



Priest of Bones

Peter McLean

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It's a dangerous thing, to choose the lesser of two evils.

The war is over, and army priest Tomas Piety finally heads home with Lieutenant Bloody Anne at his side. When he arrives in the Stink, Tomas finds that his empire of crime has been stolen from him while at war. With his gang of Pious Men, Tomas will do whatever it takes to reclaim his businesses. But when he finds himself dragged into a web of political intrigue once again, and is forced to work in secret for the sinister Queen's Men, everything gets more complicated.

When loyalties stretch to the breaking point and violence only leads to violence, when people have run out of food, and hope, and places to hide, do not be surprised if they have also run out of mercy. As the Pious Men fight shadowy foreign infiltrators in the backstreet taverns and gambling dens of Tomas's old life it becomes clear; the war is not over.

It is only just beginning.

Priest of Bones Details

Date : Published October 2nd 2018 by Ace Books

ISBN : 9780451490216

Author : Peter McLean

Format : Paperback 352 pages

Genre : Fantasy, Fiction, Adult

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From Reader Review Priest of Bones for online ebook

Emily May says

Priest of Bones has been on my radar ever since I attended a book talk at SDCC 2018. It sounded so good - a heavy dose of grimdark with all the usual nastiness and morally-grey characters. **But I could not connect with a single character or event in this book no matter what I did.**

I'm sure the right sort of reader will eat this up and add it to their favourites list. It does seem to be garnering a lot of positive attention. But, honestly, Tomas Piety - war priest and crime lord - just bored me. He was not a narrator I cared for or could become invested in. The only character of interest to me was Bloody Anne, but she alone was not enough to hold up the narrative.

The dark themes didn't bother me (more on that further down), but I do think I took a particular (and early) dislike to the **dick-swinging, beer-guzzling, woman-raping BROS** in this book. Dark books should make me shudder, make me think, make me gasp... they shouldn't make me frown and mutter *morons* under my breath.

True to the genre, this is a dark read. I expected and welcomed the darkness, though I think some additions were gratuitous, such as the pedophilia. If you have any triggers or deep dislikes, they are probably in this book. This is not an exhaustive list but warnings for: **sexual assault, pedophilia, alcohol and substance abuse, all kinds of abuse, graphic violence and torture, and child prostitution.**

Tomas Piety is a crime lord who returns to the place of his birth after fighting in a devastating war. Under his command are a group of loyal soldiers who fought beside him and will now help him reclaim the streets he once ruled over. It's a fairly generic tale of gangs fighting over the streets and torturing a few people along the way. There's some magic thrown in, too, though it seems like this will be developed more in the sequels.

I think my problem was that there were several elements that make up this book and I found none of them compelling. The story of gang warfare, for one, was uninteresting and unoriginal to me. Tomas felt like any old crime boss with a little humanity towards women and children amid his ruthlessness. I couldn't tell you anything about him that makes him different. The world-building, though suitably dark and dreary, was vague. I like a bit more detail painted into my fantasy worlds.

Perhaps Priest of Bones would have also benefited from a third person perspective. We are stuck inside Tomas's mind for the whole book and everyone else feels like little more than a name, colourful as those names may be - Bloody Anne, Black Billy, Kant the Cunt, Will the Wencher, Billy the Boy and more.

Not the gripping read I was hoping for, but there's some strong writing here. Curious grimdark fans should give it a shot.

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Mogsy (MMOGC) says

3 of 5 stars at The BiblioSanctum [https://bibliosanctum.com/2018/10/01/...](https://bibliosanctum.com/2018/10/01/)

Hmm, my thoughts are complicated for this one. *Priest of Bones* by Peter McLean is garnering all kinds of praise and I'm happy it's getting the attention it deserves, but I'm just not feeling as enthusiastic about it as I ought to be. It's as if on some level, I know I should like this—everything about the story screams "me" and the premise sounds exactly like the kind of dark fantasy designed to push all my right buttons. And yet, I felt a bizarre sense of distance when reading this, like how when an overzealous salesperson comes on too strongly with their pitch and actually winds up turning you off from a product you had wanted to buy.

In this novel, which feels a lot like grimdark sword and sorcery meets *The Godfather*, we follow mob boss and army priest Tomas Piety as he returns home to Ellinburg after fighting in a brutal war, only to find his criminal empire in shambles. Someone else had moved in during his absence, using the confusion of the war to take over all his properties and rackets. Keeping his trusted lieutenant Bloody Anne at his side and his volatile brother Jochan at arm's length, Tomas sets out to gather up his gang of Pious Men in preparation to reclaim what he had worked so hard to build.

But in doing so, Tomas unwittingly uncovers the secret of who has been bankrolling his rivals, turning his once beloved city into a hollow shell run by foreign powers. Though he is loathe to do it, Tomas agrees to work clandestinely with the Queen's Men, a group of agents for the crown, if it means saving the kingdom from invaders.

Credit where credit's due: *Priest of Bones* is action-packed and fast-paced, wasting no time in getting right into the thick of things. From my experience reading the *Burned Man* trilogy, I already know McLean doesn't mess around. His prose is sharp as a blade, his dialogue acerbic and punchy. There is hardly any preamble as we are thrown headfirst into the raging turf war, with the violence escalating from fist fights to fire bombs in no time flat.

There's a dark tone to this one, no question about that. But here's where its entire concept also started to unravel for me. Yes, a lot of unsavory things happen in this story, including but not limited to murder, sexual assault, violence and cruelty towards men, women, children, animals, you name it. As an avid reader of grimdark, none of this is anything I haven't seen before, and yet, something about it in this case felt...off. While I wouldn't stay the amount of violence is gratuitous exactly, I would say it feels a bit perfunctory and done for its own sake. There's a real sense of going through the motions when it comes to a lot of these sequences, and character actions also feel scripted like they're only doing and saying the things they do because it's what the reader would expect.

It was difficult connecting with Tomas, as a result. There was a lot of telling and not showing when it came to his motivations, which made him come across as disingenuous. Simply repeating something over and over does not make it any more believable, for example, as when Tomas kept insisting that he respects women because he made Bloody Anne his second and pays her more than his other men. His persona felt artificial, like the very heart and soul of his character was missing. It also didn't help that he was such a practical man. Tomas is someone who does what needs to be done, tackling problems with an almost detached and calculating approach. There's a marriage-of-convenience plot in this story which perfectly illustrated this, where the protagonist might have felt something more for his expedient bride, yet at no point did I actually feel convinced. While I could definitely see what the author was trying to go for with Tomas' character, I just couldn't get on board with it.

Nevertheless, I certainly don't want to discourage anyone from reading this book, especially if it sounds like something you'll enjoy. And to be quite honest, while I did not love *Priest of Bones*, I could still appreciate it for what it was: a fast-moving dark fantasy novel of moral ambiguity and intrigue that scores high on the readability and cool factor meters—and there's absolutely nothing wrong with that. Of course, it would have

been nice if it had gone above and beyond those factors, but at the end of the day, this might just be another case of my misplaced hopes and hype.

Megan says

4.5 stars.

rtc.

I HEARD THIS WAS PARTLY INFLUENCED BY PEAKY BLINDERS SO OF COURSE I'M DUTY-BOUND TO READ IT

Nick T. Borrelli says

Click here for my full review:

<http://outofthisworldrev.blogspot.com...>

Army priest Tomas Piety has come home after three years of fighting in a war that he didn't sign up for. Before being shipped off to the bloody battlefield, Tomas was a very important man in the city of Ellinburg. Some might say he was the only man that really mattered. He is the de facto leader of a powerful crime syndicate that once controlled every aspect of Ellinburg society. Nothing happened in Ellinburg that didn't first go through The Pious Men and their boss Tomas Piety. One thing becomes increasingly obvious to Tomas upon his return to his home city, and that is things have changed dramatically in Ellinburg during the time that he's been away. The first thing that he realizes is that all of the businesses that he and his Pious Men once controlled have been taken over by another faction, seizing upon the vacuum that The Pious Men left behind. This is understandably enraging to Tomas since he's been off fighting and bleeding in a war for his Queen, only to be undercut and have his business operation taken over by a shadowy group who have their own specific motivations. These motivations are murky at best, but could soon be revealed now that a confrontation is almost inevitable between the two groups.

The Pious Men are left with only two real options: leave things as they are and simply blend back into society as returning war heroes or engage in an all-out power struggle to take back what was unjustly (in their minds) stolen from them. Let's just say that Tomas Piety isn't the type of man to take something like this lying down and he simply cannot allow this to stand, if only to save face with his people. Tomas, along with his emotionally unstable brother Jochan and his second in command Bloody Anne must begin hatching a plan to begin to take back each tavern, gaming house, and brothel that they once controlled. Complicating matters even further is the governor of Ellinburg, who doesn't particularly relish what he knows is coming. And what is surely coming is a bloody power play that could potentially cripple the city, leaving corpses strewn across his streets. Tomas knows that he must walk a fine line so as not to run himself and his crew afoul of the law, while still somehow avenging the audacious infiltration that has taken place in his absence.

In the end one true fact emerges, the war that Tomas once fought on foreign soil for three long years never ended even after their victory. Rather, it has just continued in another form on his home turf of Ellinburg. Can Tomas summon the leadership skills that he acquired during that bloody conflict to rally the Pious Men in an overthrow of the outlanders or are they ultimately just too strong and organized to be beaten? And even more problematic to consider, could these interlopers have friends in very high places that don't want them to be taken out?

I knew that I was going to be in for quite a ride with this book when Peter McLean immediately kills off one of the characters in gruesome fashion within the first few paragraphs. I thought, "okay, time to buckle in!" In *PRIEST OF BONES*, we are introduced to this strikingly powerful main character named Tomas Piety. The first thing that I was struck by was how Tomas is portrayed as an unforgiving and sometimes brutal leader of men, yet he has recently taken the cloth of priesthood and in so doing becomes a follower of "Our Lady of Eternal Sorrows". When he is reunited with his brother Jochan after the war, Jochan actually laughs openly at the idea that Tomas is now a priest. I knew at this point in the story that Tomas was going to be one heck of a complex character and very far from one-dimensional. With every decision that he makes and with every thought in his head, it is obvious that he is now somewhat influenced by his newly found religion. The first-person narrative is so effective and really gives you a great sense of how he sees things on a personal level.

At the same time, Tomas has lost none of his overbearing personality and brutality when it comes to his territoriality issues and claims to what he believes are rightfully his. He's a guy who doesn't take very kindly to being challenged. Tomas also has the inane ability to lead and enjoys the unwavering support of his crew through a delicate balance of harsh discipline and also praise, as he shows when he divvies out money from his private stash after The Pious Men conduct a successful raid to take back some of their lost territory. The secondary characters are so incredibly well fleshed-out and are vital to the story as with Tomas' second in command Bloody Anne. Anne has lived a very tortured life and we get a definite taste of that in a couple of scenes where she bears her soul. We also get treated to the disturbing reason why she has been given the unusual moniker "Bloody" Anne. Then there's Jochan, who tends to be a thorn in Tomas' side as he can be quite unstable most of the time. This only gets compounded when his jealousy that Bloody Anne is chosen as Second to Tomas instead of his own brother comes to a head. This little personal battle between brothers serves as a very nice conflict within the overarching conflict in the book, and is something that you have a creeping feeling will be somewhat problematic for Thomas down the road. From the start, I was drawn into the drama between The Pious Men and the invaders who had taken over their former territory. Just as an aside, I think the whole "Godfather" angle is a bit overplayed in some of the descriptions of this book, as this is still a very Fantasy-rooted story and I never once got the feeling that I was reading about Michael Corleone. It's definitely more Scott Lynch than it is Mario Puzo in my opinion. The confrontations between the two battling factions are so stunningly vivid in their descriptions, some not even involving physical violence but rather subterfuge and political maneuvering. *PRIEST OF BONES* gave me many moments of jaw-dropping surprise, there are twists and turns aplenty in these 350 pages. What I originally thought was going to be a Grimdark battle royal became in reality a multi-textured, mystery-infused, character-driven novel that shows you the best and worst that human nature can exhibit under extreme duress. I finished my review of Ravencry right before starting *PRIEST OF BONES* and I was kind of dubious as to whether or not another book could match its intensity and prose, let alone so soon after the fact.

I'm so happy to be able to state that Peter McLean has given us one hell of a story to savor that is absolutely at the lofty level of my previous read. Merely classifying this wonderful book as Grimdark, or Grindark, or Low-Fantasy does it a disservice in my opinion. *PRIEST OF BONES* defies classification in that it is a phenomenal story with sensational characters and should be read by everyone who enjoys bloody great books. If I didn't have such a huge backlog of upcoming reviews that I needed to finish, I would go back to

page one and read it all over again to see if I could pick out anything new. Incidentally, for those wishing to pick up a copy of PRIEST OF BONES, the official U.S. publication date is October 2nd. Now that we are on the doorstep of September, it shouldn't feel like too much of a wait until release day. Grab this one as soon as it is officially available and add it to the top of your reading list, you won't regret it.

Emma says

The war at Abingon is over, but the scars remain. Thomas Piety and his small band of war brutalised ex-soldiers have no more use to the Crown now the conflict has been won- they have been set adrift, one group among many let loose in a land already devastated by famine and plague. However, these may just be luckier than most, for Thomas Piety, leader of the feared Pious Men, had certain criminal interests before the war, and once again there's hard cash to be made in Ellinburg for those with the balls to do it. First though, they have to take back what's theirs from a shady unknown faction bent on much more than just illegal moneymaking, threatening to bring the horror of foreign wars right to the Pious Men's doorstep. And that just won't do. That won't do at all.

It takes no time at all for this fight to get going, the stakes further raised by the arrival of a Queen's Man, a deadly agent of the Crown with their own agenda. To and fro turf battles play alongside the larger issue of malignant overseas interests, building a thrilling, savage pace that lasts right till the final page. Even so, this is not violence porn. Murder is a means to an end as well as a message, but for the most part these are soldiers and when they want people dead, they push a sword through them. Oh, there's flair and inventiveness too, but the brutal efficiency of it is all the more frightening. This world is dark to the core, but not gratuitously so. All the sadistic aspects of this life are there, whether as part of a character's past or in contemporary Ellinburg society, but it's set up pretty quickly, in the way Piety deals with one of his men attempting rape, that such transgressions will receive his own style of harsh justice. And that tends to be pretty final.

So while the book ostensibly seems like it might be straight up grim, it's much more nuanced than that. Don't get me wrong, there's still lots of stabby fun, but it's a long way from the nihilism that characterises true grimdark. The first person narrative has the feel of epic poetry, of Homer: a story of war and of 'heroes' returning to find their home changed, seized by outsiders. Piety talks directly to his audience and his voice has a precision to it, a kind of dry, distancing effect that clashes effectively with the bloody, personal nature of his tale. It has the repetition and musicality of oral storytelling, with him reminding us frequently of what has come before, 'as I have written', as any storyteller does to emphasise and focus attention. He repeatedly returns to one refrain: these are the times we live in. Both reiterations add a sense of rhythm and connectedness to his story, as well as highlighting himself and the present state of affairs as two interwoven strands, combining to produce an inevitably bloodstained pattern. It works to explain his own actions as well as those around him, but isn't there to absolve him, or them, of responsibility. The introspection at the end certainly suggests this; in trying to prevent war, he has brought death and destruction on an unprecedented scale. What does that mean for his position in the future? I can't wait to find out.

Above all, he is a practical man. He might be a priest, but he doesn't hold to any kind of religious morality. Instead, he will do what needs to be done. He provides action based, effective solutions to problems, whether it be dealing with people or removing the competition with bloody finality. That's not to say that he doesn't have his own ethical framework. He looks after his own. His mantra is 'the right man for the right job. And in this book, 'man' means anyone. He actually has a rather enlightened attitude to women and race as well as deep loyalty to those who have bled and fought for him. None of the women are treated as lesser, quite the

opposite. From Gutcutter leader, Ma Aditi, to his ex-soldier aunt, Enaid, and his second, Bloody Anne, the women are capable, clever, and frightening enough to freeze your blood solid. Cross them and they'll soon be carving you open to see just where that sort of stupid came from. It has the same kind of equal opportunities badassery as Malazan and the tone to match. Though the reader sees everything through Piety, there's still some scope for these other characters to shine and the small amount we learn about them all only serves to whet the appetite for more.

This is a compelling blend of historical style fiction, gangland, and magic, with a fascinating main character in Thomas Piety and a voice that's thrillingly original. I have been lucky enough to read some cracking books this year, but I have no doubt this will sit high in my best-of-2018 list.

ARC via Netgalley

Petros Triantafyllou says

Absolutely sensational - What Low Fantasy should be.

Tomas Piety returns from war to see everything he has worked so hard for in his life taken from him. While he was fighting for his country and his Queen, foreigners invaded his city and took all of his businesses and therefore his throne as one of the city's most powerful crime lords. But while he once used to lead gangsters, he now leads soldiers, forged and hardened in the fires of Abington. Soldiers that he won't hesitate to use in order to bring the Pious Men back in power, and harsh justice to those who dare stand in his way.

"I looked down for a moment and gave thanks to Our Lady of Eternal Sorrows for my victory. She hadn't guided my hand, I knew that much. Our Lady doesn't help. Not ever. She doesn't answer prayers or grant boons or give a man anything at all however hard he might pray for it. The best you can hope for from her is that she doesn't take your life today. Maybe tomorrow, aye, but not today. That's as good as it gets, and the rest is up to you. She was a goddess for soldiers and no mistake."

Before I tell you what I think of this book, I'll first delve into its nature. I've seen Priest of Bones described as Grimdark, and although several of its aspects are usually seen in that sub-genre, I find its main thematic elements closer to Low Fantasy: a morally ambiguous, gritty and realistic world, a complex and flawed social order with consecutive power struggles, a limited use of magic, and a lack of heroism (or interest in it).

Priest of Bones is beautifully written and well-thought-out. While you meet a big portion of the rather numerous characters from the very first chapter, you're still able to set them apart from their distinctive personalities and traits. The purpose of such a large cast is clear in the same chapter, when a seemingly important character is promptly killed and disposed in a surprising and shocking manner. While the story is told by a single POV in a character-driven way, the rest of the cast gets enough spotlight throughout the story, making the reader care for their fate, which is rather unsettling at places due to the aforementioned purpose of their large number.

The plot is kept tight from beginning to end, and while a couple of sub-plots naturally emerge to introduce fresh purposes and motives, they don't steal much of the spotlight. The rather small portion of the world introduced in the story is beautifully portrayed and well fleshed-out, but most importantly aptly suited to the story. The magic, although scarcely used, is still there, playing a role rather than serving a purpose, which is what sets apart Priest of Bones from a number of other fantasy debuts of the past few years. The prose is

smooth and easy to follow, and that combined with a flowing story, an even pace and a rising tempo, result in one of those books that you could easily read in one go. All in all, Priest of Bones is Low Fantasy at its finest, and I wouldn't hesitate to call it Debut of the Year.

Mark Lawrence says

Priest of Bones is a very more-ish book, very readable. The prose is solid, the single first person character who delivers the story has a strong voice. It's a very satisfying book to read, the plot never gets away from itself.

Basically Priest of Bones is a story of organised crime with shades of the Godfather here and there. Our protagonist returns from a horrific war with old friends, family, and new friends formally under his command. I say friends, but Tomas Peity is a leader, sometimes a priest, always a soldier, he commands respect rather than friendship and he is returning to the city he was born in to pick up where he left off, ruling the streets of a sizeable district as its crime lord.

Naturally others have moved in during his absence and heads have to be broken, knee-caps removed. Things grow more complicated and the plot thickens, but essentially this is about driving out other gangs, re-establishing control, building an empire of brothels, pubs, gambling houses and the like.

It sounds quite old school. It really isn't. The cast is diverse in terms of gender, race, and sexual preference. It sounds grim and dark ... and it is ... but our priest of bones is quite the humanitarian for a ruthless crime lord, intolerant of rape, violence against women (unless they are armed), child abuse, the drug trade, treating the poor badly, the list goes on. It doesn't stop him leading an exciting life though and cutting his way through some very grimdark situations. There's blood and shit in large measure.

Tomas Piety is a good fighter but he leads by choosing the right man (or woman) for the job, be it Bloody Anne, Billy the Boy, Black Billy, Sir Eland, Kant the Cunt, Jochan Piety - his wild brother, Will the Wencher, or any other of his crew of Pious Men. It's fun to watch him rebuild his empire a piece at a time, ripping down someone else's as he goes.

Given the single point of view, and the high tempo action, most of the characters remain little more than nametags, but we get to know a few much better and it's well done.

Fantasy enters the story through the sporadic appearance of sorcerers with a trainee on the home team. The magic is definitely of the mysterious variety rather than the magic-system sort.

I found it to be a really good read. It's not a book that stuns you with originality, powerful prose, cunningly engineered plot ... it's just very fun to read. It's a charismatic book. I think it could do really well.

EDIT: & now there's a cover!

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

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Ed McDonald says

TLDR: An enjoyable read for lovers of small-scale fantasy, with a diverse cast of crooks.

Priest of Bones can be effectively summarised as “gangsters in fantasyville.” The story follows Tomas Piety as he attempts to reclaim his underworld kingdom following a significant war.

I finished this book after just six days, and for a reader who only manages about 15 books per year, that’s saying something on its own. PoB is an easy read. There’s always something going on, and Mclean manages to combine two of my most liked elements in fantasy – a quick moving plot, and characters with realistic relationships. None of the character interactions felt forced. I’d have liked to see more interaction with two characters in particular, but I’ll have to wait for the sequel to see how those plots turn out.

I’m a big fan of small-scale fantasy. This isn’t epic fantasy; the events, at most, affect the population of a single city and that’s a really refreshing break from big, world sprawling journeys. The cast is actually quite large for a story of this scope, but Mclean uses a naming system that reminds me a little of Glen Cook in order to ensure that you don’t forget who is who (a problem I often have with larger fantasy books). The cast is diverse in terms of ethnicity, gender and sexuality.

This book may get called grimdark at some stage, but I’d not place it as such. Despite his criminal intentions, Piety is a fairly moralistic character. He’s all about being good to the people – kind of so that he can exploit them – but for his time he’s something of a visionary when it comes to morality. There’s a lot of violence, some of it sexual, but we’re never unsure of which side of the moral divide Piety is on.

Fans of Daniel Polansky’s Low Town books, Mark Lawrence’s Prince of Thorns or dare I say Blackwing will find a number of similar themes put forward and I feel that’s the readership who will most appreciate this book.

The Tattooed Book Geek (Drew). says

4.5 stars.

As always this review can also be found on my blog The Tattooed Book Geek:
<https://thetattooedbookgeek.wordpress...>

After three years away, fighting a war in Abingon for Queen and country Tomas Piety returns home to the city of Ellinburg.

Before the war conscripted everyone of an age to fight Tomas with his brother Johan were ‘The Pious Men’ and led by Tomas they were one of the gangs that ruled Ellinburg. Each gang has a specific area of Ellinburg

that they rule with borders dividing the territories. The gangs take taxes, offer protection to those that pay, bribe the City Guard to stay out of the way and run various businesses and criminal enterprises to make money.

Upon his return to Ellinburg Tomas finds that his businesses and his territory have all been stolen from him by outsiders from another country. With veterans from the war that were part of his company and crew along with Jochan, his younger brother and his crew too offering the battle-scarred soldiers jobs, an income and a future Tomas reforms The Pious Men. Setting out to take back his businesses, his streets and reclaim everything that was his before he went off to war taking on the foreigners and other returning gang leaders alike and that's the crux of the story. As the story escalates and builds to its explosive finale, there are, however, added reasons (and slight twists) as to why Tomas needs to consolidate his power in Ellinburg that are revealed during the course of the book.

There is more than enough action to please in the bloody battles, gangland warfare, power struggles and turf wars that take place on the streets of Ellinburg but Priest of Bones is also a very character-driven read with a great story that unfolds too.

Priest of Bones is written in the first person perspective and narrated by Tomas Piety but also features a large cast of ensemble characters. The war in Abingon was hard and harsh and it has taken its toll on those who survived, all have scars, some you can see, others you can't and many of The Pious Men are suffering from battle shock (PTSD). Some of them are downright bad and all of them have questionable morals coming firmly from the 'shades of grey' school of miscreant characters.

For those who like and look for strong female characters in their books, there is Bloody Anne. Bloody Anne was the sergeant in the company that Tomas was the priest of during the war and has remained by his side becoming a Pious Man. She can handle herself in a fight, gets the job done and is tough, she's also a fantastic character. She's not the only strong female character though, Tomas's aunt Enaid an ex-soldier herself is as tough as old leather, a battle axe whose not to be messed with, likewise, Ma Aditi the leader of the Gutcutters, a rival gang and then there's the mysterious Ailsa too.

The whole cast in Tomas's narrative has a role to play in his tale. As we become acquainted with them and their plethora of nicknames McLean turns them into fully-fleshed characters. Offering plenty of page time and giving them their own individual attitudes and personalities. Allowing many of them the chance to shine and to showcase the various abilities that make them important to both The Pious Men and the story that McLean is telling.

Tomas, himself is an intriguing main character and narrator. Lower class, he's neither prim nor proper and there's no excess pomp to his words. Narrating in his own distinctive voice, peppered with foul language and using his own unique phrases and sayings. He's a priest, due to circumstance and the war rather than any excessive religious belief. He's a hard man who delivers harsh justice to those who wrong him and those who deserve it but there's something more to him too. He's a leader who looks after his family, both his blood and his crew, he looks after his people, those under his protection and takes their safety seriously, he's fair to those who show him respect and to those who do right by him and The Pious Men, he's not honourable as such but he has a code that he abides by.

The city of Ellinburg and its streets are the setting for Priest of Bones. We don't get to see a vast amount of the city with the story predominantly taking place in only a couple of the quarters but what we do see is well-depicted, shows the class divide between the rich and the poor and comes to life in a grimy and gritty fashion.

There's not much magic in *Priest of Bones* and its usage is very minimal but it's there and has a role to play. There are various explosives but the fighting is done mainly with steel. Axes, knives and swords are the weaponry of choice for The Pious Men with the occasional crossbow thrown in for good measure allowing for plenty of blood-letting to occur in the battles.

One of the things that I particularly liked about McLean and his writing was how he delivers information to the reader. Alongside Tomas and Jochan only a couple of the other characters are Ellinburg natives who know the city and the ways of The Pious Men, the others don't. This enables McLean to have Tomas explain to and tell the new crew members how things in Ellinburg are done and what the appearances, expectations and rules of The Pious Men and the politics of the city are without it ever feeling like information dumping on his part.

McLean writes in such a way that his words fluently flow and adroitly pull you in. From the first chapter, you find that you are in for a grim read and one in which the author isn't afraid to off his characters. *Priest of Bones* is a dark and fast-paced book that you can devour and I found myself effortlessly reading 100 pages or more in one sitting.

In fantasy and in other genres too some books tend to be padded out with an overly long page-count and they can, on occasion feel like a chore or a slog to get through often outstaying their welcome. *Priest of Bones* isn't one of them and with his book, McLean has created what feels like a short but snappy read that packs both a punch and a lot into its length.

Priest of Bones is an intoxicating blend of fantasy and gangsters that left me wanting more.

Anton says

? absolutely fantastic! Can't wait for the book 2. Will follow up with more notes asap. This is a gorgeous new entry into low-magic grimdark genre!

5 ?? all the way

megs_bookrack says

Priest of Bones by Peter McLean is the start to a new adult grimdark fantasy series. Gritty, violent and highly addictive this book kept me glued to the pages until the very end. The story begins with our badass MC, Tomas Piety, returning to his hometown after fighting in a long, brutal war. He brings with him a hodgepodge group of men, including his righthand 'man' Bloody Anne, and the mysterious child, Billy the Boy. Not far behind comes his younger brother, Jochan, with some of his men, returning as well. The two groups band together and set out to reclaim the territory and businesses previously owned by Piety that have been pirated during his absence.

This story has everything I am looking for when I open a grimdark fantasy. I want dirt. Lots of it. Dirt, grime, blood, stink, cussing, fighting and no mercy. Just me?

This book had all of those things in spades but it also had a lot more. It deals with some heavier topics that I think were handled really well; rather impressively in fact. For example, a lot of the men returning from war struggle with PTSD - I believe they call it battle sickness in the book - and it didn't gloss over that fact; it discussed it, showed what that meant amongst the men and how they helped one another. It also examined the aftermath of childhood sexual abuse - the effects that has as an individual is growing into an adult. There are issues with grief, with guilt, and sexual identity. This is by no means an exhaustive list, just a few that I noticed and appreciated. That is pretty much all I want to say on the plot, as I don't want to reveal anything else that may spoil the paced reveal of the story to anyone.

"All you want is more blood, and more fucking death, and it's never enough for you, is it? You've become a fucking priest of bones!"

I would highly recommend this to anyone who likes grimdark fantasy; particularly people who may like stories like, *The Song of Ice and Fire series*, that have a lot of political intrigue in them and complex relationships. This story left off in the perfect place for the second book to start and trust me, I cannot wait to get my hands on it. Well done, Peter McLean, well done!

Thank you so much to the publisher, Berkeley Publishing Group, for providing me with a copy of this book to read and review. I appreciate the opportunity and look forward to hearing what other readers think of this incredibly dark and delicious story!

James Lafayette Tivendale says

I received an advance reading copy of Priest of Bones in exchange for an honest review. I would like to thank Peter McLean and Ace for the opportunity.

The crime boss, soldier, and priest Tomas Piety has spent the last three years fighting a war he was conscripted into. Although victorious, it all seems hollow with the death, destruction, plague, and famine that has ravished the land. We join Tomas and his crew of trusted mercenaries as they are venturing home, warworn and looking to return to their previous lives. Upon reaching Ellingberg- the city where Tomas and his gang the Pious Men once controlled the streets he soon realises that his businesses have been stolen whilst he has been away spilling blood and guts for his Queen. With his crew of loyal military veterans at his side, he decides it's time to reclaim what is rightfully his. It is soon unravelled that there is more going on in the city than meets the eye this time and the turf war skirmishes of his previous business regime are the least of his worries. To quote the back of the advanced reading copy "The war is not over. It's only just beginning."

I can safely say that this will be the book dark fantasy and grimdark fans will be raving about at the end of this year. It is reminiscent of McDonald's Blackwing for the mercenary crew camaraderie, Puzo's The Godfather or Lee's Jade City for the crime family intricacies, and Horowitz's House of Silk for a few very uncomfortable moments.

This narrative is presented in the first person perspective as if Tomas is dictating or writing his memories. Within the first chapter, I was gripped by the voice, the flow, and Tomas' thoughts and opinions. Essentially, being inside the mind of a crime boss, we are privy to all of his views, ambitions, agendas, and secrets which none of the other characters in the *dramatis personae* are. This cleverly ascertained instant empathy pulled me in and even though you'd never call Tomas an unflawed person you will more than likely be on his side

throughout.

There is a pretty sizable cast of characters in Priest of Bones and for a relatively short book, I initially thought there would be too many. The way it's written as if we are following Tomas' train of thought and views makes it easy to recognise, differentiate between and feel for the wide range of many different individuals within the ensemble. Many of the players including our narrator have hidden objectives, motives and a secret past existence. As the first of a proposed trilogy, not all questions regarding the characters are answered but enough nuggets and reveals are presented that it's truly enticing although often gritty and I'm excited to find out more going forwards. Especially with reference to three of my favourite characters including Tomas' second, the scarred veteran Bloody Anne, his brother the slightly disturbed but warrior berserker Jochan, and his mysterious, cunning, and adopted 12-year-old nephew Billy the Boy. There is also a character called Cutter who is described as "a professional murderer with a mysterious past" who I can't wait to find out more about in the rest of the series. I'll point out that it is a coincidence that he shares a name with an assassin in Malazan Book of the Fallen.

McLean himself described the first entry in War for the Rose Throne as being influenced by a combination of Peaky Blinders and The Godfather, but set in Tudor-era Edinburgh crossed with Industrial Revolution London. I can readily see all these influences, however; I also analysed it as having a sort of medieval Irish twang and in addition, it features lots of fantasy greatness such as deadly magicians, named personal weapons and secret assassin groups. The world building is exquisite and it mostly takes place within Ellingberg as the Pious Men are trying to rebuild their business empire and find out more about who their opposition is. Who is this Bloodhands who is just described as a very, very scary man? I'm sure a map of the city will be featured in the final edition but McLean painted perfect imagery with his lexical choices so that it felt that I was walking down the streets of the Stink or the Wheels and even feeling as if I was with the gang drinking in the local tavern before an inevitable ruckus occurred. My only negative of this story is very minor. I felt that occasionally there was slight, in my opinion, needless repetition of statements that had been said in chapters before yet that didn't take anything away from my enjoyment. An extra point for me to mention is that this book is a complete standalone and all wraps up nicely. That being said there are enough loose threads and intrigue that it sets up the next entry expertly and I will definitely be continuing this series. There is a segment in the last chapter that hints at what may follow in book #2 and it's an exciting prospect.

I'm pretty certain Priest of Bones will be one of the finest grimdark books of the year. Dark fantasy alumni such as Mark Lawrence, Ed McDonald, and Anna Stephens have already posted glowing reviews regarding Priest of Bones and I believe it will be fans of the above mentioned who will find a lot to enjoy here. Although McLean's released the Urban Fantasy series The Burned Man previously, in Priest of Bones he has presented a brilliant debut grimdark outing that is fascinating, gripping and has everything that I look for in a crime-focused novel.

Dave says

Priest of Bones is a fantasy novel, a beginning of a new fantasy series, that is a cross between Conan the Barbarian's world, Nicolo Machiavelli, and the Godfather. It involves battle-hardened men (and women- there is no forgetting Bloody Anne) returning home to what is left of the city back home. Tormented by battlefield nightmares and wounds that will never heal, the Pious Men have returned to reclaim their part of the city- the part they taxed and gave protection to- the businesses they ran. And, it will be a bloody mess reconquering their buildings from the rot that has taken them over. Battlefield violence, magic powers, palace intrigue, and never-ending strategy occupy.

The world that McLean gives us is stark, desperate, violent, and dark. There are no birds singing in the trees. There are no green meadows alive with the sound of music. But, he has filled this world with so much interplay, so much strategy, that you finish this only wanting to pick up the next volume when it comes out and see where he is taking Tomas Piety, Bloody Anne, and the rest of them. The characters are well-drawn and each becomes more fascinating than the next. What's amazing is he has only given us small hints at the world that this story is taking place in and there is so much more out there to reveal in future volumes in this series.

Many thanks to Penguin Publishing for providing a copy for review.

Dianne says

It's grim, it's dark, and it had me from page one! Adult fantasy with a charismatic anti-hero with-a-heart, **PRIEST OF BONES** by Peter McLean is an action-packed tale of a crime lord taking back his town, one villain at a time.

Meet bad guys with a heart, a keen sense of loyalty and a very unique sense of justice as Tomas Piety and his gang finally head home when the war is over. All is not well in the streets he once "owned" and he is determined to take it back, one inch at a time, but he had not expected to be caught up in the dark political intrigue poisoning his home.

Thugs, miscreants and gangsters make up an unlikely band of anti-heroes as they slash and stab their way through their own brand of justice. Razor-taut writing, raw and unadorned, this tale and these characters have forged their way into one of my top reads for this year! Magic and mayhem abound as Peter McLean unleashes his imagination with bold characters and gritty scenes. Fantasy for grown-ups at its finest! I can guarantee I'll be back for more!

I received a complimentary ARC edition from Berkley Publishing Group!

Series: War for the Rose Throne - Book 1

Publisher: Ace (October 2, 2018)

Publication Date: October 2, 2018

Genre: Dark Fantasy

Print Length: 352 pages

Available from: Amazon | Barnes & Noble

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Carole (Carole's Random Life in Books) says

This review can also be found at Carole's Random Life in Books.

I absolutely loved this book. This was one of those books that I was able to lose myself in for just a little while. This book first fell on my radar when it was listed on First to Read. I signed up for a copy but let it expire before I got around to reading it. As luck would have it, my local library had a copy and I was able to

give it a try. Let me tell you, I should have read this book as soon as I had a chance because it was fabulous!

This was a fantasy that I found very easy to slip into its world. It is a rather dark story and you can expect to see a fair amount of blood and violence. I was hooked by this story pretty much right away. The story follows Tomas Piety who happens to be an army priest. The war is over and his group of soldiers that have looked to him for leadership still wish to follow his lead. The group goes back to his home known as the Stink where Tomas plans to put everyone to work in his businesses. When he arrives home, he finds that all of his businesses have been taken over by others and he will have to fight to get them back.

I liked Tomas right away and the more I read, the more I liked him. When necessary, he delivers swift justice but overall he is a fair leader. He is incredibly smart and is a natural leader that seems to know exactly which job would be the right fit for all of his men. He inspires complete loyalty from his men which he returns in full. Tomas is put in a position where he not only needs to reclaim his territory but must also work with a powerful group to help prevent another war. It is a delicate balancing act that he is able to maneuver with finesse.

I thought this book was really exciting. There is plenty of action to keep the pages turning but I found the strategizing to be equally entertaining. The entire book was really well paced. The characters were very well developed and I not only liked Tomas but also really grew to care for the other members of his crew. There were a few magical elements that I found really well done as well.

I would highly recommend this book to fans of darker fantasies. I was totally drawn into this wonderful story that I found almost impossible to set aside. I cannot wait to read the next book in the series!

I received a digital review copy of this book from Penguin Publishing Group via First to Read and borrowed a print copy of the book from my local library.

Initial Thoughts

This was fantastic! Easily the best book that I have read so far in 2019. It was dark and bloody and rather hard to put down. I liked Tomas and his crew. I liked being in his head as he made decisions to lead his men and when he felt like he had no control over what was going on. The more I read the more I liked this group as they tried to retake what was theirs and what was ordered. I will definitely be looking for the next book in this series.
