The Bonehunters by Steven Erikson

*The Bonehunters*, book six of the *Malazan Book of the Fallen*, reunites us with the 14th Army which, under the “trust me, it will all work out” leadership of Tavore Paran, seeks to crush the last vestiges of the Whirlwind rebellion, once and for all. And while this hungry army chases its apotheosis, action is taking place elsewhere.

Letherii and Tiste Edur ships are scouring the world, looking for champions to take back to their new emperor, as well as seeking the Throne of Shadow. The Tiste Andii, too, are active, for the Edur’s ancient betrayal of their cousins has left a splintered legacy that, inevitably, must be drawn together and resolved.

This book is one for the masochists, for those who understand that pleasure delayed often means pleasure enhanced. There is the agony of Y’Ghatan, Karsa Orlong’s drawn-out wanderings, the seeming futility of Cutter’s (once Crokus) labours, and the advancement of Mallick Rel’s plans which put him and his henchmen in reach of global power. But far from a criticism, this is quite the authorial achievement.

First, this is one of the longest books in the series and to keep a reader on tender hooks throughout such a tome is an act of both bastardry and mastery from Steven Erikson. Second, in the bringing together of champions and delivering them to Lether, a convergence is set up for future works; one where there is the very real prospect that Karsa and Icarium will tear the world apart. But don’t think that this book lacks satisfactory conclusions. By its end the Bonehunters have become a true force to be reckoned with, yet not because of great achievements but rather because their desire for a reckoning has made them desperate and dangerous; so much so that the Malazan Empire can no longer contain them.

The Bonehunters’ cutting of its imperial ties sees Tavore needing the help of Kalam Mekhar, Quick Ben, the Empire’s last official High Mage – though Tavore’s 14th Army contains some surprises for those who think the Empire is without magical firepower, and from T’amber, Tavore’s mysterious companion. There is perhaps no sequence in modern fantasy quite like Kalam’s confrontation with the Claw.

Yet there is something much deeper in this book, something meta, which truly warms my heart and increased my enjoyment this book, both as a first-time, and as a repeat reader. Erikson’s story started out as a roleplaying game. We’ve all been there. I still am – every Tuesday night. At some point in time, Erikson and a group of friends met regularly and created a powerful story and a full world that, thank the stars above, he then went on to novelise. And in this book you get a very real sense that there were conversations around a table, which in my mind is laden with empty chip-packets and bottles of soft drink, that have bearing on almost everything that takes place throughout the *Malazan Book of the Fallen*.

Kellanvad and Dancer: what did they really see in the Azath House? Have Surly and Tayschrenn been acting on Kellanvad’s orders all this time? What really happened in the Hanged Man Inn, with Braven Tooth, Whiskeyjack and all the others listening to Fiddler, then a
recruit, playing his prophetic laments on his instrument?

While certainly a sense of this special something has existed in previous instalments, in particular in the musings about the binding of the Crippled God, there are enough appearances here by Kellanvad’s ‘old guard’ that it makes the shadows of those nights-amongst-friends loom large over all that happens in this book.