

The Overending: Wood Cow Chronicles, Volume 2

Rick Johnson

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Compelling, refreshing characters, intelligent story, and fast action highlight this second installment of Rick Johnson's fantasy epic.

Rick Johnson's second installment of the Wood Cow Chronicles, *The Overending*, is an intelligent, fast-paced fantasy. Somewhat reminiscent of Brian Jacques's Redwall series, Johnson offers up refreshing heroes and humor while addressing the more serious issues of equality and prejudice.

The High One rules his kingdom with an iron fist, relying on a steady stream of slaves to work his granite quarries. In the follow-up to *Helga: Out of Hedgelands*, Helga's brother, Emil, has landed in the company of those who are helping escaped slaves to freedom. Soon joined by Helga, their parents, and several of their friends, the group is forced to face the High One's army, sent to crush their rebellion. All the while a whisper passes through the country that the Overending, the end of the High One's tyranny, is coming.

While *The Overending* can be understood on its own, it is highly recommended that *Helga* be read first. Many characters and plot lines are carried over from the first book, and background details on these carryovers are sparse in this installment.

The characters are compelling and refreshing. As in Jacques's novels, all the characters are anthropomorphized animals—cows, wolves, rabbits, etc., who talk and wear clothes. The players are also three-dimensional, even the tyrannical High One, who eschews his throne in favor of working at his forge while holding court, and is capable of feeling pangs of remorse. Leading the action are a number of delightful female protagonists who are made stronger by awareness of their own weaknesses; Helga notes, "This task may be a thousand times too big for me to handle, but I can try." These well-rounded female characters are especially important in a genre dominated by male characters going on adventures.

The book touches on important issues. Equality and prejudice are addressed through the plight of the Pogwaggers, a group of second-class citizens who join the fight for freedom. And animals like the Skull Buzzards, pompous guards who consider themselves superior to all creatures different from themselves, serve as a foil to the highly diverse group of animals who work with Helga and Emil without conflict, despite their clear differences. Humor is used to poke fun at inept bureaucracies; massive destruction results when a group of bureaucrats follows a construction manual to the letter instead of making adjustments for the construction site. And though the premise of the book might sound violent, outsmarting the enemy is valued over brute force.

The narrative jumps from one group of characters to the next every couple of chapters, and Johnson skillfully brings all of the strands together at the end. This also helps build tension and propels the plot along at a fast pace, as events set into motion by one group will have ramifications for the other groups, though the characters might not be aware of it yet. While the first two sections are clearly delineated as "Book One" and "Book Two," showing where a change in characters is going to occur, "Book Three" comprises over half the novel and could have been broken down into two

or three smaller sections.

Johnson doesn't leave his audience on a complete cliffhanger, but there are enough loose ends to merit eager anticipation of the third installment in the series. Though appropriate for readers as young as fourth grade, *The Overending* is sure to delight fantasy readers of all ages.

ALLYCE AMIDON (May 16, 2014)

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