



The Heroes

Joe Abercrombie

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They say Black Dow's killed more men than winter, and clawed his way to the throne of the North up a hill of skulls. The King of the Union, ever a jealous neighbor, is not about to stand smiling by while he claws his way any higher. The orders have been given and the armies are toiling through the northern mud. Thousands of men are converging on a forgotten ring of stones, on a worthless hill, in an unimportant valley, and they've brought a lot of sharpened metal with them.

THE HEROES

For glory, for victory, for staying alive.

The Heroes Details

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Evgeny says

The plot can be described in a couple of sentences, literally. This is about a 3-day battle between the Union forces (civilized bureaucratic society) and Northern people (barbarians), and also about the events right before it and its aftermath. This is probably the most spoiler-free plot description I ever wrote, by the way.

Joe Abercrombie is the undisputed king when it comes to modern grimdark fantasy. Yes, I have read Malazan epic. Yes, I still stand by what I said in the beginning of the paragraph. I even admit that I do not like his first standalone in The First Law universe - Best Served Cold that much. My opinion on him is still the same.

Ask any Abercrombie's fan about his main strength and the first answer you get from anybody would be characters. I was fairly skeptical about these when I started to read as in the first trilogy he had three books to develop them while here he had to do it in just a third of space. My fears were somewhat justified as there are some two-dimensional people which is unavoidable given their number and relatively (for a fantasy book) small page count, but there are some really great people here. My personal favorite is Craw followed closely by Calder. These are just two of quite a few others. This is the first time I fully realized that Bayaz is (view spoiler). On the negative side, Black Dow is a pale shadow of himself in the first trilogy.

I would also like to point out this is probably the first time somebody perfectly conveyed the mood of simple soldiers right before the battle. I found myself vividly imagining staying in the line of soldiers waiting for the attack to come - several times. I do not mean the glorious part; I mean gritty brutal all-out attack.

The final rating is **4.5 stars** with half of a star lost due to some minor annoyances; I already mentioned one of them - some of the returning characters do not feel like themselves. For anybody unfamiliar with the series and curious about it, read it in publication order or you will get spoilers and will be confused.

This review is a copy/paste of my LeafMarks one: <https://www.leafmarks.com/lm/#/users/...>

Eon ?Windrunner? says

War in all its misery. Did you expect anything else? This book is as Abercrombie as it gets. As The Bloody Nine would say, you have to be realistic about these things.

The story takes place a couple of years after the first law trilogy (read it first!) and centers mostly around a three day battle between the Union & the North. There are quite a few of the characters we have come to love present, but sadly, also a few key ones that have gone back to the mud in between books. I mention them only because I was really hoping to read more of them. Abercrombie has a knack for writing characters that you just want to keep on reading about. In some of his other books I have found the plot to sometimes stall a bit, but the strength of the personalities he has captured on the paper always pulls him through and thoroughly makes up for any shortcomings in the story-line. The plot did not need any assistance this time round though.

I must mention the excellent sequences where multiple POV characters are used in battle, with a change in the POV triggered by death, and POV changing from the victim to the perpetrator each time. Superb.

The only thing I disliked was the death of my fav character in this book. Oh, and also the tying up of the different characters story-lines which seemed slow after the huge final battle. Necessary, but slow.

Orient says

I was eager to put my eyes on “The Heroes”, because I was still high from Best Served Cold and I didn’t read Mr. Abercrombie’s book for some time. The fact is that “The Heroes” decreased my fangirlism a little bit. But let’s start from the tasty bits.

Joe Abercrombie always has smth tasty in his books. “The Heroes” is a military fantasy novel, which offered me a rather unique and interesting glimpse into war and warriors who are annoyed with fighting a war. I always love to find the so called Abercrombie’s realism in his characters, action and the gritty fight. The characters feel real. They aren’t perfect (in a good way) and they have emotions. Their manners, speech and thoughts allowed me to imagine them better. I could live and feel their life in my thoughts. The battle episodes were like a good, disgusting, bloody and gritty movie. Quite a lovely stuff :D

Moreover, with the rivers of blood, loads of deaths, toils of political intrigues and grim, dark humor there is a story here that is very real and in places even touching. The story is told from different points of view: the sly cowards, the courageous honorable heroes, the greedy mercenaries or the ones who were forced to fight. I liked how Mr. Abercrombie blended fantasy and military in the story. It was interesting and new to me because I love fantasy and I avoid military books.

Some things weren’t tasty for me and as I mentioned before – decreased my fangirlism. At first I was put off by a slow start and the Gorst’s attempts (not quite successful) to match Glokta (<3) with his inner dialogues. Also I found quite a bunch of characters, so I had to stop sometimes to go back to clarify who’s who. But (as usual) these things make an individual story and I ended up quite enjoying it. As a matter of fact it took me about 100 pages to put all dots on i: who was who, where they were going, who and why they were fighting for and etc. Once it was settled I felt myself thrown into a dark, gritty world with sharp fighting scenes and realistic characters.

James 'Eagle' says

This book is breathtaking. The ultimate sum of it's parts, 'The Heroes' is a perfect display of Abercrombie at his absolute best: grim, brutal, vivid, real, and intensely moving. I fell in love with this novel early on and that feeling still hasn't gone away even after I turned its last page. It's a story that made me want to finish work as soon as possible so I could go back to it. An experience that had me thinking about it hours after it ended. It is a phenomenal ride, one that has pushed this into the ranks of my favourites of all time.

What I love about this novel (the same reason I loved 'Best Served Cold') is that it doesn't need to dwell on worldbuilding. The necessary stage-setting has all been dealt with in the original 'First Law' trilogy allowing Abercrombie to take the characters we've already come to know, put them in a separate independent story, and focus so finely on it that it has the amount of depth, realism, and time to make this story extremely satisfying.

I feel like I learn something new every time I read an Abercrombie novel. He goes into his work with so much heart and intelligence with lessons and analyses of all types of human nature, inviting you to think of the nature of humanity when the odds are completely stacked against them. It is an incredibly human novel in an inhuman world and the characters that inhabit it are beautifully, achingly real.

The military tactics shown indicated a real amount of research into Medieval battles, and the map of the ever fluctuated regimental tides with each passing day really aided the reader in gaining a full understanding of the battle in hand. There was so much thought put into the ins and outs of this novel. From the personal character-shaking stories of Gorst and Shivers, to the world-changing actions of Bayaz, First of the Magi. Each individual thread felt like all part of a plan for the world of the First Law, and it was incredibly exciting to see the world develop.

Gorst, Calder, and Craw were the three characters who received the most attention in the novel, and it shows clear skill that Abercrombie is able to evoke empathy with multiple viewpoints in this novel. You get a grand sense of how this battle affects everyone, not just the select few. With important moving choices being made by other characters such as Tunny, Finree, Beck, and Whirrun. Each individual stands out as a fully-realised character in a horrific situation. Some deal with it far better than others, but all of their reactions are entirely real and believable.

The sense of combat anarchy is achieved through selective description and a rapid writing-style during the most intense battle sequences. This served to place the reader directly in the midst of the battle. You feel like you are right in the middle of it all, with people fighting and dying all around you. It is seriously intense. And there are moments of pure brilliance like with the chapter 'Casualties' which follows a number of different people caught in the battle, the viewpoint swiftly moving to whoever killed them as you jump from sorry victim to sorry victim and witness the full extent of this battle's horrific brutality. If this doesn't show you the utter shit that is war, no novel will.

The themes were full explored and the genre-bending that Abercrombie is so known for is subtle, not in your face. Heroism, self-preservation, redemption, ambition, desire are ripe throughout and make this story what it truly is, an absolute masterpiece.

So, yes, I loved it. How could I not?

Vladimir ?eha says

Finally.

Yes, that's how I feel after finishing this book. I loved the First Law trilogy, but Heroes just fell flat for me. In spite of the title, the novel is not about heroes, in fact Abercrombie never misses a chance to remind us that his characters are not honorable men. Everything was different in the distant past, when people knew what they were fighting for, but nothing remains of that time, only rock formations that are aptly named Heroes, and where most of the action takes place today. It is an ironic setting for our scheming and shallow characters, who are not heroes at all. Did I say there is nothing heroic about them?

And it goes on and on like that, becoming very repetitive and predictable. There is hardly any magic, although Bayaz is present, playing the puppet master. Of course, he represents the Union, while on the other side there is Ishri, a powerful Gerkish Eater. But what do they do with their powers? They play with

gunpowder for a while and that's it.

It felt so anticlimactic, like I wasn't reading epic fantasy, but a novel with a watered-down taste of fantasy. And it is really just about a stretched out battle, that takes place over the course of three days, with Abercrombie repeating how the scuffle between the Union and the North makes no sense whatsoever. No one wins in the end, there are only losers on both sides.

I could get behind this notion if the characters are convincing enough, if there is some sort of catharsis in the end. However, as I previously mentioned, everyone here reminded me of Glokta, Bloody Nine and others from the First Law trilogy. What is more, they came across as cheap imitations. I felt nothing for them. Gorst was irritating, Black Dow's potential was not fully realized, but what annoyed me most was this bunch of cliched characters from the North. I think I know how Abercrombie comes up with them: he gives them a generic nickname, as well as a catchphrase which they can repeat over and over again, some kind of physical disability, and voila, he can send them on their merry way.

It is interesting how supportive characters were actually better, Beck for example. His story arc made sense to me. To end on a more positive note, I will also say that the novel is gritty and very realistic in its portrayal of war. There are traces of black humor, but nothing memorable really. It was a long story that I struggled to finish, and after being too generous with Half a King, which I gave four stars in spite of its flaws, I'm gonna go ahead and give this one a three star rating. Abercrombie can do so much better than this.

Ivan says

600 pages for only 3 days of battle and more grittiness, dark humor, blood and guts than in any other First law book and that is saying something. There isn't much else to say just Abercrombie at his best.

Pavle says

Volim kada neko ne glorificuje rat i ne pravi od konja magarca (u ovom slu?aju tehnici suprotno, uz du?no poštovanje magarcu), a fantastika je tome pre?esto skloni. Glavni junak, divan ?ovek sa talonom od circa petsto ubijenih. Ko da klikere skuplja ili juri akcije u Tempu pred praznik. Ali krvolj?no. I to je uglavnom stanje stvari u žanru. Sve to veoma imponuje onom „ha-ha nasilje je kul“ delu osobe, ali pobogu, ljudi umiru i ovako, mnogo li je tražiti da bar umru na miru a ne kao kod Tarantina (...re?e ?ovek koji nastavlja da ?ita bogaoca fantastike)?

E pa kod Aberkrombija nije baš tako. Svi umiru vrlo brutalno i eksplisitno, što jes jes, ali nije to ?in nikakvog herojstva, nema slave, nema ni?ega lepog, ni?ega velikog. Takav tonalitet je karakterisao i originalnu trilogiju, kao potpunu subverziju šablona herojske fantastike (posebno primetno u kraju kojeg se i dalje se?am kao da sam ga ju?e ?itao, a ne pre pet godina), ali ona je bila relativno akciono oskudna, više posve?ena likovima i donekle narativi (ovde je uopšte nema) nego što je to slu?aj sa Junacima, koji su jedna akciona scena na šesto strana (vidi: poslednji Med Meks) sa divnim polemikama ne-tako-juna?kih-junaka. Po mom mišljenju najbolja Aberkrombijeva knjiga, sa ta?no dovoljnom razmerom eksploracije (anti) junaka, filmske akcije, ritma priповедanja i brutalnim sentimentom „zašto mi beše ovo radimo?“. Jer retko kada je razlog dovoljno ubedljiv, ako je uopšte dat.

A tvrdoglav se sve ponavlja i ponavlja i ponavlja.

5

Manju says

My sixth book by Mr Abercrombie and as always he never cease to amaze me with his writing, especially when he is writing about “War”.

So ‘The Heroes’ is story of Black Dow, the Northern King, and Union army finding themselves battling over an old monument called, The Heroes.

As it is war, so there are tons of characters and with them lay the beauty of the book. its the story of famous names, fallen and new names. its the story of people who are strong headed, cruel, ambitious, self-centered, vicious and people who knows how to survive a war. And Abercrombie has done a wonderful job of doing justice to every character in this book.

There are two things that I liked most about this book. First is how Mr. Abercrombie has described the battle scenes, from one person to another, almost in a sequence. He made these battles alive with his words. Second thing that I liked is I really never got settled for one side. Sometimes I wanted Union to win the war and at other times I was rooting for Northern side. None of the side was good, at the most they’re the evil sides led by equally evil leaders.

I didn’t liked any of the Union warriors, not that there were many. Only Gorst caught my attention and he too was annoying as hell when he was not fighting. Other than him no other Union troop is worth mentioning for me. But I liked most of the characters in Black Dow’s army. Craw, Shivers, and even Calder, all were very good.

So if you like action, war, treachery, then this one is for you.

Stephen says

"HE WAS AS UGLY AS INCEST"...now that is funny!! Okay, so do not...DO NOT listen to those who call this a less than a stellar performance by the god-king of grit, Joe Abercrombie. This is not only a 541 page manual on the art of breezy, muck-dripping proseology, but it also sports an intricately layered and well designed plot, three dimensional characters that are just saturated with nuance and some powerful evocative statements on the “underpants loading horror” of war and the pain-burden born by those who must fight it.

Despite the “war is pretty shitty business” sentiment expressed throughout the book, the common soldier and those doing the actual fighting are shown, for the most part, to be men of quiet bravery and just trying to do their best and get through in one piece. Of course, there are certainly a lot of venom-filled cannon-shots fired across the bow of the leaders and instigators of the conflict and some fun poked at the conventions of war, but I found that Abercrombie was generally respectful of the fighting soldiers and didn’t portray them as

murderous meatheads out to rape and pillage.

The majority of the story takes place over three days with the Union Army and the Northmen fighting for control over a strategically located hill called “The Heroes.” That is the story’s cover, but underneath it is so much bigger and so much bolder.....OH, OH, OH, and lest I forget, this book also includes a whole bounty of Abercrombie’s always amazing and often amoral Ass-kickers, Ass-kissers and Ass-holes, including:

BAYAZ: The First of the Magi: The most amazingly complex and compelling wielder of magic that has ever been inked on paper. While the Bloody-Nine is an awesome character, it is Bayaz that has all TEN fingers on the strings of the world.

HARDBREAD: A named man and the early proof that Abercrombie has new memorable characters growing in his brain like a fungus. A terrific character developed fully in the space of a handful of pages.

CAUL SHIVERS: Supporting star of Best Served Coldand early proof that Abercrombie can take a character we have seen a lot of and shine a brand new light on him that feels as natural as life. Shivers is a new favorite character of mine.

WHIRRUN OF BLIGH aka CRACKNUT: Wielder of the Father of Swords and yet another in a seemingly endless supply of fresh, original and epic kickers of that we call ass.

PRINCE CALDER: Another great character and without giving away spoilers, I think the character arc that Abercrombie gives Calder is the best in the book. I loved the nuanced complexity of his final “decisions” because I was completely not expecting them. I also think that his character arc shines a massive OMG spotlight on how deliciously complex BAYAZ plans are.

SEFF: Yes, I would have been happier had there been more female characters, but this is the story of a three day battle out on the front lines so I guess it is forgivable. That said, Seff is an amazingly well realized female character and I thought she was terrific.

STRANGER-COME-KNOCKING: My favorite new character and a top 10 favorite character of all of the Abercrombie stories...the Giant who would be a Gentleman....Stranger-Come Knocking. I sense BIG things coming from him down the road.

I see the complete gush I have left all over this review so I will try and rein it in and wrap it up. In summary, I loved the book from the opening pages to the unbelievable ending and at all blood, gore and humor in between.

I will leave you with a quote that is pretty close to the exact opposite of what Abercrombie’s central “war sucks” message is, but I really liked it so I thought I would share. Whirrun of Bligh (aka Cracknut) in describing his affection for war says:

“The smell of it. The feel of it.” He rubbed one hand up and down the stained sheath of his sword, making a faint swishing sound. “War is honest. There’s no lying to it. You don’t have to say sorry here. Don’t have to hide. You cannot. If you die? So what? You die among friends. Among worthy foes. You die looking the Great Leveller in the eye. If you live? Well, lad that’s living, isn’t it? A man isn’t truly alive until he’s facing death.” Whirrun stamped his foot into the sod. “I love war!.”

...Well he is called Cracknut after all.

Joe Abercrombie has yet to write anything that I have not loved. I can't wait for the next one. In the meantime, this is definitely a book that I think could be even better upon a second reading because there is so much going on. **HIGHEST POSSIBLE RECOMMENDATION!!!**

Oscar says

Joe Abercrombie es uno de los abanderados de esta nueva fantasía que surgió con George R.R. Martin, heroica, oscura y realista, como nunca se había visto hasta entonces. El talento de Abercrombie crece con cada novela que escribe. Lo demostró con sus tres primeras novelas, que forman la trilogía de *La Primera Ley*, y continuó con 'La mejor venganza', que tal vez no alcanzó mis expectativas, pero que aun así supera en calidad a muchas de las fantasías que se escriben actualmente. Y después escribió '**Los Héroes**', donde Abercrombie vuelve por sus fueros, una novela épica desde cualquier punto de vista, que nos narra los tres días de una brutal batalla.

'**Los Héroes**' transcurre en el mismo mundo que las anteriores novelas escritas por Abercrombie, y si bien puede leerse de manera independiente, sería aconsejable haberlas leído para poder disfrutarlas plenamente. En '**Los Héroes**' no hay buenos ni malos, están todos entremezclados, cada uno en un bando, listos para la batalla que se avecina. Tenemos por un lado a la Unión, comandados por el Lord Mariscal Kroy, y por el otro a los hombres del Norte, liderados por Dow el Negro, todos ellos congregados en el Valle de Osrun, cuyo centro lleva por nombre Los Héroes, un círculo de piedras conmemorativo y un magnífico punto estratégico. Nos encontramos ante una novela coral, con gran cantidad de personajes con voz propia, pero donde destacan sobre todo el coronel Bremer dan Gorst, caído en desgracia, el guerrero norteño Curnden Craw, hombre de honor, o el cabo Tunny, siempre escaqueándose de sus responsabilidades.

Esta es una historia antibelicista, a pesar de la crudeza con la que se describen las escenas (algunas de las cuales parece que estén escritas "con cámara al hombro", al igual que en esa primera parte de 'Salvar al soldado Ryan', de Spielberg). Es una reflexión en toda regla de lo que significan las guerras y todo lo que conllevan. Unos luchan por el honor, otros por convertirse en héroes, otros por el gusto por la masacre, pero la gran mayoría lucha porque no tienen otra cosa o por miedo a la cobardía, en una batalla que va careciendo de sentido por momentos. Se trata de una novela compleja, elaborada, donde la habilidad de Abercrombie más que sorprender, se ratifica.

Emily says

It's been a really long time since I read the First Law books and several years since I read Best Served Cold, so I started off a little lost on this book. I didn't remember what had happened between Black Dow and the Bloody Nine, I didn't really remember Calder or Gorst so I ended up doing some Wikki reading trying to catch back up. Once I got it all straight I really enjoyed it. I actually found a few people that were worth "cheering for" (at least by Abercrombie's standards) and the big scene at the end (view spoiler) had me actually feeling nervous about the outcome. Totally didn't see that ending coming - which is great, I love it when I can't see a major plot point coming. Although I did see this coming a mile away (view spoiler)

Anyway - overall I liked it. Bayaz is still a giant asshole, but I found more people in this book to be likeable

(vs the characters in the First Law books). Not a good place to start though if you haven't read any of the other books in the series.

Conor says

War, War never changes.

The Heroes unflinchingly chronicles a 3 day battle between two warring nations. It's a story filled with visceral fighting, complex characters and constant danger and suspense. For me this is the best of Abercrombie's standalone novels and is on a par with his 'First Law trilogy'. Being a massive Abercrombie fan as I am the fact that this is my favourite of his works says a lot. The Heroes combines Abercrombie's dark fantasy with a war story and while the entire novel revolving around a single battle limits the plot in some ways it still manages to be inventive and gripping.

A brutal land war serves as a brilliant backdrop to Abercrombie's typical cynicism and exploration of human flaws. The 'shit rolls downhill' philosophy espoused throughout is reminiscent of the Wire and one of my all time favourite war stories (and TV shows) Generation Kill. In perhaps Abercrombie's biggest subversion of classic fantasy to date he mercilessly describes the pointlessness and brutality of a Medieval land war. There's not a force of pure evil bent on world domination nor a prophesised hero to be found. Instead we see scheming politicians, bloodthirsty warriors and grunts just trying to survive.

The character I most wanted to read about in this book was Bremer Dan Gorst. He was one of my favourite minor characters in the first and third (especially the first) books and I was excited to get inside his head. Ultimately this was probably my biggest disappointment in the book. Gorst is shown to be a typical Abercrombie protagonist: selfish, neurotic and flawed. While I normally like this in Abercrombie's work and feel it makes his characters more realistic I felt that Gorst was completely different from the character I liked so much in earlier books. In the first book especially Gorst seemed the epitome of Logen's 'seem less than you are' philosophy. Gorst gave the impression of a stupid brute but was in fact a brilliant swordsman and was implied to be incredibly intelligent.. I admired his complete disinterest in what people thought of him and seeming scorn for attempts to be liked. In the first book everyone at the Contest hated him and yet he coolly demolished all the snotty fan favourites. In 'The Heroes' he completely abandons his plan to kill an arrogant noble who beat one of his friends because they complimented him. His constant, annoying desire to be liked seemed completely at odds with his personality in the trilogy. Also in the first book when he lost the contest (because Bayaz completely stole his rightful win, his first dick-move in the series but not his last...) he was the bigger man and immediately congratulated Jezal for his undeserving win. In The Heroes he is a whining man-child constantly trying to blame others for his failures. Based solely on this book Gorst is an interesting, complex character in his own right however I was still disappointed with how his (previously awesome) character seemed completely changed from the previous trilogy to suit the needs of this book. I also noticed these dramatic changes in character's personalities to suit the plot occurred with other characters as well (Black Dow, general Kroy). While it makes sense that people would change over the 10 years or so since they last appeared in the series it was still jarring. I understand Abercrombie's desire to make Gorst less perfect in the typical mould of his protagonists but... WTF Abercrombie? Did you have to destroy one of your coolest minor characters? WTF.

Probably my favourite POV character in this book was Finree, who's become my favourite Abercrombie POV female character to date. She's even surpassed Carlot Dan Eider as my favourite Abercrombie female character and is now among my favourite POV characters full stop. Unlike Abercrombie's other female

POV's she isn't a scarred, impossible deadly warrior woman. Finree's skills are politics and intrigue. I've never liked 'warrior women' in fantasy especially when they're used as excessively as with Abercrombie. I've always found them both improbable (there were ALOT of barriers to a woman fighting in most societies throughout history, that most male authors tend to ignore) and unfair in how they imply that the majority of women who aren't warriors are inherently weak and worthless. Despite her flaws I found Finree a really likeable and admirable character.

My other favourite character was Curnden Craw. Craw was a really atypical Abercrombie protagonist: an honourable man in a world without honour. His interactions with his 'dozen' were a really cool study in the camaraderie and trust that develops between soldiers in war and was one of my favourite parts of the book. It also reminded me of the Northman crew in the original trilogy. (I loved those guys and was super bummed about how the trilogy ended for them). 'Red' Bek provided interesting parallels to the typical Abercrombie characters with bloody pasts. His desire to be a warrior followed by his experiences of the horrors of war provided a nice contrast to the cynicism and experience of the hardened warriors who comprise the main cast. As a sidenote I didn't understand the point of Corporal Tunny. He didn't interact with any of the other main characters and didn't have any real effect on the battle.

Other than the main POV characters we get some brief POV's from other characters. 2 of these were really interesting as in the first the POV character is killed and the narration passes to his killer who is killed in turn and so on. This was really well written and creates a mounting sense of genuine danger to the characters especially when a major POV character takes over. In another chapter we follow a command as it is passed, along with the narration, down the line from the general. This scene shows us the arguments that can exist even among the same side in a war. While the third chapter like this, which this time just jumped around randomly, was disappointing this was still a cool feature that broadened the perspective on the battle. Highlights included a good soldier reflecting on his girl at home as he dies 'she'll probably marry her cousin, terrible business that', two officers (validly) criticising each other in consecutive POV's and a mortally injured cavalryman leading a doomed charge. I also enjoyed how Heroes presented war as a hypocritical, horrific endeavour without ever becoming preachy or self righteous.

In conclusion this is a great entry into the world of one of the best fantasy authors around as well as a great war story. Not for the faint-hearted but definitely worth reading.

Robin Hobb says

Forty-eight hours. So much can happen in such a short span of time in the middle of a war. This tale shifts between varying viewpoints, from soldiers to commanders to camp followers. There are no good guys and no bad guys. The reader will wind up caring about all of them, and knowing that not all of them can win, let alone survive. Highly recommended.

Steve says

The premise of the book is very straight-forward: the Union and the Northmen are fighting a war over a narrow strip of borderland, and “The Heroes” is the setting of a long and bloody three-day battle. The title is a play on words, and without spoiling anything, the hilltop setting named “The Heroes” and the violent battle there bring out the heroic in men on both sides.

“The Heroes” follows Abercrombie’s previous titles chronologically, so if you haven’t read the other books yet, start with “The Blade Itself” and work your way through. You’ll be glad you did. Overall, the series is very good, and it’s gotten better. Abercrombie has made steady progress as a writer. His writing has grown more technically sound and is tighter overall. Words are worth more. The voices of his characters have become more sure, and his ability to juggle multiple characters and an increasingly-numbered cast of supporting characters has vastly improved.

Abercrombie’s improved ability to weave character arcs is displayed in “The Heroes”. This was a slight problem in the initial trilogy, in which many characters came through as flat, and only a handful of characters grew through the storylines. With “The Heroes,” Abercrombie juggles a huge cast and keeps up with most all of them, whether major or minor; and they all have well-conceived character arcs, fleshed out from start to finish. While some of his peripheral characters remain flat, used to flavor various scenes, Abercrombie has raised most of them to three-dimensional status, with wants and desires, and small character arcs of their own.

Abercrombie is sticking with the same general direction as the previous books, and his readers should recognize why: he’s still world-building, even here in the fifth novel set in this universe, and following the overarching events as they happen. He continues to build and progress his world with ever-increasing details in both characters and settings. “The Heroes” is a great story, focusing on very flawed men (and women) making decisions (both good and bad) in desperate situations, and the consequences of following those decisions.

Overall, “The Heroes” is a very satisfying read, and an outstanding addition to the world of the First Law.

Rob says

The Piles

“Fuck this shit” grumbled Slicker Gutwruck as he wearily limped up the hill, bile tickling his tonsils. “I couldn’t give an arse about war anymore,” he spat. *How ironic that I’m so good at it* he mused, as his rag-tag squad of soldiers showed off their cool moves on a group of unfortunate peons they got the drop on. There was Broody McBroderson, master of the garotte; Slicker’s second-in-command, Little Miss Sunshine, tougher than any man, and more than capable of commanding Serenity, er, the squad, on her own; wise-cracking Esposito from Brooklyn; Ole Five-Finger Discount; the triplets, Gramps, and the rest. A hard bunch. Sick of fuckin’ war. But fuckin’ good at it.

Back at HQ, the Big Chief grimly sat in conference, looking over the hardest men of the North like a hamster considering pellets of its own shit. There was Brandis Bowel-burster, clawed face fixed in a rictus of hate, scowling while he stroked his axe made of sharpened pelvic bones. Next to him loomed the always dangerous Farnsbury Flopper, commander of the 3rd Signal Corps, as hard as un-rinsed oatmeal that has dried on a bowl for two days. And eyeing them all cynically from the back of the tent was the Gooch, another complete arsehole.

The last to enter the tent was He-Who-Heaves, green of face and unsteady of gait. The other war chiefs inched away warily, vomit frothing in their gullets.

“We have to show the Confederacy who's boss,” growled Brandis. “Those fucking arseholes are too effete and corrupt for my liking. And they're a perfect stock antagonist for our hard Northmen trope.”

The Farnsbury Flopper swirled his granite eyeball in a mug of lager and hissed “Fucking retard, we don't know where the arseholes are.”

“Retard?” queried the Gooch from the shadows. “What's with the anachronism?”

“This is a gritty fantasy story, playing with the genre conventions by mashing up movie, television, and other source material familiar to its audience,” growled Brandis. “Just enjoy the story, you butthead.”

“So there's no internal consistency, even within the conventions of the setting as depicted by the author?”

“Nope,” sneered the Flopper. “That shit don't fly with our crew.”

The Big Chief raised his mangled hand menacingly. “Enough! We do know where the Confederate forces are” he gloated. “Slicker Gutwreck's expert scout/commando/spy/hand-to-hand combat squad has found the whole fucking Confederate army. They're south of Toad Hall, split into three divisions, marching in mutually-supporting columns, converging on this obscure hill called the Piles.”

“The fuck,” interjected the Gooch. “The division was introduced during the Napoleonic era as a military unit containing all the necessary arms – infantry, cavalry, artillery – to sustain independent combat. It was facilitated by the tremendous growth in the size of armies nations could field at the time, owing to improved roads, conscription, the mass production of arms, innovations like canning –”

“Shut it!” shouted the Big Chief. He resumed, glowering. “As I was saying, the first division is commanded by Harold Lacksack. The second, by Marshal Fritz Loober and his chief of staff Colonel Quiff.”

“Whoa, whoa – his chief of staff? What kind of staff work is necessary in a pre-gunpowder army living off the land, without the logistical network, let alone the command and control capabilities, that would support a system of centralized staff planning?”

“Stop thinking and just enjoy the story, you fucking douchebag!” bellowed the Big Chief. He ripped out his own kidneys and waved them in the Gooch's face menacingly. “Any more chirping out of you, mate, and it'll be your kidneys next time.”

The Gooch raised his hands. “Whatever,” he murmured. “Mellow the fuck out.”

The Big Chief resumed. “They're supported by two brigades of conscript cavalry –”

The Gooch couldn't help himself “Conscript cavalry? You mean civilians drafted to fight on hugely expensive animals that take years of training to simply learn how to ride properly, let alone manage in battle? There's a reason every fucking cavalryman in the history of warfare was either born to the saddle, or was an aristocrat who had the means and time to raise his own horses and gallivant around on them all day. And you're suggesting some out-of-work bakers assistant will be assigned to the cavalry, like learning to be a mounted soldier is as easy as cleaning latrines.”

Shaking with fury, the Big Chief drew his dread sword Dreadblade, shimmering in the torchlight, and brandished it balefully before the mouthy critic.

The Gooch carried on, heedlessly. “This is supposed to be a gritty military story, about armies and warfare and all that cool shit. Shouldn’t it have at least the basics right in regards to military structures and tactics? I mean, if the author has free license to go completely off the grid about this stuff, why not include jeeps and predator drones? That’s about as plausible as an ostensibly renaissance-era army set up like a - “

The Farsnsbury Flopper whipped out a twinned pair of repeating crossbows and shot several bolts into each of the Gooch’s eyes, which burst in sprays of glistening gore. The Gooch groaned and sunk to his knees, clawing at his eyes, as puke jabbed his molars.

The Big Chief stepped forward and grunted in rage as he swung Dreadblade in a murderous arc, cleaving the Gooch in two. He shit himself and collapsed on the ground with a deafening crash, lifeblood streaming out of his shit-stinking body like the rivers of beer pissed in Northern halls on the eve of hard-won victories.

“Fucking troll” growled the Big Chief.

Slicker Gutwruck, who had a knack for being at the right place at the right time, stepped out of the shadows and spat. “Waste of a good man. A good, hard man. The poor bastard didn’t know how to suspend his sense of disbelief and overlook lazy cliche and awful prose. But those are the times.”

He scowled at the blood-oozing body. “I’m sick of genre fiction,” he grumbled. *Sick to my arse of it.*

Esmerelda Weatherwax says

I can’t get enough of this series, it’s a problem. I don’t know what I’m going to do with myself when I finish all of the stand alones, which is coming up fast. I burned through this one on the audiobook version – and didn’t take notes. Please forgive names that are spelled wrong. If you haven’t read First Law trilogy yet, I’d absolutely say start there.

Plot:

More war, such is life in the First Law world, this one has some crossover characters from some of the other books. Black Dow is King of the North now, and he’s not any more of a peaceful leader than his predecessor was, he’s waging war against the Union and it’s proving to be a tough fight.

This book had fewer plot threads than the first trilogy, or at least it felt that way to me. It’s pretty straightforward, The Union is pitted against the Northmen, and neither side has much of a clear advantage. As soon as one side has a battle victory, the next day’s victory is claimed by the other side.

This is more about showing the atrocities of warfare, a lot of the first trilogy was spent building up, there were skirmishes and fights in The Blade Itself, but the war didn’t come until later. This book is basically one long battle, the entire thing takes place in just about a weeks worth of time, but a lot of action happens within that time period.

We watch a bunch of different characters viewpoints from both sides of the war having it out and trying to win the day.

A young boy named Beck is trying to earn his name in some great battle, he's left his family's farm behind determined to walk in his fathers' footsteps – who was also a famous warrior in the north.

A disgraced officer named Tunny who would rather laze around than fight is begrudgingly teaching new recruits "how to be soldiers", and he hates it.

We also follow Gorst, who was seen in the first trilogy is madly in love with a general's daughter, who herself is married to an officer in the army. Gorst is bitter and resentful towards his position in the army, writing angry letters in the night to the king, then burning them as some sort of therapy.

The general's daughter, Finree, is also featured and she's trying her best to hoist her husband higher and higher in the army. He's the son of a traitor and has to scrape his way to every promotion, he works himself twice as hard as anyone else trying his best to prove he's no traitor. She's a very gung ho and ambitious person who speaks up often, which grates on the patience of First Magi Bayaz and other higher-ups in the military – it causes some problems.

Craw is fighting for the north, and he's one of the last "straight edges" left, meaning he regards honor as much or more than just brute strength in a fight. He's trying to be a better man and lead people into doing the right thing even if it doesn't get you anything but bloodshed in return. He's struggling with his loyalties because he's not a fan of Black Dow and his blacker ways of doing battle. His loyalty gets tried further when the ex-prince comes into the mix because he and Dow are obviously enemies, and Craw had been around Calder since he was a child and helped raise him in some respects.

And we also have Bethod's son, "Prince" Calder who's no longer a prince now that his father is dead and Dow holds the crown in the north. His wife is being held captive to ensure his good behavior, but this guy sort of reminds me of Jalan from Mark Lawrence's Red Queens War. He's kind of a slippery bastard, more likely to lie to you than not. He's also a self-professed coward and truly terrible in a sword fight – he's mostly just trying to survive the battle.

Final Score: 14/15

Characters:

Beck is sort of a jerk to the rest of the trainees he's grouped with, he's convinced he's the baddest new recruit and is thirsty to win his name. I didn't really know if I liked him all that much, he was pretty immature, quick to a fight, and there wasn't much in the way of redeeming factors. However, watching him try to navigate through his first battle does make you sympathize with him, and he turns into a rather tragic character.

Gorst is OBSESSED with Finree and it plays a major part in his story arc, he has a lot of inner dialogue each time he speaks with her, which is pretty creepy but also funny at points. He's a very tired and bitter person, he resents his current station as Observer for the king, what he really wants is to be reinstated to his old position which he lost in disgrace some time before the events of this book. As the book goes on he gets more and more bitter and depressed and fed up with his life.

Calder is fairly cowardly and instead of trying to fight Black Dow head on, he's trying to sow seeds of disloyalty in Dow's thralls. Trying to get each of them to turn against Dow one by one by whispering things in their ear, some true, some not. He has a wife, but he's not faithful – although he says he loves her and does think of her a lot. He has a stressed relationship with his half brother, who's more of a warrior than a thinker.

Finree is extremely ambitious and it almost seems like no matter how high she gets, she just wants to go higher. She's very bold and very brave, enduring some battle scene hardships the way some warriors would. She has to stand up to Black Dow at one point and manages to make demands and keep eye contact – which a lot of Dow's own men can't do. She has a lot of good ideas and strategies, but she's ignored due to her gender and she finds it infuriating. She and her husband have an interesting relationship, she's never quite certain how she feels about him, although he seems fairly besotted with her. She's definitely the backbone of the relationship and does seem to at least care about her husband even if it's not the most passionate romance.

Final Score: 12.5/15

World Building:

Much the same of the first trilogy, so to keep this brief – The Union is “civilized” with those fancy mother fuckers eating with forks and having holes where the poop gets flushed away. The north is full of warring clansmen, it's colder, it's harsher, and it breeds a hard society.

Final Score: 12.5/15

Pacing:

This is a much faster paced book than the original trilogy, and it's a stand alone so it sort of has to be. There's no real build up, you're thrown into it from almost the very beginning. There's a battle scene in this were I was listening with furious intensity, I was so into it. If I had been reading the physical book I would have been flying through it.

Final Score: 14/15

Writing:

The writing continues to be amazing in this book, Abercrombie has a way of using repeated phrases that really hammer home certain personality traits or overall takeaway messages and instead of being annoying, they are deftly done and work well. He uses a straight forward writing style that's sprinkled with metaphor and simile, not being flowery, but creating interesting imagery that doesn't slow the pace.

Final Score: 13.5/15

Originality:

Again, this isn't exactly the most trope busting book that's out there, but I couldn't care in the least because of how strong the plot and characters are. What was unique about this story was a battle scene done unlike any other I've read, so it definitely earned some points from me there.

Final Score: 11/15

Personal Enjoyment:

I really liked this one, I think my favorite Abercrombie book is still Before They Are Hanged, but, this one is a very strong book that I really enjoyed listening to – the audiobooks are just superb.

Final Score: 9/10

Audience:

For people who have read First Law
For people who want more twisted characters with grey morals
For people who want a lot of action
For people who like low level magic
For people who like a lot of violence and bloodshed
For people who like characters struggling with depression
For people who like seeing two sides of a war
For people who like fast paced books

Final Score: 87/100

Bookdragon Sean says

I've got a really great idea for a novel. Do you want to hear it?

Okay, so here goes:

Well I was thinking I could create a story in which everything relates back to the title. That way I could say the title over and over again.

Wouldn't that be fun?

I mean I could write about heroes fighting at a place called the Heroes and then they could have a crisis about being heroes whilst worrying who has taken the Heroes and if enemy heroes are going to kill them. And then I could say heroes a few times more and relate all the events to heroics and consider what makes a hero a hero.

Doesn't that sound like one big heroic headache? See! I can do it too Joe. Maybe that makes me a hero. Damn I'm getting good at this.

That isn't the only reason I hated the novel, but it did piss me off the most. Nothing speaks the word redundancy more than an overly used metaphor. The entire novel also felt restrictive. It is essentially one big battle sequence. So, its layers of action upon action in the same boring place. I hated the end. I hated the beginning too. And I especially hated the middle. This is Joe Abercrombie's worse book. Please bear in mind that I'm actually a big fan of this author. I've read all of his books, and this is the only one I strongly dislike. So, don't hate me. I do like Joe Abercrombie, but not this book.

Joe keeps telling us the same thing throughout. The characters keep lamenting (or rejoicing) the fact that they are not heroes. I mean.....I think we get it. After the first few chapters it is clear that these guys aren't nice people. That's not a bad thing. I like dark characters, but I don't need to be told every chapter what they are. **SHOW IT TO ME.** It became incredibly annoying. I think I can draw my own opinion; I don't need to be told the author's intent. So many chapters ended on the reminder; it became ridiculous. It's a shame really because this novel could have been good. I just think it lacked the balance of his usual style. Abercrombie can do wonderful things with words. Sometimes it's the short sentences, the phrases that hold so much dramatic effect. In this he overused them that they only resonate with one thing: **WEAKNESS.**

I don't care about any of it

The characters that tell the story are just as bad. I really think Black Dow should have been the protagonist. The cover certainly made it look like it was his tale, but I can't exactly blame the author for a misleading cover. That fault resides with the publisher. But at least Dow is interesting. Instead Abercrombie uses a bunch of weak and flat characters. I can't even remember half of their names because they're that unmemorable. One of them was a basic warrior, not much else. Gorst was an annoying blubbering wretch with some weird inferiority complex that made no sense because he was a huge and attractive brute. Calder was okay, but lacked motivation and presence in the story. They were a rather meagre bunch to be honest.

See? I'm turning into a critic, though this did have some real problems.

But I just didn't care if these men lived or died. It felt like the author just shoved all the random non-essential characters from The First Law series into here and then let them fight it out. All it needed was the annoying, and overused, Cosca then it would have been a full house. There was no room for character development or investment, only cheap, thoughtless, blood. I just hope Abercrombie doesn't write anything else like this in the future because this was nothing short of terrible.

Kaora says

Wow.

This one has been on my To-Be-Read pile for a long time. In an effort to clean out some of my older books I finally got around to reading it.

And now I'm not sure what took me so long! Heroes is a gritty book about a war between the Northmen and the Union, which takes place around a hill called the Heroes.

It's a dark book, with rough characters and some pretty gory deaths. Ambergrombie does a great job with his battle scenes, showing the confusion of war and the costs of being a hero.

But with a war comes a lot of downtime. But scenes without fighting are boring right? Wrong! Some of the best quotes came out of the downtime, and many times I found myself laughing out loud.

The fool's tasks lined up in crushingly tedious procession. Run. Practice. Shit a turd. Write a letter. Eat. Watch. Write a turd. Shit a letter. Eat. Bed.

Or nodding in agreement to some sound advice:

An unarmed man is like an unroofed house. They'll both end up leaking.

Through this great story however I found a deeper meaning. The book is divided into 5 parts:

1. Before the War
2. Day One
3. Day Two

4. Day Three
5. After The War

On coming to after the war I found myself stumbling on lines I had already read in before the war. Was this laziness on the authors part? Or was he saying this is just an endless cycle. Is before and after the war the same thing as after one war at some point becomes before another war?

And its books where I continue to think on them after I've put them down that show a talented writer. Mr. Abercrombie you have a new fan.

Everyone needs to read this book.

Hanne says

I've been reading a lot of Abercrombie lately - one a month for the past 5 months to be exact. One more to go and (sad face) it'll be over for a while. I hope Abercrombie is writing fast!

This book contains more of what Abercrombie is absolutely brilliant at:

Gritty, dark but oh so real. This book tells the story of war: the Union and the Northmen have been in a cat-and-mouse-war for a while, but the council needs their army elsewhere and commands a short end to this war. We'll get three days of war.

Abercrombie shows the victories, the failures, the astonished reactions to new weapons. He writes about the 'heroes' but about the 'cowards'. One of the young lads in this war, son of a famous Named Man, always dreamt of becoming a famous fighter, but he chickens out of his first attack and hides in a cupboard.

And yet, what Abercrombie does so well is to balance all that heavy stuff with a lot of humour. Black humour usually, but he regularly makes me chuckle nonetheless. There are many moments i could have chosen, but i'm copying the one on the invention of sliced bread (parts of it, that is).

"I sliced the bread thin, d'you see?" (Whirrun slicing bread with his sword)

"Sliced bread?" Wonderful turned away from the black valley to watch him. "Can't see it catching on, can you?"

Whirrun ignored 'em. "Then when I got two cut, I trap the cheese between them and there you have it!"

'Bread and cheese.' Yon weighed the half-loaf in one hand and the cheese in the other. 'Just the same as I've got.'

Whirrun sighed. 'Have none of you no vision? A whole new thing. A forging of the humble part of bread and cheese into a greater whole. I call it ... a cheese-trap.' Whirrun took a dainty nibble from one corner. 'Oh, yes, my friends. This tastes like ... progress...'

(...)

Whirrun pointed at her harply with his whole new thing and the cheese fell out into the unlit fire. Wonderful near fell over from laughing. Yon snorted so hard he blew bread out of his nose.

Whirrun frowned at his two flapping slices of read. "Don't think i wrapped it tight enough."

Last but (definitely) not least, in this book Abercrombie shows again his brilliant character building. So many characters to cheer for. Too many to all put down here, so i'll just stick to my absolutely favorites:

Finree, daughter of the marshall:

Finree: "They're idiots!"

Hal: "Have you ever noticed that everyone's an idiot but you?"

Finree: "You see it too?"

But there's also Calder (a thinker, not really a fighter) and Craw (an experienced Named Man):

Calder: "Guess he couldn't beat the Union without my mighty sword-arm."

Craw: "What's his plan? Cut it off and throw it at 'em?"

This book is not for the faint-hearted. It's about war and all the little things that go along with war. It's a really good book, but personally i still prefer Best Served Cold. Maybe just a little too much war in this one. I preferred the revenge plotting over these wargames, which seems so ... pointless. But i guess that might actually be the point after all.

"The truth is like salt. Men want to taste a little, but too much makes everyone sick."

Petrik says

4.5/5 Stars

I won't forget the three days I spent reading the intricate three days of battle in this book. Joe Abercrombie has proved himself once again to be my shining star in Grimdark fantasy.

For me, there's simply no one that can write Grimdark fantasy like him. 'The Heroes' has been claimed by a lot of Abercrombie's fans to be his best works, although I disagree because imo that crown still belongs to 'Last Argument of Kings', I do however think 'The Heroes' as his third best work, almost as much as I loved 'Before They Are Hanged', which is a LOT.

Picture: The Heroes (Subterranean Press edition cover)

The year is now 584 AU, four years after the events in 'Best Served Cold'. The entire setting of the book took place in The Valley of Osrungr in the North, located between Uffrith and Carleon. The plot of the book revolved around the three bloody days of climactic battle between the Union and the North. That's it, this is seriously the main plot of the book. The Heroes is thoroughly a Military grimdark fantasy, it captured the horror of war perfectly, showing the preparation, the wars, and the aftermath of each battle in details from both sides. The pacing of the book is well paced, it started really slow in order to give first impressions and personalities to the huge cast of new characters, once that's done, it became so addictive to read. It's just impressive how gradual and natural the flow of the book felt, with increasing tension in the story with each passing day.

"All you can do is take each day as it comes. Try and do the best you can with what you're given. You won't always do the right thing, but you can try. And you can try to do the right

thing next time. That, and stay alive.”

There are no heroes in this book; each protagonist is a villain from the opponent's point of view and vice versa. Although it can be read as a standalone, I strongly suggest you read The First Law trilogy and Best Served Cold first due to the reason that some side characters from the previous books played a bigger role this time, Bremer dan Gorst, for example, has become one of the main POV characters in this book. As usual, Abercrombie's characterizations towards his variety of characters, old and new, are incredible. The six main POV's characters have amazing development throughout the book, almost everyone ended up different mentally from they were in the beginning of the book, it felt like Abercrombie's message to the readers of this book is that it doesn't matter what kind of a person you are, war will change you eventually, for better or worse.

“It is easy to forget how much you have, when your eyes are always fixed on what you have not.”

The best strength of the book definitely lies within its battle scenes, which were done in stupendous quality, especially in its masterful use of consecutive shifting POV's to show the relentless coup de grace dealt from both side of the armies factions. This is also the first time I read a novel which utilized the view of war from the eyes of common soldiers and they're terrifying as hell. Superlative cinematic action packed with heart book, it's brutal, visceral and bloody thrilling, I've read plenty of epic/dark fantasy and other than John Gwynne or Bernard Cornwell, no one else can write realistic and explosive battle scenes imbued with raw emotions as good as Abercrombie, no one. Every action scenes here is truly breathtaking, thrilling and gripping, usually we have only one climax sequences in the books we read, in here we have five, the book consists of five parts and each part have a breathtaking and compelling vivid war or duel scenes, combined with Abercrombie's meticulous and impeccable prose, the book provides a truly one of a kind satisfying combat experience.

Picture: Interior Art from The Heroes Subterranean Press edition

The first time I fell in love with Grimdark fantasy novels was after reading The First Law trilogy, The Heroes will be the third book by Abercrombie to go into my favorites of all time shelves. Thank you for reminding me once again why I love Grimdark fantasy in the first place. **All hail Joe Abercrombie, the Lord of Grimdark.** Absolutely recommended for fans of grimdark or military fantasy. I'm closing this review with this little beautiful quote or advice from the book that I think every one of us should always try to remember.

“Savor the little moments, son, that's my advice. They're what life is. All the little things that happen while you're waiting for something else.”

Bonus Picture: My gorgeous UK paperback edition of The Heroes

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