



# The Grey Bastards

*Jonathan French*

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Jackal is proud to be a Grey Bastard, member of a sworn brotherhood of half-orcs. Unloved and unwanted in civilized society, the Bastards eke out a hard life in the desolate no-man's-land called the Lots, protecting frail and noble human civilization from invading bands of vicious full-blooded orcs.

But as Jackal is soon to learn, his pride may be misplaced. Because a dark secret lies at the heart of the Bastards' existence - one that reveals a horrifying truth behind humanity's tenuous peace with the orcs, and exposes a grave danger on the horizon.

On the heels of the ultimate betrayal, Jackal must scramble to stop a devastating invasion - even as he wonders where his true loyalties lie.

**A standout adventure fantasy debut that's down, dirty and damn good fun - perfect for fans of Joe Abercombie, Mark Lawrence, Markus Heitz's Dwarves series and Stan Nicholl's Orcs series.**

## The Grey Bastards Details

Date : Published June 19th 2018 by Orbit (first published October 16th 2015)

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Author : Jonathan French

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## **From Reader Review The Grey Bastards for online ebook**

**Jennifer ~ TarHeelReader says**

**5 astonishing stars to The Grey Bastards! ? ? ? ? ?**

When I was contacted by Crown Publishing to read and review two fantasy genre books, I jumped at the chance. Not because this is my typical genre; not at all. That's not because I don't like fantasy because I do. For whatever reason, I don't pick up fantasy books regularly. But I am drawn to these types of TV shows and films, and The Grey Bastards is ready for the screen.

Another thing that is ironic to me is that, while I'm no puritan, the title of this book contains a word I don't use in my regular vernacular, and here I am typing the word repeatedly. Lol

As I was reading, I instantly thought that The Grey Bastards would appeal to fans of Game of Thrones. It's brash, graphic in every way, and an epic adventure. It's been compared to Lord of the Rings, and I can definitely see that comparison, too.

Jackal is a half-orc and a member of a brotherhood of same. Sadly, half-orcs are not accepted into human society, so they are forced live a hard-wrought life in the Lots. The brotherhood is called the Grey Bastards, and they are responsible for protecting the fragile human civilization from the extremely violent full-orcs; kind of intermediary between the humans and the full-orcs.

As with any great story, there are secrets, deep, dark secrets of which Jackal is unaware, and there is a secret that belies the peace between humans and half-orcs. An invasion occurs on the cusp of Jackal learning this news, and it leaves him questioning everything he thought was true.

This book completely transported me to the land of the half-orcs. I could see Jackal and all his compatriots as if it were a movie inside my head. This book is gritty, dark, gruesome, gruff, tough, and wild!

I can see why fantasy fans are eating this book up! It's fast-paced, transporting, full of action, and an absolute thrill.

Thank you to Kathleen at Crown and Jonathan French for hours of pure entertainment! The Grey Bastards will be published on June 19, 2018.

My reviews can also be found on my blog: [www.jennifertarheelreader.com](http://www.jennifertarheelreader.com)

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**Emma says**

Winner of the 2016 SPFBO, The Grey Bastards introduces us to Jackal, half-orc and all round badass hog rider. Him and his fellow half-orc brothers form one of the hoofs that reside in the Lots, the lands between human held territories and those of the full blood Orcs, the thicks, who are straight out of Tolkein and really aren't at all nice. The hoofs work protection on multiple levels, ridding the Lots of Orc bands who dare to test the boundaries of Ul-wundulas, as well as in the more racketeering sense, providing assistance in

exchange for cash to businesses such as Sancho's oft-visited local brothel. An unfortunate murder at said establishment throws Jackal head first into the kind of world-threatening plots of which he'd been blissfully unaware.

So I'm going to get the ranting out of the way first because if you can't get through this paragraph, the rest of the review won't matter, and this book is definitely not for you. It is, as so many others have mentioned, the sheer amount of (unnecessary) sexual commentary and action. It reads like a teen boy's wet dream and while there are going to be some who love it, there are also going to be some people offended by all the cobs and cunny, and I just found it tiresome. Perhaps it's supposed to be earthy, with the half-orcs rutting like pigs (or hogs), but it repeatedly takes you out of the story. Whatever is occurring, and I mean WHATEVER, it gets interrupted by seemingly overwhelming thoughts about having sex or actually having sex or thinking about this woman or that woman or swapping derogatory comments about dicks and/or women. I'm pretty convinced Jonathan French is obsessed with his own anatomy as he can get a dick into any scene, often more than once, and good for him, but some of us occasionally need a bit of a break. Those without dicks, otherwise called 'female characters', are mothers, whores, rape victims, or rare one-of-a-kind individuals who get to play in the male arena by being exactly like men. It's fair to say that female empowerment is pretty limited, though the book's finale offers some positive avenues for the next offering.

Despite this, it's worth reading because it's fun. And because around 75% in, French stops whipping cocks out and writes some of the most exciting fantasy around. Under the light of the Betrayer Moon blood-crazed Centaurs descend towards Strava, a town Jackal is sworn to protect, an oath exchanged for the healing that saved his life. The brutal battle that follows is tightly written, tense and exhilarating in equal measure, and represents only the beginning of connected action sequences that hid hard right to the end. It's this point when the author's narrative feints become proper shocks, taking you in directions you never saw coming. This is especially the case with Jackal himself. Suffice it to say that at the beginning, he is far from as cunning as his moniker suggests, except perhaps in the midst of battle where his careless confidence looks like bravery- when it works, of course. He develops as an individual as his understanding of the world around him evolves- his initial shallow thinking leads him into situations where knowledge is forced upon him, clashing with what he believed was true. Each time he has to consider new information, motivations or consequences, he genuinely learns, and as a result, finally becomes the kind of leader he already thought himself to be.

Whatever the chatter says, this definitely isn't grimdark. Just because it has violence and bad language doesn't make it so, and if anything, Jackal is more of a classic hero. He saves people, and is saved in turn by his friends and allies. The relationship between him and his hoof is epitomised by close friendships, loyalty, and a striving to do what's best for the group. They care about their hogs, they care each other, with wonderfully developed friendships like the one between Jackal and Oats that is genuinely moving as well as funny, and they even care about the frails, the humans with whom they hardly have a positive relationship. Despite the backstabbing and political machinations that underlie the main plot, the overarching themes are of brotherhood, compassion, connections over differences, and faithfulness. It would have been much easier to take the novel down the darker path, but it's the emotion of it that raises it above the bar, giving the reader a group to root for, to laugh with, and to love. I can't wait for the rest of the journey, just a little less of the cob and quim, if you please.

ARC via Netgalley

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## Emma says

Live in the saddle  
Die on the hog!

Kerching! This is the fantasy payload! All the stars for this highly original, foul mouthed story! I was surprised by various twists and turns in the plot. I loved the world of half-orcs, orcs (thicks), centaurs (horse-cocks) , elves, halflings, humans (frails), magicians and sludge demons- yes you read correctly- sludge! I loved the hogs that the Grey Bastards ride. I loved the main characters Jackal, Oats and Fetching. The pace is fast, the action is varied- the world promises details and history yet to be told. Plenty of room for sequels.

This is everything fantasy should be! The last 20% was so exciting.  
Recommended!

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## Mary ~Ravager of Tomes~ says

### Actual Rating: 4.5 Stars

The Grey Bastards is a **wild, gritty romp** across the unforgiving lands of orcs, centaurs, and elves. Our main character, Jackal, is amongst the "hoofs" of half orcs that prowl the borderlands, unofficially tasked with protecting the human kingdom of Hispartha from outside threats.

Their mantra: *"Live in the saddle. Die on the hog."*

The Grey Bastards first crossed my radar as the winner of Mark Lawrence's 2016 Self Published Fantasy Blog Off Competition. It has since been picked up by Crown Publishing, which is a subsidiary of Random House.

Having judged in SPFBO 2017, I have *no trouble* at all seeing how this book was a standout submission that ended up taking home the prize when the dust settled.

From the very first page, this story **hits the ground running & doesn't let up**. It's savage, full of off-color language & abounding with jokes about male genitalia.

Vulgarity to this degree can be a fine line to walk, as I feel it can easily turn into overkill. When I get the notion a book's primary goal is to shock its audience instead of tell an interesting story, I can't help but disengage.

**I'm happy to report this is not at all the case with The Grey Bastards.**

Any foulness or obscenity ends up serving the novel's **dark & hilarious tone**, blending seamlessly with author Jonathan French's assorted characterizations.

Even with such crude subject matter, the writing style is **classic & smooth**. From believable, diverse fight scenes to fantastic, lush descriptions to distinct & believable dialogue, French's writing **reads like the perfectly spiced dish with all the right ingredients**.

Specifically, I really enjoy how scenes are crafted to **highlight tension & create anticipation**. At times I felt myself flying through the pages, desperate to see how the action would unfold. I had to consciously stop myself from flipping ahead to the end of each chapter!

The plot of this one certainly didn't develop in the way I expected, & it was a **refreshing feeling** to be caught off guard. I've read quite a lot of Fantasy & that usually means noticing certain common patterns. But I was constantly guessing about who to trust, what would happen, and whose intentions were pure vs. whose weren't.

That unpredictable element makes for an exciting experience, **regardless of whether you're a new or experienced Fantasy reader**.

This is a super entertaining first novel in the *Lot Lands* series & I can't wait to see what more is in store. I consider myself someone who is rather hesitant when it comes to Grimdark Fantasy, but I'm here to tell you **this one is worth giving a shot!**

*This review and other reviews of mine can be found on Book Nest!*

*\*\*\*I received a copy of *The Grey Bastards* from the publisher in exchange for an honest review. Special thank you to Jonathan French & Crown Publishing for this opportunity!\*\*\**

**Publication Date: June 19th, 2018**

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### **J.L. Sutton says**

Jonathan French's *The Grey Bastards* is an entertaining, immersive and page-turning adventure! Our heroes are crass, foul-mouthed and brave. This is what you might expect from a half orc, but we don't generally see half orcs (or 'monsters' of any sort) as our heroes. And not half orcs who ride into battle mounted on pigs! Their motto, "Live in the Saddle. Die on the Hog" resonates through the book. In the context of the world French has created, this all makes sense and as protectors of a buffer zone no one else much wants, our half orcs are compelling. Moreover, their society and their codes aren't just interesting asides. They're integral to how the story progresses. Terrific writing, great pacing, and memorable heroes!

I received a copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

4.25 to 4.5 stars.

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### **C.T. Phipps says**

"Live in the saddle, die on the hog."

THE GREY BASTARDS have been on my list of things to review for quite some time but I've been distracted a lot from my reading due to a tidal wave of other good books. Still, I never lost my desire to read about half-orc calvary fighting against full-blooded orcs along the borderlands. The excellent art on its front

intrigued me as well. Which goes to show you you can judge a book by its cover.

The premise, as mentioned, is half-orcs are the unloved former slaves of humanity who have been bequeathed the wretched badlands between their territory (Hispathia) and full-blooded orcs (called "thicks"). The half-orcs, who live in nomadic clans called hooves, take pride in their role as humanity's defenders. Jackal is a prostitute-loving young warrior who kills a human nobleman at the start of the book and, after hooking up with a mute elf and a obese half-orc wizard, finds himself neck deep in a conspiracy against the crown.

Jackal is a great protagonist as he has qualities which are rare in fantasy heroes. Specifically, Jackal is easily fooled and aggressively ignorant. I don't mean to say he's drooling imbecile but he's deeply unobservant and takes virtually every character by their word or his own cultural prejudices. Given orcs have a mythology that exalts them and looks down on everyone else, it means his worldview is both believable for him to have as well as incredibly skewed. He's easily taken in by anyone who lies to him (and a lot of characters do).

This adds a level to the narrative as every scene is told from his perspective but the reader is often left to make their own judgements which may or may not disagree with Jackal's own. As far as Jackal is concerned: humanity only exists because of the small orc clans on the border, half-orcs are all honorable warriors, women are to be dismissed (except for his closest friend), gods are for fools, halflings are the biggest fools of them all, elves are purity-obsessed psychopaths, magic is inferior to swordsmanship, and thicks are to be exterminated to the last. Needless to say, his views take a few lumps along the wall.

Part of what makes the Stark family entertaining protagonists in A Song of Ice and Fire is, they, too, are deeply conservative "honorable" warriors who were very often ignorant because of their worldview. Jackal's worldview is a bit less noble, especially as he and his brothers are constantly spewing anachronistic curses and slang (particularly against women). The narrative doesn't agree with Jackal or his fellows as they end up in a lot of trouble because of their beliefs.

Still, if the "c-word", "f-word", or "quim" bothers you then be forewarned. Rape is also implied and shown to be (off camera) how the vast majority of half-orcs are created. Local women may lie with half-orcs but regular orcs only propagate through war crimes. Half-orcs, themselves, are sterile and I think that was missed opportunity there. The Grey Bastards "hoof" is homophobic but not aggressively so as they're more put-off by bisexual newcomer "Crafty" than angered.

Despite this, or perhaps in part because, The Grey Bastards is an intelligently-written fantasy drama about warrior cultures and their traditions. A lot of what Jackal believes is the product of his elders feeling them a line of hog-poo in order to make them proud of who they are as well as cover up past sins. When Jackal shows compassion to the women around him, very often he unwittingly condescends to them with his friend Fetch irritated by his actions more than pleased. Indeed, when Fetch backpedals on an action she took earlier in the book, I felt it was dishonest as I fully understood why she "betrayed" Jackal.

Jonathan French has created a very evocative world which I "believed" in. Part of what drew me to grimdark was the presentation of fantasy worlds which were ugly, grimy, and sweat-filled places where you could believe people lived. That certainly was the case in his setting and all of the nasty behavior on display made it feel like actual soldiers and warrior culture (with all the problems thereof) versus the theme park version where everyone is well-behaved. As one history teacher of mine put it, "Chivalry and honor were primarily covers for the fact knights were killers-for-hire."

Are there places I think the book could have benefited from some revision? I think so. I would have loved

the perspective of full-blooded orcs on their halfbreed offspring. Humans are complete garbage in this book so I'm not sure why the half-orcs feel defending them is worthwhile. I also found Fetch's characterization a bit unbelievable and preferred her when she was actively hostile to Jackal rather than his secret supporter. Oh well, maybe next book.

In conclusion, I strongly recommend this book and while it's presently out-of-print, it'll be returning to in a few months. It's definitely a book which earns its grimdark status, though, and is more *The Hound and Bronn* than *Ser Barriston Semly*. I'm very glad to have gotten a chance to read the original version and believe this is the kind of book which deserved to be re-released.

9/10

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## **James Tivendale says**

I received an advanced reader copy of *The Grey Bastards* in exchange for an honest review. Thank you to Orbit Books and Jonathan French.

In French's debut release, readers follow Jackal, an attractive half-orc who is a key member of his gang which is known here as a hoof. The hoof is called *The Grey Bastards* and they operate in similar fashion to how a biker gang might, offering protection to local businesses, riding around their turf, and getting into skirmishes with rival factions but instead of motorcycles, they travel on giant and vicious war hogs. The war hogs are more than just vehicles, they are closer to pets and are incredibly loyal and a huge asset in any conflicts with fully fledged Orcs. One of the hogs is lovingly called Ugfuck!

Alongside Jackal, the standout additions are - Oats, a giant thrice-blood who is Jackal's banter-buddy and loyal best friend, and Fetch, who is fierce, amazing with a bow and arrow and also the only female member of the hoof. The camaraderie and banter of the Bastards' is top quality throughout and reminiscent of the crews in *Malazan* or *The First Law*. Orcs are often presented in fantasy as brainless brutes but with half human emotions thrown into the equation as presented here they often extremely likable and relatable. The majority of the characters are fully fleshed out and each have detailed motives and opinions. Another notable mention goes to the Half-Orc Wizard Crafty.

The worldbuilding is excellent throughout with the environments and its inhabitants brimming with details and intricacies. Although *The Grey Bastards* includes a fair amount of fantasy tropes including wizards, elves, orcs, halflings - it is crafted in such a way that combined everything feels new, fresh, exciting and original. There are many different nations, races, and factions each with their own religions, hierarchies, and histories which are all well-crafted, however, I still believe we've only just touched the surface of what *The Lot Lands* trilogy has to offer. A moment that stood out as a highlight to me was when information regarding the half-orcs' pasts and how they came to be placed where they are in this worlds current hierarchy was revealed.

This novel is filthy, dirty, and gritty but in the best possible way. It is dark fantasy done right. *The Grey Bastards* is extremely adult in nature featuring certain moments of vulgarity and also the swearing count is high from the very first page. There are a plethora of standout scenes dotted throughout this sharp brilliant debut. Ambushes, swamp-battles, and an assault made by beasts straight out of mythology are but a handful of occasions that spring to mind. There are many exquisite and dramatic confrontations but a scene that stood out the most to me was a conflict battled with wits and words rather than javelins and swords. The character



dialogue throughout is unbelievable tight, not just for a debut novel but for any top fantasy novel. In *The Grey Bastards*, just when I thought I knew what was going to happen next I was blindsided and then the chaos, twists, drama, and unpredictability gave me an Orc-powered punch to the gut! French has composed a stunning opening chapter to his trilogy that is well worthy of the hype that has been garnering. If you have been living under a rock and haven't heard about this book yet then I'd definitely recommend putting it on your radar.

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### **Montzalee Wittmann says**

*The Grey Bastards* (*The Lot Lands* #1) by Jonathan French is a powerful, deeply moving, gritty, emotionally powered book that thrilled my every being! I felt I needed to shower off sweat, blood, hog hair, and grime when finished with this amazing book! It was the best book I have read in soooo long!

So rich in world building in every facet..just so detailed yet told without pointing out details, if that makes sense. The multiple species and the differences in their life habits and habitats.. WOW. Elven, Orcs, Half-Orcs, and Wizards, and of course humans. The story is about a group of Half-Orcs and their group called the Grey Bastards. The history of these, and all the fighting Half-Orcs, is so emotionally charged and thrilling...I wanted to get on a hog too!

After reading this book I tried to read several books and I couldn't! I felt I was reading children's books compared to *The Grey Bastards*. This book spoiled me! I tried a cozy mystery, a fun fantasy, and a few others and decided I shouldn't read for a day or two and then read. I had to just let the story marinate in my head and then read something else. I am still thinking about the book a few days later. I finally picked up another book but nothing compares to this. I bought his other books now. I hope it lasts until book two comes out! I am addicted to his rich, gritty, wild but wonderful writing!

I requested this book and the review is voluntary. I received an arc copy of the new edition.

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### **Jeffrey Keeten says**

**"The first Grey Bastards were potters, named not for our skin, but from the dry clay which covered it. We knew fire and heat and mud, until the day we rode into battle on the backs of hogs that knew only the yoke of a supply wagon. That day we became warriors. We were carving a path to freedom, though we didn't know it then. Carving it with swords fallen from the hands of our fleeing masters, carving it through the flesh of our orc fathers."**

The Lot Lands, a Mad Max zone that lies between the Orcs (Thicks), the Centaurs (Horse-Cocks), and the Frails (humans), is defended by bands of Half Orcs who are the only thing standing between the Frails and imminent invasion of Thicks. In the last great Orc invasion, the Half Orcs were pulled from the mines, the fields, the blazing kitchens, and given swords and war hogs. They threw them into the front lines, but the Frails knew that their slaves were not going to be enough.

**They developed a plague.**

**They purposely infected hundreds.**

Only a handful of Thrice Orcs survived the infection, but these contagious survivors, on the verge of madness from the disease, became the deadliest weapon against the Thicks. They were the smallpox

contaminated blankets to end the war.

By the time Jackal joins the Hoof along with his best friends Oats and Fetching, the times have changed. All but one of the contagious Orcs have died, many by madness induced suicide, but one still remains.

### **The Claymaster.**

He is the leader of the Grey Bastards, and needless to say, for a young, aggressive, impatient Half Orc like Jackal, he has had enough of the addled directions of the pus dripping, mummy wrapped, corpse asshole smelling presence of his leader.

### **He is ready to make his move.**

The Half Orcs are all bastards. They are the result of rape between a Thick and a Frail. No Human woman in her right mind would bed down with an Orc by consent. They are ugly, cruel, dimwitted creatures that make even a caveman look like a civilized man of elegant culture. Once born, these half breeds are sent to the Lot Lands where the very best of them will be molded into warriors to join up and become sworn members of one of the bands of Lot Lands protectors. Even though the Frails need them, they still look down upon the Half Orcs as an abomination.

Naturally, there is a lot of rage lurking in the hearts of those less than a generation away from being raised under the lash.

Jackal has only a limited understanding of the history of The Lot Lands. He has been too worried about surviving and achieving his most precious goal, to become a member of The Grey Bastards. The moment life seems to be on a trajectory upward, something usually explodes out of nowhere to send everything sideways. A shit storm of unfortunate events has Jackal dealing with a series of crisis situations, each one more dire than the last. Jackal finds himself outlawed from all that he loves, including his friends.

His friend Fetching is one of the most interesting characters in the book. She is the only woman to be allowed to join The Grey Bastards, and frankly she only makes it because Jackal and Oats insist on her capabilities. It doesn't take long for her to prove to everyone that she more than deserves a position with the band. She has a talent for killing. She is gorgeous, which keeps all the boys in a steady state of arousal. She is frustrated that being good enough to be a Grey Bastard is not enough without the help of Jackal. I think a lot of women can certainly identify with that frustration.

### **She will prove pivotal as the final chess pieces move on the board.**

Betrayal, conniving sorcerers, whorehouse treachery, magical arm bones, swamp land slugs the size of refrigerators, conspiracies, madness, moon mad Centaurs, halfling zealots, kidnapped elves, and let's not forget a 40,000 member Orc army about to descend on The Lot Lands. The fight scenes are incredibly vivid. What's not to love? This is an absolutely filthy book with absolutely nothing held sacred, so if you are PC sensitive, you might keep that in mind when considering reading this book. **Half Orcs will be Half Orcs.** There is never a good spot to stop reading this book. The plot is so riveting I was compelled to read large chunks every time I curled up next to a war hog and immersed myself in the blistering, unforgiving Lot Lands. If you enjoy Mark Lawrence's books, you will be thrilled to find another writer who will add some pulpy, blood spilling, sword swaggering, whore shagging, Orc splitting goodness to your reading entertainment.

## **Live in the saddle. DIE ON THE HOG.**

I want to thank Kathleen Quinlan and Crown Publishing for sending me a free copy in exchange for a gore splattered, honest review.

If you wish to see more of my most recent book and movie reviews, visit <http://www.jeffreykeeten.com>  
I also have a Facebook blogger page at: <https://www.facebook.com/JeffreyKeeten>

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### **TS Chan says**

**4.5 stars.**

**The Grey Bastards is a worthy winner of last year's Self-Published Fantasy Blog Off.** An original tale of valour, loyalty and friendship told from the perspective of half-breeds between humans and orcs, it was well-written and entertaining with loads of vulgarity.

I am not entirely convinced that this book should be termed grimdark though. Sure, there was a lot of crude language in this story that is set mainly within the forsaken badlands of Ul-wundulas, the home of the half-orcs whose society and culture are largely misogynistic. However, aside from a few less savoury personalities, the main protagonist and key supporting characters do have strong moral values. While this in itself does not define the sub-genre, the numerous fighting and action scenes were also far from being gory and visceral.

The story follows the third person perspective of Jackal, a young, ambitious and sometimes carelessly confident member of the Grey Bastards, who had set his eyes on removing and replacing its current leader, the Claymaster. A leader whom Jackal viewed as being past his time and had not been making the right decisions for the future of the hoof, one of the brotherhoods that patrolled Ul-wundulas against the threat of orcs. The narrative started off on a relatively small scale and the worldbuilding gradually revealed accordingly. Instead of bombarding the reader with loads of info-dumping, the author managed to weave the exposition of the world The Grey Bastards was set in, its history and inhabitants, throughout the progressive unveiling of the plot. What this achieved was an even pacing of the story with just some acceptable meandering at times into the history of the Ul-wundulas and Hispartha, wherein the humans reside.

This land was forgiven and forgiving, resting imperiously above its oft-raped sister. Ul-wundulas had no more tears, for itself or its people, it was used up, and bitter with the knowledge that its hideous, sun-scorched surface would not save it from another assault. Yet noble Hispartha was flush and unspoiled, content to ignore the ravages of time and invasion so long as the dusty thighs of Ul-wundulas lay spread between it and Dhar'gest.

Oppression of the minority is hardly something new. The originality of this tale came from the approach that author took to integrate this theme from the point-of-view of a traditionally less-favoured race, albeit these are only half-orcs, and not their full-blooded savage relatives. Aside from humans and orcs being inhabitants of this world, we also have elves which retain the fantasy convention of mystery, grace and beauty, a dwarven-like race called halflings and a reclusive and violent version of centaurs (which are known by a most unflattering but hilariously vulgar name among the half-orcs).

The character development of Jackal was executed skilfully as the sequence of ever-escalating problems forces his maturity. His relationships with his best friends, Oats and Fetching, made the story more compelling. However, my absolute favourite aspect of the characterization of these half-breeds was the connection between the riders and their battle hogs, more affectionately known as barbarians. For their seemingly brutish facade, these riders truly love their hogs; the loyalty and care demonstrated was truly heart-warming. In fact, Jackal's Hearth and Oats' Ugfuck (guess what it is short for) are two of my favourite characters in this book - swine with personalities. The supporting characters were also fully fleshed-out, each and every one of them have distinct personalities which are relatable and realistic.

The antagonists were also well-portrayed with believable motivations that I can empathise with. In fact, it is difficult to tag anyone as a villain per se. Even the creepy Sludge Man was not exactly evil in its truest sense. Speaking of which, I really love the worldbuilding element of a skin-crawling eerie bog called the Old Maiden protected by inky sludge creatures and its master; a land and its occupants transformed through the corruption of conflicting magical energies.

Seek potent allies and you shall find the most grievous of your future foes.

Plot-wise, *The Grey Bastards* deviates from standard predictable fantasy fare. Allies and foes are not immediately identifiable. And just when I thought I might have an inkling of what might transpire, I was proven wrong most of the times. Something that I really liked in my books as it kept me on my toes and the pages turning. The last quarter of the book was hard to put down with a really exciting climax. To cap it all off, the ending wrapped up the plot nicely, leaving just enough of a teaser for the next book.

The prose was fluid with occasional purple tendencies, which did feel a bit out of place at times. The vulgarity was off the charts. While it was highly entertaining and I admit to laughing out loud many times, there were a few instances of rather unpleasant sexist remarks. As such, as much as I enjoyed reading this remarkable story, I will not readily recommend this to anyone who may be offended by the language in this book. However, if you live for an entertaining read filled with filthy dialogue, as well as a well-plotted story with heart and great action scenes, *The Grey Bastards* will be right up your alley.

The self-published edition of *The Grey Bastards* has been removed from sale as of 1st June and will be re-released in 2018 with a major publishing house. Hopefully, this will address the intermittent typos throughout the narrative. It will also be most useful to have a cartographer create a map; a must-have in fantasy books set in different worlds.

*This review can also be found at Booknest*

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## **Niki Hawkes - The Obsessive Bookseller says**

What a fun, irreverent read!

I've had *Grey Bastards* on my radar since before it was picked up by a publisher (I went to buy it and had a freak out because it wasn't available anymore). Lately I've been really enjoying this type of story – where the characters don't take themselves too seriously and even manage to give me a few laughs while they're doing awful things. It falls perfectly in line with that cheeky dark fantasy I've been craving.

Grey Bastards had a unique concept that piqued my interest right away – human/orc half breeds on the edge of society who protect the lands from full-blood orcs. The tale wasn't terribly complex, but it did surprise me how many good character dynamics and twists it provided. My favorite scenes were anything to do with the conflicts within the council of the Grey Bastards, which I feel took a decent story to the next level.

The characters are easily the selling point of this book (with overall concept a close second). This is going to sound an odd comparison, but it reminded me a bit of the dynamics between characters and their handling of certain situations in *Firefly*. You know what I mean – the same irreverent humor and causal ass-kicking that made that series so memorable. Obviously all context is different, but chances are if you liked the “spirit” of that show, you'll enjoy this book.

Series status: where the hell is the second one? I need it yesterday.

Recommendations: if you like cheeky fantasy with a fun plot and loads of debauchery, look no further! Grey Bastards is easily one of the most entertaining books I've read this year and I think a lot of fantasy readers will have fun with it (if they haven't already).

Via The Obsessive Bookseller at [www.NikiHawkes.com](http://www.NikiHawkes.com)

Other books you might like:

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## **Samir says**

19.06.2018. Update:

The Grey Bastards ride today!

And they have a new cover:

Too bad the original cover didn't stick. I'm not saying this one is bad but the original was badass AF.

Actual rating: 4.5 stars.

I'm sure a lot of you are aware of the following fact but I'll remind you anyway; *The Grey Bastards* is the winner of the SPFBO 2016 and the worthy winner it sure is!

I was lucky to grab the indie version before the book and its forthcoming sequel were sold to Penguin/Random House, because as of June 1, 2017, the book was no longer available for purchase.

The new edition will be released in 2018, and I can only hope it will have a cover that will rival the badassery of this one:

As you can see from the picture above, the stars of this book are half-orcs which was an instant like for me

because I wanted to read a fantasy book where the humans aren't in the spotlight for a very long time. However, the human characters are present as well as are orcs, elves, halflings and centaurs so if you look for diversity in your fantasy, look no further.

As I mentioned, the half-orcs are the main characters and if you have ever encountered those kinds of characters in video games or other books, I'm sure you've noticed they don't recite poetry in their free time and when they speak, they certainly don't sound like this: "*I'll beat thee, but I would infect my hands.*" or "*The rankest compound of villainous smell that ever offended nostril.*" What I'm trying to say here is; there is a lot of swearing and vulgar vocabulary present so if you're triggered by that and if you cringe when various synonyms of vagina and penis are mentioned, then this isn't a book for you.

It's hard to say something about the story or the characters without revealing the crucial plot twists so I'll refrain myself from doing so. I will however compare this book to a TV show which was in my mind the entire time I spent reading this and the name of the show is *Sons of Anarchy*. I was a big fan of SoA with the exception of the last two seasons which were crap and if you've never heard about it, it was a show about biker gangs. This book is basically about biker gangs only they are called hoofs and they ride hogs. Just like in the show, the characters are grey (pun intended), there are scheming, betrayals and past events which are affecting the present story and character's actions. If you were a fan of the show or if you're a fan of biker gang culture in general, I think you'll enjoy reading this adventure.

The strongest point of the book for me was the pacing. There is no slow build up here; the action starts from the get go and pulls you right away. The story just keeps on moving fast forward until the end and you'll have trouble putting this book down. The action scenes are gripping, violent and graphic so if you enjoy when blood is spurting and limbs are flying, you're guaranteed to have a great time.

To sum up, I had a blast! The characters were charismatic, the story was compelling and exciting, and both were interwoven in the rich and vivid world of the Lot Lands. I can't wait to be back in this world and will eagerly await news of the sequel.

**"Live in the saddle. Die on the hog."**

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**Mark Lawrence says**

**COMES OUT TODAY!**

This book got a major publishing deal during the home run of the SPFBO contest. It has the highest score recorded in the 3 years of the contest out of nearly 1,000 books entered.

<http://mark---lawrence.blogspot.com/2...>

So this is without question the filthiest fantasy book I've read, beating the former title holder *The Grim Company* by a factor of ten ... possibly a hundred.

The book has elements in common with Jeff Salyard's *Scourge of the Betrayer* in that much of it concerns the interplay between a small band of fighters.

But really if you've seen Sons of Anarchy on TV, then that's the perfect parallel. This is a book about a biker gang. Only the bikers are half orcs. And the hogs they ride are actual hogs. The sort that make bacon.

The story starts, and for a long time remains, very small scale. The focus is on the fewer than a dozen half-orcs in our ~~biker gang~~ hoof, and on their squabbles with small numbers of fairly low key antagonists. Some posturing leads to a fight, the fight to a death, the death to the hoof having to pay for prostitutes rather than get freebies ... it's entertaining but not epic.

We discover that the half-orcs have as neighbours all the D&D races with the notable absence of dwarves. But we do see elves, centaurs, orcs, and halflings. If I had been told this in advance it would have put me off reading the book, but fortunately I wasn't and French's take on these guys is sufficiently novel &/or grimy to stop it feeling like discount Tolkien.

Anyway, the plot spirals slowly outwards and turns out to be a complex thing of many moving parts that eventually encompasses two nations and a vast square mileage. The heart of it all though is always the hoof and the tight but complex friendships therein.

If you look past the towering mounds of vulgarity this is actually a book with a lot of heart and no real evidence of the morally grey &/or nihilistic slant often called grimdark. The main half-orc characters are loyal, good-hearted, and as inclined to do the right thing as many a fairy-tale prince, only with bags of very crude sexual innuendo (no, in *your* endo #Scrubs #TheTodd).

It's a well written book that captures characters well, contains great description, and keeps the pace varied but entertaining. I spotted a grand total of 2 typos and a dozen or so lines I would have scrubbed the purple out of, which now that the book has a major publishing deal should mean that the editors have very little work to do.

I really enjoyed this book. It has charisma. It's very entertaining, it builds to an exciting finish, and left me ready for more.

You know you want to read about a dozen orcs on giant pigs charging into massed centaurs while screaming insults and waving their genitals. Or ... you might not know it ... and be surprised to find that you like it!

+++++

Out of the 300 fantasy books that entered my self-published fantasy book contest #SPFBO for 2016 this book was the runaway winner!!

Check out the contest results here, there are other great titles clamoring for your attention.

<http://mark---lawrence.blogspot.co.uk...>

Join my 3-emails-a-year newsletter #prizes

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## Petrik says

4.5/5 stars

**Filthily fantastic. I never cared about pigs this much, and I'm not talking about bacon.**

The Grey Bastards was the champion of SPFBFO (Self-Published Fantasy Blog-Off) 2016 and in my opinion, it totally deserved the winning crown and all the praises. This review is based on my experience of reading the indie edition which I stumbled upon in my good friend's shared kindle library. For those of you who don't know, the self-published edition of The Grey Bastards has been removed from sale as of June 1st, 2017, and will be re-released by Penguin Random House on June 19th, 2018. I hope the cover will remain the same because man, that's Raymond Swanland's art! But enough about that, let's get on with the review of the book.

The Grey Bastards can be described as Lord of the Rings meet Sons of Anarchy. Instead of motorcycles, the characters rode hogs (called barbarians), and instead of humans, the characters are half-orcs. The book can be filthy to read at times, with a lot of sex jokes, foul language, and plenty of violence. Out of all the books I've read, The Grey Bastard's filth level is comparable only to Fletcher's Manifest Delusions. Simply to say, Jonathan French pulls no punches and if that suits your reading preferences, then this is the book for you.

The Grey Bastards has plenty of great action scenes, but like all the books I've read, characters' personality and development is the most important factor. The plot revolves around Jackal, a cunning and ambitious half-orc who is one of the members of the Grey Bastards. The Grey Bastards is a brotherhood of half-orcs who patrol their country to make sure their lands are safe from full-blooded orcs. The main highlights of the book for me were definitely Jack's relationship with his two best friends, Oats and Fetching. It was truly a delightful experience to read their crude banter and well-written relationship development. However, it's not only the main characters that were great; the side characters received proper backgrounds and the relationship between the hogs and their riders was a huge plus for me.

Live in the saddle. Die on the hog.

I am a huge lover of human-animal friendships in literature. Fantasy books usually have the bond between human and dogs/wolves to satisfy their readers, but this was something totally different. It's the first time I've read about a bond between a half-orc and a hog and I really think it was refreshing. Jackal's and Oats's hog, named Hearth and Ugfuck, managed to steal the spotlights in every scene with their appearance.

The world-building is also intricate; the Lot Lands has a rich history and although it's not really grand yet in scope, I loved reading this take on half-orcs protecting humans rather than the usual trope of humans protecting themselves from those with orc blood.

Although the book wasn't an immersive experience for me at first—mostly because I had to get used to French's prose—everything changed when the novel neared its halfway point. That was when the book



turned from okay to amazing for me. There were quite a lot of typos, however. Although they didn't distract my reading experience, I hope these will be fixed in the rerelease of the book.

I've read both the runner-up and the third place of SPFBO 2016, *The Path of Flames* and *Paternus: Rise of Gods* respectively. Both are great in their own way, but *The Grey Bastards* is slightly a superior in comparison and it totally deserved to win the crown. I look forward to the re-release of the book because I need to have this book in physical form. *The Grey Bastards* is simply an exhilarating book filled with great characters and awesome action scenes. Highly recommended.

*You can find **this** and the rest of my Adult Epic/High Fantasy & Sci-Fi reviews at **BookNest***

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## **Mogsy (MMOGC) says**

4.5 of 5 stars at The BiblioSanctum <https://bibliosanctum.com/2017/02/20/...>

I fucking loved this book. *The Grey Bastards* went down like a shot of good top-shelf tequila: warm and smooth, but with one hell of a spicy kick. If SPFBO has taught me any lessons, it's that you never know what you're going to get when you pick up a self-published novel, but many stars aligned to make this one work immensely well for me. It happened to perfectly fit my tastes, for one. With a title and cover like that, you can be sure this dark epic fantasy will have plenty of grit and violence. Throw in some breakneck pacing and a dash of that crude and vulgar brand of humor, then you've got yourself a recipe for a good time.

The story follows a half-orc named Jackal who is sworn to the *The Grey Bastards* hoof, one of the eight brotherhoods of former slaves that now live on the land known as the Lots. Shunned by humans but also hostile to the orcs, the mongrel bands are all that's left standing between the city of Hispartha and the forces that want to see it fall.

Life among the hoofs has its own trials, however. Long has Jackal wanted to challenge their warchief Claymaster for leadership of *The Grey Bastards*, but because a failed bid can mean his own death, our protagonist is prepared to wait until he has more support beyond that of his good friends, Oats and Fetch.

Still, that was before their so-called allies started turning against them, or before the Claymaster started sparing their orc enemies instead of swiftly dispatching them, and certainly before before a wily wizard named Crafty managed to weasel his way into the warchief's good graces. More and more, Jackal is noticing erratic behavior in their gnarled and plague-ridden leader, reaffirming his beliefs that the old half-orc should be deposed. The final straw finally comes in the form of an elf girl named Starling, whom Jackal rescues from a terrible fate. Vehemently disagreeing with the Claymaster on their next course of action, Jackal feels he has no choice but to throw down his ax—thus declaring his challenge and sealing his fate for the inevitable course of turmoil to come.

So yeah, I liked this book. I liked it a lot. And thing is, there isn't any one aspect of the story that I can single out and claim that I liked the most, since it was the culmination of all of its parts—and all at once—that made *The Grey Bastards* such a memorable and spectacularly good read. I enjoyed how the plot started small before snowballing to become something much bigger, and at no point did it take a step back or even pause for a breather; there was only aggressive forward motion, constantly driving forward.

I'll also admit a love for reading dark fantasy featuring raw, gritty, foul-mouthed and violence-seeking

characters—call me old softie, but I reserve a special place in my heart for these kinds of anti-heroes. However, an author can wind up with a whole cast of virtually indistinguishable characters if they're not careful, which is a common pitfall for books in this genre. Fortunately though, French manages to avoid this problem in *The Grey Bastards*, giving all his half-orc characters their own unique and individual personalities. Jackal is our main protagonist, with his lofty ambitions which can sometimes blind him to other perspectives around him. In part, this book is the story of how he finally opens his eyes to see the big picture, but the journey to get there is a tough one indeed. Lucky for Jackal, he has his friends to back him up. Oats is a thrice (so called because they are three-quarters orc, making them physically larger than their half-orc brethren) who is as loyal as they come, and rounding out the inseparable trio is Fetch, the only female in the Grey Bastards who had to fight tooth and nail for her position in the hoof. Like all friendships, the three of them have their ups and downs, but the well-developed relationships between them made these dynamics very convincing.

In terms of story, *The Grey Bastards* was a book that pulled me in straight away. It's fun and exciting, full of unexpected twists and turns, though I feel I have to warn prospective readers that this is not one for the faint of heart. If you are easily turned off by brutal graphic violence or crude and offensive language, then this is probably not for you. French pulls no punches in this vicious and no-holds-barred world full of orcs, humans, elves, halflings, and even centaurs all fighting one and another, with scenes of skirmishing and great battles punctuating the narrative every few chapters. This sets a very fast and readable pace with rich world-building that is not so much inserted as it is integrated into the story, often done in a seamless way that is in context with the events playing out on the page. This has got to be one of the most interesting and fleshed-out fantasy worlds I have ever read, and the author made it all seem so effortless.

In case you couldn't tell, I am beyond impressed with *The Grey Bastards*. In reading it I got to experience a strikingly vivid world come to life before my eyes, populated by characters who are at once wild and wonderful. Jonathan French is a fantastic writer and talented storyteller who has created a very special gem here, and the story even ends with potential for our characters to engage in more future adventures. Here's hoping Jackal and his fellow Bastards will get a sequel soon, because you can bet I'll be all over that.

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