

## Vlain and the Last Wild

**Winston T. Harrell**

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*Vlain and the Last Wild is an epic fantasy novel that skillfully takes on moral questions about authority and the value of life.*

Winston T. Harrell's adventure-filled fantasy novel *Vlain and the Last Wild* is set on the frontier. In it, Vlain, who is held in high esteem as an unbeatable fighter, is dispatched to combat the woodlanders.

After Vlain's legion's first bloody incursion, his eyes are opened to the cruelty of the legion's actions and the ill intentions of power-hungry Commander Orilius. When Orilius refuses a peaceful end to the conflict, instead ordering the burning of a woodlander village, Vlain defects. He's accompanied by a small group of allies, and their fight for justice begins.

Vlain's humanity is never in question, despite his great warrior status: He feels pain and sustains incapacitating injuries, and there's much at stake in each battle he enters. He cares about the people around him, too. He treats both the men of his legion and the woodlanders with friendly camaraderie.

Its pace informed by its continual combat scenes, this warfare-centered book includes graphic depictions of killing. Vlain injures others in the context of obedience and duty, and he comes to see how arbitrary Commander Orilius's orders are. Vlain and his company dismember and slay people defending their native lands, but they stop short of burning the homes they empty. But despite their changes of heart, Vlain and his allies' past violence jars with the woodlanders' decision to trust them; Vlain strains credulity as a keeper of peace, given knowledge of all that he's participated in.

This worldbuilding is clear, though the book is prone to excessive exposition when it comes to fantastical elements, as with the creation of a particular metal that is described at distracting length. People's actions and choices are also overnarrated, as where the book details each combatant's role in the fight, both supporting the book's epic scale and contributing to overwhelm. Indeed, as all of the supporting characters have ample room to show off their individual skills, the book's pace flags. And since fight scenes encompass so much page space, a sense of sameness takes over. During pivotal moments, the granular details are beneficial, but most of the skirmishes are too incidental to support such specificity.

In contrast, the depictions of the woodlanders are evocative. The variety of the animal folk adds depth, and the legion's encounters with them expand their limited worldviews. And people's exchanges are humanizing, in particular given the context of warfare. When the legionaries play games, their personalities and relationships are clarified, and even their conversations regarding war and the military hierarchy are revealing. And the novel, which starts by portraying the displacement of native populations, unpacks those actions with nuance, skillfully taking on moral challenges regarding authority and the value of life beneath its blood-soaked exterior. Vlain's ultimate growth is satisfying, though it does not erase his initial violence.

In the rebellion-fueled epic fantasy novel *Vlain and the Last Wild*, famed soldiers weigh duty and obedience against their feelings of compassion for those they fight.

VIOLET GLENN (December 18, 2024)

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