

Between the Rivers

Harry Turtledove

Tor \$24.95

Harry Turtledove, Hugo-winning master of alternate SF, has produced a stunning new fantasy novel. Set in the early bronze age, *Between the Rivers* takes place in what is most likely the Tigris-Euphrates valley, though it is not so named in the novel. Here, early man struggles toward civilization while beset by various supernatural beings such as fever demons, devils of the waste, and gods.

The gods of Turtledove's world are active. They take part in and interfere with the everyday activities of humans. Swear an oath to your god? Be careful, he will hold you to it. Speak ill of your god, and he may hear it and punish you.

Sharur is a young merchant in the city of Gibil, which is ruled by the god Engibil. The Gibli differ from the citizens of the other cities between the rivers in that their god is less active. He rarely speaks directly through one of his subjects. Most important, he allows Kimash, a human, to rule in his place. Kimash directs the people of Gibil. He also keeps Engibil distracted with treasures and wonders and concubines. Thus, Kimash maintains his authority.

Sharur sets out on a mission of trade, selling his prized bronze weapons to people who still live in the age of copper. Sharur has always been welcome before, but now the gods of the other cities forbid trade with Sharur. The Gibli are seen as corrupters. Along with their bronze, they bring a new way of thinking. They bring self-reliance to replace god-reliance. The gods hate the Giblut and the lazy Engibil. More important, they fear the people of Gibil and their egocentrism. Sharur must find a way to renew trade, or Gibil's power will fade, and the Giblut will lose their newfound freedom.

Between the Rivers is a novel of ideas. It brings to life the possibilities suggested by Julian Jaynes in *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. There, Jaynes postulates a time in the past when egocentrism was rare and

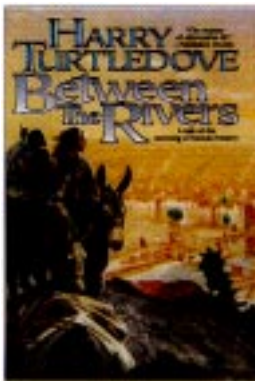
people were ruled by their gods. For instance, seeing an icon of a god of the fields might prompt a farmer in the proper care of his crops through an internal voice. Jaynes sees such interaction as a function of a little-understood area in the right brain. The story of the Tower of Babel is a metaphor for the downfall of the right brain and the ascendancy of the left brain. Too many people with too many gods gather in one place. When the gods quarrel, so do the people. Chaos ensues.

If Jaynes is correct, ancient peoples would behave as they do in *Between the Rivers*. Historically, more than one group of people have allowed themselves to be led or misled by charismatic individuals because it was easier to follow than to lead.

It is the brave and the bold who refuse to obey without reason. The people of Gibil have learned to think for themselves. They are not unique in this respect, but those in other cities, cannot break free as long their gods maintain a stranglehold on their actions and their very thoughts. Not all of the Gibli are free thinkers. Many would return to the safe times when Engibil ruled utterly, but the newly freed predominate and, by the very nature of their freedom, prevail.

Between the Rivers is not an adventure novel but one of political and theological intrigue. There are battles. There is war. There are encounters with devils and demons. There are also nattering, dusty old ancestral ghosts advising caution and adherence to the old ways, but *Between the Rivers* is primarily a book of conversations—a verbal struggle between reason and mindless obedience. It serves as a metaphor, mirroring a modern society where pressures of population and economics force people to stop thinking, driving them to hear and obey. Read *Between the Rivers* for fun or read it to think, but read it.

—PIERCE WATTERS



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Ship of Magic

Robin Hobb

Bantam \$23.95

Robin Hobb blends realistic characters and a unique setting into one of the best fantasy novels of the year. *Ship of Magic* is primarily the story of the liveship *Vivacia* and the Vesrit trading family. Liveships are made of magical wizardwood, and when three generations of the family attuned to the ship have died on her deck, the ship truly comes alive. Ephron Vesrit's early death changes the Vesrit family forever. As the newly awakened *Vivacia* tries to make sense of a strange, confusing world, the Vesrit family struggles to pay old debts and deal with their loss.

Althea Vesrit, Ephron's favored daughter, heir to his knowledge of the sea, must vie for the cap-

tainty of the *Vivacia* with her older brother-in-law. Kyle succeeds in taking control of the ship, and the family's troubles continue to mount. After Kyle foolishly tries using the liveship to transport slaves, the *Vivacia* is captured by Kennit, a pirate. Unfortunately the plot is not brought to a satisfactory conclusion. Althea, who ran away after Kyle took control of the ship, still plans to win it back. Malta, Kyle's willful daughter, is still causing the family problems. These are only the biggest of the problems still to be resolved in the story.

The book is blessedly free of cliched heroes. The characters each have their own agendas, and several of the truly likable characters come into direct conflict while pursuing their personal goals. The villains are also captivating; their actions and personalities are often offensive, but they are so well portrayed that it is impossible not to enjoy the show. The most enjoyable aspect of the characters is that they are aware of their shortcomings, but like most people, they usually act true to their nature instead of true to their ideals.

Despite its length and excellent story development, the ending of *Ship of Magic* is disappointing. Hobb makes no attempt to bring the book to a satisfactory conclusion, giving us simply a pause before the story continues in the sequel.

The ending is the only weakness in an otherwise outstanding book. *Ship of Magic* is as enjoyable a read as any fantasy novel, and I can't wait to follow the story through to a satisfactory conclusion.

—JESSE DECKER

Touched by the Gods

by Lawrence Watt-Evans

Tor

\$24.95

A vengeful wizard. An undead army. A hero of prophecy. These are the trappings of the fantasy genre; all that's missing are mythical beasts and multiple moons. Sadly, there are no mythical beasts in *Touched by the Gods*, but there are moons—more than one hundred of them. Each represents one of the gods who govern the fate of the Domdur people. In times past, the gods spoke to the Domdur through oracles, guiding them and granting them favor over the other races of the world. However, for sixteen years the oracles have been silent, leaving the Domdur to govern themselves. Without the gods to guide them, they have lost their way and left themselves vulnerable to an embittered warlord who seeks revenge for wrongs inflicted many centuries ago.

The novel tells the story of Malledd, a child born with the mark of Ba'el, the god of war. Malledd is declared as the divine champion of the Domdru—his destiny foretold by the priests of Biekedau. But Malledd has no desire to be special.

He tires of the attention, jealousy, and derision. He becomes a smith, settles down with a family, and forbids others in the village to speak of his "gifts"—his strength, his ability to work without tiring, and his rapid healing.

The novel also tells the story of Reberi Nazakri a spiteful man whose people were defeated by the god-favored Domdur many centuries ago. His hunger for vengeance is fed by an ungodly magic discovered deep within the earth. Unlike Malledd who shuns his destiny, Reberi embraces his. He learns the dark magic and uses his sorcery to raise an army comprised of disgruntled rebels and nightwalkers—animated corpses.

The conflict between the divine champion and the dark sorcerer is inevitable. The first half of the book moves slowly, as Malledd hides from the Domdur priests who seek the divine champion to protect them. Malledd's uncertainty becomes less compelling as the story develops. Fortunately, the novel introduces a number of subordinate characters subplots to compensate for a hero whose indecisiveness grows increasingly tiresome. In Seidabar, the Domdur capital, Prince Granzer and the ruling council contend with an ailing empress, Nazakri's spies, and the coming of the nightwalkers. As Seidabar builds its army, the search for the divine champion continues.

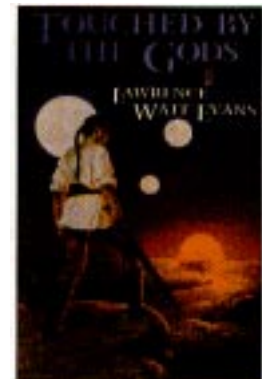
The story both fails and succeeds. Malledd is a disappointing hero, and Reberi is a cardboard villain. Most of the supporting characters—in particular, the female characters—are shallow. Among the exceptions are Malledd's friend Onnell who, despite not being the divine champion, fights valiantly against the nightwalker onslaught, and Lord Duzon, a noble fop who wants the prestige of being the divine champion and cannot fathom why Malledd would reject his god-given gift.

The story positively shines in the last third of the novel, when Malledd meets one of the gods and finally accepts his destiny and joins the Domdur vanguard in its struggle to keep the nightwalkers from advancing to Seidabar. The battle between Reberi's tireless nightwalkers and the Domdur vanguard is chilling, memorable, and expertly narrated. There are moments when Malledd proves he's more than just a skilled fighter—moments that elevate the story above expectation. Unfortunately, the sword-and-sorcery climax relies too heavily on fantasy cliché—I won't give away the book's major "revelation," but let's just say it involves an eclipse. Nevertheless, *Touched by the Gods* resolves itself fittingly, affording the hero a chance to fulfill his destiny and rise above mortal men.

—CHRIS PERKINS



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