragons. I yearned for a book that would be just like a D&D adventure, and Raymond E. Feist wrote me one.

So, has it stood the test of time? Yes. Er, and no.

There are two versions of Magician; the original, and a ‘revised and expanded’ edition that you’ll see in bookshops now, what would be a director’s cut if it was a film. I’ve read both in the last couple of years, and I’m now at war with myself over the book I once loved.

I read the original on holiday two years ago, and it was everything I remembered. Magician is a coming of age tale, but it’s also a warning about growing powers. Our two heroes, Pug and Tomas, start out as boyhood friends, their paths leading them to become the titular magician and powerful warrior respectively. On the way, Magician is strewn with everything a fantasy fan could want: dwarves under mountains, elves in forests, sieges, mysterious magic-users, pirates and thieves. It’s all in there, and only the most cynical would fail to be satisfied.

Here’s where I come in. While the original book has retained its ability to charm and the plot stays gripping, the revised and expanded edition loses something with its increased word count. In his introduction to what he describes as the ‘author’s preferred edition’, Feist speaks of when he handed in the original manuscript to his editor, who subsequently told him that it was 50,000 words too long. That’s a wise editor; now those words are back in, and much is taken from what was once a ‘ripping yarn’.

Sadly, there’s precious little action in these extra words, but dialogue abounds. Too much dialogue; lots of talking about history and places that only genuinely prove insightful to those who’ve read the many sequels (I’ve managed the two more required to complete the Riftwar Saga, both of which I found disappointing after the cracking start), nothing that I found to genuinely further what was already a well-paced plot. Padding, for want of a better word.

Some of you may be considering taking aim at me with rotten fruit now, while others may be nodding their heads sagely. Fact is, this is an author who has over twenty books to his name – does he really need go back to the beginning and tinker with his first novel in this way? Does Feist want his loyal readers to know his true vision or is it a clever marketing ploy to sell more copies? (If so, then it worked on me too, darn it!). Wouldn’t 50,000 new words towards a next
novel be more useful?

Whatever your thoughts, it’s testament to the strength of *Magician* that this is the book that was altered. Sure, the changes aren’t (in my opinion) beneficial to the novel’s core story, but completists may argue against that if it fills in blanks or adds to the timeline of other novels. That’s me being diplomatic. What of new readers? Will they love this version, uncaring that there was once an original, or think ‘it’s not a bad story, but it gets bogged down at times’?

Deep in my heart, where lives a little writer, I can sympathise somewhat with Feist’s reasons for making his changes to *Magician*. In his eyes, his original vision wasn’t complete, so he did the necessary to alter it, so we could all share in what he fully intended. I’d possibly have done the same in his shoes, so I’m not in a place to criticise. I can only state my opinion, which is that *Magician* is a brilliant book, although its shine has been somewhat diminished in my eyes with the amendment. While I can understand, it doesn’t mean I agree. In my eyes, *Magician* was close to perfect; now it isn’t.

It’s not nostalgia talking, either. When I re-read the original *Magician* two summers ago, I was completely drawn in. Here were the characters I knew from my youth, scenes of high drama, intrigue and romance. While there’s nothing unexpected with the usual fantasy tropes – elves are haughty and distant, while dwarves are friendly pipe-smokers – it doesn’t lessen the story at all. This ‘masterwork of magic and adventure’ remains just that; a fantastically realised world, characters that stay with you for years, and a story that cheers for heroes and hisses at villains.

Feist himself admits in his new introduction: ‘if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’. Frankly, he should have stuck with that advice and left *Magician* well alone. Don’t get me wrong, it’s still a worthy read, but these additions have severely disappointed me.

So that’s it. Nostalgia can be what it used to be, but not if somebody tinkers with it. I had to get this off my chest, share my feelings about *Magician*. Feist fans will no doubt disagree with me, although others may have had the same experience. I’d still recommend the book without hesitation, but try and get your hands on the original version, sit back and enjoy the story of Pug and Tomas.

**Original version** - 4-1/2 out of 5 Stars  
**Revised version** - 3-1/2 out of 5 Stars