Warbreaker by Brandon Sanderson

Brandon Sanderson is, without doubt, one of the very best fantasy writers around today. What I think Brandon does better than anyone else out there is create a world that seems to live, breath and make sense. The worlds Sanderson creates have sound rules and believable plots. And his narrative style, where he isn’t afraid to take that bit of extra time explaining the possibilities/limitations and describing to how things work, is something very, very few authors are able to do without it feeling like a drag. Personally, having read The Way of Kings, Mistborn, Warbreaker and Elantris – I now think Warbreaker is his best book to date in terms of story. The Way of Kings has far more going for it because it is a series, but the stand alone that is Warbreaker to me is his best work to date.

For those who don’t know the how’s and why’s of how Mistborn came about, it wasn’t a book/series that Sanderson wanted to write (originally). Elantris had come out to a relatively good reception, but my understanding was, that because it was such a unique book, it didn’t capture those ‘huge’ numbers. Also, Sanderson had pitched a few novels before Elantris and Mistborn, and had some good response, but I believe the general consensus was “this just doesn’t suit the market.” Well, Mistborn was his reaction. He decided to write a book that slotted well onto the shelves amongst what was currently out there. As such, we see in Mistborn a book that has a lot of awesome elements such as a unique magic system, a very different world, an awesomely complicated villain and great characters with an understandable and yet seemingly impossible mission.

Well, it went down as expected – people liked it because it was familiar enough to land on the shelves and yet different enough to capture their imaginations and feel fresh. More importantly though, it got Sanderson’s name out there and the fact he had built up a user-base meant that publishers were willing to take more risks with his work (i.e. Warbreaker, The Way of Kings and the purchase of Elantris by the UK markets) and he had people he could call readers. Sanderson took an interest in an author named Cory Doctorow, who released all of his work online at the same time as it is released in hardback. Brandon himself called the idea insane
and thought: “If you give it away for free, nobody will buy it!” Well, to cut a long story short – Brandon ended up reflecting on this for a while and eventually decided to publish the book online FOR FREE himself. The reason he gave was: “Readers can ALREADY get their books for free; I went to the library often myself as a youth. And yet, I still bought books. I often bought the very books I’d checked out from the library, as I liked them so much I wanted to read them again and loan them out to others.”

That wasn’t all Brandon did though, he posted the book up, literally as he wrote it, chapter by chapter. That includes all those unpolished rough drafts and proving to readers (many of us doubted it) that Brandon was indeed a human that made mistakes and not some kind of writing robot (trust me...there were theories!). The great thing about this was that it served everyone: readers, writers and Sanderson himself. For readers it offered them a free book. For writers, they could be inspired by the writing process Sanderson seemed to go through; rough drafts, editing and all. For Sanderson it meant he could reach a ton of younger people or people who hadn’t previously justified spending out money on a new authors work in fear they wouldn’t connect. It seems to have worked well because today Sanderson is more popular than ever!

So, anyway, back to the book itself. Written in 2006, Warbreaker is the tale of two nations, two sisters, a god, and a man with incredible powers.

The two nations, are that of Hallandren and Idrian. Idrian is a small nation that struggles to maintain its dependence from the nearby powerful society that is Hallandren. Hallandren is a nation ruled by an all powerful God King and supported by a group of ‘returned’ beings that essentially are men and women who have died and been deemed worthy to return. Any man, woman or child upon death can be chosen to return. The reasons are unknown, but it is believed that during their death or life they must have done something to deem them worthy.

Two sisters, Vivenna and Siri are featured in a tale of reversals. Vivenna, Daughter of the King, is a Princess and has been trained for years in the ways of Hallandren. When the day arrives for her to be sent from Idrian to Hallandren in order to marry the God King however, a new plan is conceived by the Idrian King. He will send his younger, troublesome daughter Siri along to the God King instead. This tale then is of a young girl, completely unprepared for the world she is about to be propelled into and the sister Vivenna following her in hope of rescuing her from the fate she had already accepted.

A god, Lightsong is one of the ‘returned’. As with all returned, he doesn’t remember any part of his life before he died and returned. Unlike the other God Kings though, who seem to embrace their god like status, Lightsong struggles to see himself worthy of the title ‘God’ and this upsets not only his people, but the other gods who worry about the ramifications of him calling himself anything but a god.

The man with incredible powers is Vasher. This man is one of the darkest, most intriguing characters you will meet in a long, long time. He is the first character you meet during the prologue – he comes across a man being held captive within a castle and demands that he transfers his ‘breaths’ to him. The man tells Vasher he will not, however, Vasher promises him that if he transfers across his breaths, he will get revenge on their mutual enemies. The man,
knowing he will die anyway gives Vasher his powers and dies. Vasher, who entered the building as a relatively normal being, leaves with enough ‘breath’ to make him a real threat to anyone that stands in the way of his currently unknown ambitions.

So, have I confused you? A little? Well, the book is indeed complex. Not confusing though, just complex and multi-layered. That is a good thing for me and I think those who thought Mistborn was a little too one dimensional (i.e. Vin and Eland were very much the focus) will like the multiple threads that Brandon provides in Warbreaker. I guess the main character would be Siri, she is the one who is plunged into a world that is completely unfamiliar and one that she is totally unprepared for. The tale of Siri, who until now has been a rather naive and rebellious daughter of the Idrian King, is a fantastic one. We get to explore a new world with her and watch her rebellious nature really grind down the Hallandren hierarchy that she has been sent as a ‘gift’ to. Her sister’s role is just as enjoyable. Vivenna, who was completely ready to become the wife of the harsh God King, befriends a number of Mercenaries in an effort to rescue her sister. The characters of Lightsong, the ‘God’ who rejects his role as leader of the people, and the character of Vasher who is always there in the background, doing something dark, really adds to the reading experience. When the four plots begin to interweave and cross over each other, things get really, really exciting and it quickly becomes apparent that not everything is what it seems.

Something that shocked me was Brandon’s very good usage of sexual tension between characters and even jokes in regards to the pleasurable aspects of sex. For those unfamiliar with Sanderson’s work, up until now, I think the most we had seen from his protagonists was
the odd kiss. This really made the book for me. I loved *Mistborn* and I loved *Elantris*, but I think that they were very ‘heavy’ books. The stories were epic, the characters were loveable, but there was just that little something missing from them and I think with Brandon taking a few risks and injecting a few more jokes, the book felt a far, far quicker read than any of those I’ve mentioned up until now.

Finally, before I sum up, I just want to tell you a story. My girlfriend, Nicola, who I have been dating now for three years, has a mother who enjoys reading. However, she really doesn’t like how dense and hard-going a lot of fantasy novels are for the casual reader. Anyway, I decided to leave her *Warbreaker* and just said to her, “give this book a go sometime.” Anyway, I came home from work the very next day and her mum had finished the book! She’d started reading it the evening before and had finished it about an hour before I walked in the door. We then proceeded to have an hour-long conversation about Vasher, his motivations, his talking sword and what we each believed would happen following the end of the book. I think this shows just how great Sanderson is as a writer; he is able to appeal to such a wide audience, it is truly incredible. For a 24-year-old male to sit and talk with a woman in her early 50s (sorry Nicola’s mum) about a book and both be enthralled by it, is a rare occurrence, and I thank Brandon for giving us a book that we can both enjoy and discuss.

To sum up my feelings then, this is a book that not only has a complex and gripping tale, it is one that takes you on an emotional ride. From laughing at Lightsong’s rejections of a female god who is trying to get him into bed, to sighing over the pains that Siri experiences as she is forced into a world she is completely unprepared for, to flinching as Vasher butchers yet another victim – this is a book that has it all. Well done to Brandon Sanderson, and as a relatively young author who writes so quickly, I truly believe that as his books begin to stack up now, he will be forever mentioned as one of the finest fantasy writers of this generation.