



Chasing Graves

Ben Galley

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Welcome to Araxes, where getting murdered is just the start of your problems.

"To say that the concept of Chasing Graves is grimdark would be an understatement... The world building is fantastic and reminiscent of Michael Moorcock's Elric series."

– Grimdark Magazine

"Chasing Graves might well be one of the best releases not only for December but for the entirety of 2018."

– BookNest

"Galley has created a fascinating world that feels rife with stories... its history is rich with detail and there's so many avenues to be explored."

– Adam Weller, Fantasy Book Review

"Dark, tense and surprisingly hilarious."

– Laura M. Hughes, Author of Danse Macabre

"With detailed characters, a twisting plot, and a heavy dose of gory darkness, Ben Galley has once again produced a fantasy you can sink your teeth into."

– The Grimmedian

"There's serious grounds here for building something spectacular."

— Emma Davis, Fantasy Book Review

"A great first book to a series I sincerely can't wait to complete."

– Novel Notions

Meet Caltro Basalt. He's a master locksmith, a selfish bastard, and as of his first night in Araxes, stone cold dead.

They call it the City of Countless Souls, the colossal jewel of the Arctian Empire, and all it takes to be its ruler is to own more ghosts than any other. For in Araxes, the dead do not rest in peace in the afterlife, but live on as slaves for the rich.

While Caltro struggles to survive, those around him strive for the emperor's throne in Araxes' cutthroat game of power. The dead gods whisper from corpses, a soulstealer seeks to make a name for himself with the help of an ancient cult, a princess plots to purge the emperor from his armoured Sanctuary, and a murderer drags a body across the desert, intent on reaching Araxes no matter the cost.

Only one thing is certain in Araxes: death is just the beginning.

From award-winning author Ben Galley comes a new dark fantasy trilogy. Inspired by Egyptian mythology and packed with dark humour, action, and intrigue, the Chasing Graves Trilogy is perfect for fans of Michael Moorcock, Brandon Sanderson, Scott Lynch and Joe Abercrombie.

“Chasing Graves is a dark, compelling entry into a trilogy.”

– RockStarlit Book Asylum

“I enjoyed this book immensely, there rarely ever being a moment when I felt ready to put it down before I finished it.”

— Diogo Capelo, Goodreads Reviewer

"Chasing Graves, with its well paced and tight plot is complex, intricate and rewarding. I can't wait to put my hands on the sequel.”

– Lukasz P, Goodreads Reviewer

“The characters are fantastic, colourful and well-rounded.”

– Al Burke

Chasing Graves Details

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From Reader Review Chasing Graves for online ebook

Timy says

You can find this review on my blog!

I've got an ARC in exchange of an honest review from the author.

In everyone's life comes that point when we start to think about what awaits us after death depending on your beliefs. A happy afterlife? Torture? A place in between where we wait until our fate is decided? Or something else? The people of Araxes aren't wondering much, they know all too well what comes for them: endless servitude as shades. The luckier ones can get their freedom and a choice in the matter, but most people is not so fortunate.

"The part of loss that cuts the deepest is that you never know which moments are the last until they've already been and gone. The last meal, the last kiss and such. What hurts is how it pales to the glorious finale you might have imagined."

Araxes is not called the City of Countless Souls for nothing. The soultrade is in full bloom and no one is safe, especially after the sun goes down. Caltro Basalt is well aware of this fact upon arriving to Araxes, to learn about his mysterious employer-wanna-be called Etan. But alas, the traders' bribe are worth more than mere passengers and they ship arrives to port late. And so our Caltro meets his fate way too soon. Aided by a strong want for justice and some ambiguous warning from dead things claiming to be the dead gods. Fortunately Caltro is not one to sit on his ass idly and wait for miracle to happen and thus keeps getting into trouble with his new master, the widow Horix and her personal shade Vex. The latter hates Caltro with a passion from the moment they meet. This results in being punished. And if you wonder what exactly can be tormenting for a ghost who doesn't need, air, food, sleep, then just wait. A walking, talking reanimated cat is just the bonus to scare the shit out of him.

His new master, tal Horix is quite an interesting character. I still can't decide if I like her or not. She is definitely not the harmless, senile old lady some might think. The only thing sharper than her mind is her tongue and she is not afraid to show off both. She recognises an opportunity when she sees one and Caltro picks her interest. Sadly, we have to wait to learn why the interest, so be patient, my friends.

I quite liked Caltro, his snarkiness and headstrong personality and that he got damn good lines from Galley:

"Suppressing stress can be poisonous to a soul, and seeing as I was all soul, I needed to be careful."

He, being the main character, is the only one who got his POV written in first person, and it works really well. Although he works as a locksmith, and prides himself as the best lockpick in the Empire, he has a strong desire for justice. When it comes to himself, that is. My only complaint is that we don't spend more time with him, learning more about his past. And because he is the most interesting character of the whole cast, the only one you can actually care about. Sure, the others have their own hardships and agendas, but Caltro is the most human of them all. Even if he has to live the rest of his 'life' as a shade. We know his current situation, and his goals, but we hardly get to know him really. Or any explanation why the sudden interest of dead things in him. But I guess we'll get answers in the next two books.

Another plotline is centered around Nilith, the fierce Krass women from the steppes, who were forced into a

marriage with a wealthy merchant in Araxes years ago. Getting fed up with her husband finally, she decides to get to the end of the matter. She hunts down her 'beloved', kills him, and plans to drag him through half the Arctian Empire back to Araxes to properly bound his ghost to herself and claim his wealth. Time is running out, she only has 40 days to accomplish this according to the laws regarding Indenturement. Besides carrying a rotting corpse and bearing with Farazar wearing her patience thin. Not talking about all the dangers that awaits them on their way. If I want to be honest, I didn't see much point in this plotline until the very end. And while the banter between husband and wife was entertaining – especially the fact they finally were forced to keep each other's company and learn about the other after many years of marriage – but sometimes I wished we were moving on from this POV. I'm just no fan of a plotline which revolves around traveling from A to B. Things do make sense by the end though and that makes it worth. It also provided a cool opportunity to get a glimpse into the mythology of the world, when the old lady, the bedlam popped up. I pretty much enjoyed that scene.

We have two other side plotlines, one following Sisine, the Queen-in-waiting as she tries her wings in politics and leading without her parents' watching eyes. She is more than a pretty face, she has wits, knowledge, years of training in court politics and a healthy dose of cunning and wilfulness. I'm waiting to see what her plans will come to later in the trilogy. And then we have Boran Temsa, soultrader, merchant with big dreams rising over his own social status. He is ambitious, ruthless and he has questionable morals.

"A person who longs to change the past will only see themselves as a product of what could have been. The longing changes nothing of the present."

The book follows several plotlines, which doesn't quite intertwine yet. Being the first book of a trilogy, Chasing Graves is mostly about world-building, and setting things up for the next two books. And though it is a highly enjoyable book with a pretty cool setting and awesome ideas, it left open too many questions. I felt like there wasn't enough of an arc to the story, and ended quite abruptly. Maybe Nilith's plotline the only one that actually got a half closure with the revelation and all. I also would have liked to read more about the mythology, clearly inspired by a few ancient religions like the Egyptian or the Greek – the dead gods has similar names to the Egyptian's and the river Nyx together with the copper coins might be familiar from Greek mythology.

Galley clearly knows what he is doing, and was able to wave together a story about life and death, revenge and greed, justice and blind fate. Chasing Graves is a dark, compelling entry into a trilogy. The characters and the world is complex and well-built, the story intriguing enough to make you want more. Even if I'm still waiting for that feeling of being completely impressed. So, Mr Galley when is the next book coming out again?

Esmerelda Weatherwax says

I have loved other books by Ben Galley so when I was in a reading slump I decided to jump around in my reading order to get to this one, hoping for a little boost. This was the correct decision, it jump-started my love of reading again.

The opening of this is a very short prelude and the first thing that struck me was how atmospheric it was, it's very descriptive without falling into the "purple" prose trap where it's overdone. I felt the heat of the desert, smelled the decaying bodies, and was totally sucked into the setting in just a few pages.

What's interesting is this book goes back and forth between first person and third person POV depending on which character we're following.

I consider the first person POV to be the main POV, and I certainly liked him the most. Caltro actually has a great sense of humor which nicely balanced the rather bleak storyline this book focuses on. I feel if he wasn't as humorous as he was, I wouldn't have gotten on board as much with this story because it may have been overly dark.

He's not a violent person or a fighter – he's actually pretty chubby and out of shape. I find that really refreshing in a main character since so often our protagonists are super-powerful and usually 'beautiful'. He's a locksmith/thief and he's received a summons from someone who lives in a huge tower known as the Cloudpiercer in the very violent city of Araxes. He doesn't know who this person is, but he's dying to find out who knows him and is also wealthy enough to live in this giant spire. Curiosity gets the best of him and despite his hesitations about visiting a city that's known for murder and soul-stealing, he decides to go check it out. This was a bad decision. He figures that out as soon as he steps off the boat in Araxes. He's immediately chased down by a gang of soulstealers, then he's murdered, and then his ghost is brought back and is enslaved. In this world, it's possible for people to remove a ghost from its body and force it into labor.

The dead in this world are bought and sold, and depending on how they died you get more or less money for their ghosts. Those that died violent deaths and are scarred are worth less money because the scars carry over to their shade form. Those who have been disemboweled still have guts hanging out as shades. So, Caltro's body wasn't supposed to be worth much since he had his throat slit and he had been stabbed multiple times. While he was dead, before he was wrenched back through a binding – a ghost on the other side speaks to him. The ghost says things like: "We call upon the locksmith, the harbinger of change" "you will go back with our gift" "Stop them. Save us. Save yourself". It's cryptic and Caltro doesn't know what's going on, but it's a big clue in that Caltro will have a big impact on the world, and possibly bring an end to this enslavement of souls. Copper is used to keep the shades in line, shades can't feel much once they're dead. They don't sleep, they don't eat – they can't even smell. But, when touched with copper it's like a fiery lash that sends pain through their vaporous forms.

Once Caltro died, he was sold to a woman named Widow Horix, a very sly and intelligent older woman who has a host of shades at her disposal. He's incredibly bitter about his situation and he's constantly plotting a way to get out of his enslavement. She's actually somewhat interested in what Caltro has to say, but only to a point. She asks him what it's like to be dead since she's elderly and will die soon herself.

"It's numb. Cold, both inside and out. I can't feel much apart from the sting of copper, which I seem to have felt frequently since dying. It's like I tread on frozen feet half the time. They're like stumps. Holding things is hard. Infuriating. I mis sleep awfully and I'd happily take a nightmare in an instant if it meant I could dream. Oh, but what hurts the most is the irreversibility and injustice of my situation. To be nothing but a ghost. To own nothing but a scarf. To have the knowledge that I was murdered, robbed of my life and freedom, yet know there's hardly anything I can do to change it. To know that I am a dead slave, and will be, most probably, for all of eternity."

The originality of this blew me away, I've read about the undead, ghosts, sentient ghosts etc. But I've never come across a storyline quite like this one – it was a breath of fresh air and I really needed it to get back in the saddle for reading.

There are a few other storylines as well. Nilith just killed her husband and has his soul and is dragging his body back to Araxes to bind his body in the Grand Nyxwell. This marriage was never a good one, he was

drinking and sleeping around and never really wanted to marry Nilith in the first place. She's a rather rough person, worn down over the 22 years she's been strapped to a husband that doesn't love her, and sees an opportunity to claim his riches. When you hand over a soul, you inherit their wealth, so she's dragging his corpse through the desert trying to get to Araxes so she can be wealthy and move far away.

There's also a pov of the Empress-in-waiting who's hearing about disappearances of nobles, they vanish along with their 'shades' and fortunes. It's not unusual in a city like this for people to go missing, or untimely deaths to occur. But, too many of them can raise eyebrows.

The writing in this was just superb, I feel like he's stepped up his prose game and really went all out. The writing was smooth, fluid and beautiful at times. It never failed to create an awesome atmosphere where I could see exactly what was going on. As a personal thing, I really don't like fake cursing – so in his previous books, I've just kind of pushed through the fake cursing and tried to ignore it. This book uses fuck! It's honestly a relief because it's used a lot (100+), and if it had been something like frick I would have been pretty annoyed. He even uses the word fucktart, which is a new favorite term of mine.

The pacing, for the most part, was very fluid and smooth. There is a new POV introduced at 21% that slowed me down a bit, I was so interested in what was happening to Caltro that hitting a new POV slowed me down just a bit, but once I got a handle on how that storyline fit with everything else it was fast-paced.

I've read some other reviews for this book, and the most common complaint is that people get much more attached to Caltro than the other POV's. I have to admit it's the same for me, but it didn't bother me nearly as much as other people. Since Caltro is the only first person POV and the others are in third, it makes his chapters much more intimate and we get to know him much more than the others. I think it didn't bother me as much because I still found the other POV's interesting despite not getting as attached to them as I did with Caltro. This is a solid book with a very interesting premise that I can highly recommend!

Audience:

multi pov
ghosts/undead
darker stories
enslaved pov
rich world building
atmospheric writing
high fantasy
First and third person writing

Ratings:

Plot: 13/15
Characters: 13.5/15
World Building: 14/15
Writing: 13.5/15
Pacing: 12/15
Originality: 14/15
Personal Enjoyment 10/10

Final Score: 90/100 – 5 star highly recommended!

Al Burke says

Dang, this is good. Review here - <https://www.alwroteabook.com/2018/12/...>

Lukasz says

I deeply enjoyed Galley's *Heart of Stone*. This guy knows how to grab the reader's attention. Once I learned about his new book, I put it near the top of my TBR list. How could I say no to an early ARC of *Chasing Graves*?

You're right. I couldn't.

The story is nuanced, dark and complex. A master locksmith, **Caltro Basalt**, dies a gruesome death on his first night at Araxes. He won't enjoy eternal rest though. Soulstealers led by Boss Boran Temsa turn him into a Shade (a ghost slave) and sell him to serve the rich.

Somewhere between life and death, Caltro struggles to "survive" and make things right. He doesn't realise he had a role to play in a cutthroat game of power. Now, that he's dead, dead gods have a business with him.

Castro's arc intertwines with other complex stories featuring a cast of intriguing, morally grey characters. I especially enjoyed Boss Boran Temsa - a consummate and cruel player of games of power. I can't say I like him as a person, yet he intrigues me. Sisine, a young princess, willing to purge some nobles stood out as another interesting character. Not to mention older Shades who may have an agenda of their own.

World-building, influenced by Egyptian and Greek mythology, hooked me early in the book. To say it's great wouldn't make it a justice. It's engrossing and introduced in a skilful way.

As Chasing Graves opens new trilogy, you shouldn't expect it to work as a standalone. It doesn't. To make things worse, it ends with a cliffhanger. I don't mind as I expect to read the sequel in 2019.

As you see I enjoyed the novel. Asked about Chasing Graves' issues I would admit that choice of narration troubles me. **Ben Galley did something unorthodox**, you see. He tinkered with the expected narrative flow and told the story mixing first and third-person point of view. Caltro's chapters are told in the first-person, other in third-person limited. While not jarring, at times it felt a bit off to me.

It made Caltro's voice much more intimate and much stronger than other characters. I assume it was a deliberate choice. As a result, though, I cared much less about other characters and their stories. Despite excellent plotting of all story lines, I grew impatient when separated from Basalt's POV for more than one chapter.

It didn't bring me out of the story, but I can't say this POV mix became my instant favourite. I recall few books written in this way, for example, *Feersum Endjinn* by Iain Banks. So, yes, **writers do it, readers read it, life goes on**. And yet I don't fully embrace it.

But it's just a minor gripe.

Chasing Graves, with its well paced and tight plot is complex, intricate and rewarding. I can't wait to put my hands on the sequel.

Travis Riddle says

This was quite a good first foray into Galley's work. He's got a great, quick-moving style with creative but not overly-purple prose, which I really appreciate.

The novel follows several different POV characters, all of which have intriguing plotlines that probably could've carried a book on their own. So far they're only slightly overlapping, and I'm excited to see how they get further tangled up in each other as the series progresses.

I'd call the book's world-building its greatest strength. Galley created a fascinating world with some complex and cool rules to it, and I always loved learning more about shades and the different types of binding as well as the seedy underbelly of Araxes and its denizens. It's a dark, cutthroat, and deeply weird world that I enjoyed spending time in and was always eager to learn more about it.

That being said, the book does have one flaw that, admittedly, is more of a personal preference than an objective flaw, but it does really feel like part one of a story as opposed to telling its own complete narrative. I prefer when a series has books that have complete arcs within each book while still furthering the larger narrative, but in Chasing Graves there was no closure to any subplot, large or small, and therefore I finished the book feeling a bit unsatisfied and thinking "Well, that's it," after not really having much of a climax.

Luckily, the rest of the trilogy will be coming out shortly and readers can pick up right where they left off to see how things develop. I'll definitely be picking up the sequels!

Tam says

Chasing Graves was what I'd come to expect from Ben Galley. Unique, fantastic worldbuilding, interesting characters, and much more. I've only previously read The Heart of Stone by Ben Galley, but both that and Chasing Graves have been quite different from most books I've seen in the genre.

The worldbuilding in this book is done exceptionally well. It's based around the concept that death isn't the end, the dead can be bound and enslaved as ghosts. Naturally, this has run on effects to the whole world, and this is what the author does very well. This one change makes massive differences to everything. The economy is based more on souls than silver, murder is commonplace as it brings more souls. Buying, selling, and trading of the dead is common. All these things about how the world is impacted by ghosts create a very realistic world. There are far-reaching consequences of the ability to bind dead souls and it makes the world so immersive. It's also a concept I don't think I've seen anywhere else.

The characters are another interesting point in this book. Ben has a penchant of having unique main characters, and Caltros, the MC, is very different to what I've read in most books. Having just been murdered on his way to a job, Caltros needs to discover how to "live" as a ghost. Enslaved by cruel masters,

it's a very different life to what the once-thief is used to. Chasing Graves makes for a unique story of coping with hardship and enslavement. There are a few other main point of view characters too, and it's very interesting to see the world through their eyes too. Galley does a fantastic job of giving each POV their own voice and making them different. This partially comes from him using first person POV for Caltros, and third person POV for the other characters, and partially how the character view the world around them.

The story itself is a slow burn. Characters' lives are shown and we can see how they develop over the course of the story. My one concern with this was where it ended. Chasing Graves felt somewhat incomplete as its own story and I felt like I needed a bit more of an ending rather than a cliffhanger. It felt like the beginning of a longer story rather than its own story, however, if I had my hands on the sequel I probably wouldn't have minded that so much.

Overall, Chasing Graves was a unique tale with some amazing characters in a very immersive world. Would highly recommend to people who enjoy:

- * Character focused stories
- * Slower pacing
- * Multiple POVs
- * Immersive Worlds
- * Darker stories
- * Ghosts/undead

For more reviews, check out my blog, The Fantasy Inn

Laura Hughes says

Dark, tense and surprisingly hilarious, Chasing Graves is the accomplished opening novel in an exciting new trilogy.

Fiona Tewson says

A new venture

I have been waiting to read this book since I first heard of its conception and I have not been disappointed. A completely new concept with new characters to like - or not like! The book tells the tale of several protagonists and gathers the various ends together towards the end before throwing a spanner in the works, so to speak. We have been promised a short wait for the rest of the trilogy and book 2 is out in January, a new years present to look forward to.

If you like your fantasy to be completely different, then this is the book for you.

Swiffer says

Although I haven't read many works by Ben Galley, his previous SPFBO entry Heart of Stone is one of my

favorite standalone novels I've read this year. It presented a world ravaged by war, with an enslaved golem bound to serve and massacre under various generals throughout the centuries. The story offered an intriguing take on enslavement and the sacrifices made when one's fate is trapped and bound to another. Galley explores similar themes of enslavement in his latest novel, *Chasing Graves*, book one of the eponymous *Chasing Graves* trilogy. Whereas *Heart of Stone* offered an introspective look at one person's struggle to find meaning in his enslavement, *Chasing Graves* focuses on its effects on society at large.

When I first opened the cover, I quickly realized how much time and effort Galley spent creating this detailed world. I was immediately reminded of Steve Rodgers' *City of Shards* in its scope and world-building. We are treated to multiple maps of the truly massive City of Araxes and the surrounding country. In addition to a tone-setting prologue, we are also privy to pre-chapter quotes from the lore of the realm -- some pertinent, some humorous. But most importantly, we are taught the Tenets of the Bound Dead, which is the foundation that the story and its society is built upon. "... the soul of a body that dies in turmoil -- whether through accident or unnatural causes -- will naturally rise several days later. The shade has the chance to turn its body to the Nyx [an underground body of water] should no other claim it first. In cases of the latter, only once said shade is bound can the master own all the soul's belongings and estates." This tenet was put into place centuries ago by the old gods as a "parting gift," and in doing so has birthed a world where organized murder is commonplace. Not only can you get killed for your possessions, but you can also be enslaved and bound to your murderer for untold centuries of labor. The more 'shades' that someone owns, the more land and power and political sway one has. It's a disturbing premise not unlike parts of our own world history when slavery was legal and rampant.

One of the more interesting aspects to the story is how far into this premise Galley has explored. The majority of the story takes place in the gargantuan city of Araxes, home to millions of humans and shades, a coastal city separating a harsh desert and the ocean. The port of the city extended hundreds of miles in both directions, with races and sects from all over the world. Greek and Egyptian influences in architecture and religion dot the landscape. The ruling political party is housed in a centralized structure called *Cloudpiercer*, a tower that spans half a mile thick at the base, and over a mile high. But this isn't the only tall structure: there are elevated roads suspended between rooftops and towering pyramids, hundreds of feet off the ground. High society is a literal description. In a city where organized gangs can attain power, land, and riches through the murder and binding of souls, those in power must protect themselves from nearly everyone. Paranoia runs rampant among the elite, and certain high-ranking officials are so fearful of being slain, they lock themselves into seclusion for years at a time. Oppression threatens from all directions, and it sets a captivating precedent for character motivations.

There are several shifting points of view that switch with each new chapter. We start the story from a first-person POV, and slide into other third-person POVs that include a gangster boss, a queen-in-waiting, and a desert warrior on a desperate mission. The first-person POV, *Caltro Basalt*, is a lockpicker who arrives in Araxes by boat, summoned to the *Cloudpiercer* for an unknown mission. To say that things don't go according to plan is an understatement, and the opening chapter is one of the more exciting hooks I've read to start any book. We also spend time with *Boss Temsa*, a one-legged gang leader with a copper-and-gold eagle claw prosthetic. His slow and menacing gait, ruthless attitude, and dangerous charisma allows Temsa to climb the ranks of society with an ever-increasing army of shades, but his enemies and allies might be too powerful to manage. The story also jumps south to the vast and endless desert, where a warrior nomad named *Nilith* is dragging the body of her ex-husband (along with its undead shade) up through the arid wasteland to Araxes, with the intention of binding him inside the city. This plot thread was shrouded in mystery, as we don't know who these people are in relation to anyone else in the book. There is a reveal towards the end of the story that had been lightly hinted at, but it just opens the floodgate of more questions before the book ends.

This story has a great many elements I enjoyed. The world-building and societal rules were first and foremost the biggest draws for me. The “bound shades” element feels like a hybrid mix of Michael Fletcher’s *Manifest Delusions* universe combined with elements of the Greek underworld and afterlife. Galley is a very talented writer, lacing his pages with dark humor, clever metaphors, and philosophical speculation. There’s enough mystery and action that pulses throughout the story to keep the chapters flying by, and I appreciated how the reader is allowed perspective from the low the high, from the rich to the poor, the living and the dead. The book is relatively short for something that covers so much ground, but the table is set for some exciting events down the road.

There were a couple of areas of the book that I felt could have been improved. While the characters we spend time with are in interesting situations, I didn’t find the characters themselves as compelling as I had hoped. This is partially due to a lack of character histories; we don’t learn much about the background of nearly every character in the story. In some cases, this is done by choice, with a greater purpose in mind. But in other circumstances, such as with Caltro, arguably our main protagonist, we don’t learn much of anything of his life prior to him landing in Araxes. While we still gain a sense of what kind of person Caltro is over time, it still made it difficult to connect with his fate or feel invested in his decisions. He is likeable, funny, and arrogant, but I felt it difficult to really connect with him without knowing what roads he traveled before landing at the port.

I also imagine that the stopping point to this volume might be a point of contention for some readers. Many character goals and motivations start to slip into place, yet there’s a bit of a lack of urgency in some plot threads before the book cuts off. It didn’t feel as if the book had a true ending, or cumulative event that took us into the home stretch. It felt more of a temporary stop-gap until the next book is written. We are left with some cliffhangers, but they felt more of the ‘chapter variety,’ instead of the ‘book-ending’ variety. The story clocks in at 275 pages, a bit on the shorter side of dark fantasy, so perhaps there will be ample time to flesh some areas out in future entries.

In short, Galley has created a fascinating world that feels rife with stories that could be mined across multiple series. Its history is rich with detail and there’s so many avenues to be explored. The opening volume provides more than enough twists and thrills to have me excited for the sequels, though I do hope for a bit more reason to care about what happens to our cast. One of my favorite quotes from the book occurs early in the story, and it resonated in my head as I finished the book. “All things lie in all directions, if you’re committed to walking far enough.” I think this serves as a good metaphor for *Chasing Graves*: I’m confident that Galley has some great plans for this story and world, and I’m excited at its limitless potential. We just have a little further to walk until we get there.

Andy says

This is some of the most enjoyable and original fantasy I’ve come across in a while. It takes place in a world where death is not the end, but for many is just the beginning of your “half-life”, generally meaning a life of servitude to the person who binds you upon your death (or to whoever you’re sold to). Trading in “the indentured” is a large part of this world’s economy, and the main character finds himself murdered and his ghost sold within the opening chapters of the book. This sets off a dark tale of intrigue and mystery that only begins to intersect with other storylines at the end (this is the first in a series).

I’ve read Ben’s work before (his excellent *Heart of Stone*) and as much as I enjoyed that, he appears to have grown by leaps and bounds as a writer since then. This is a much more complex story with many moving

parts that is nonetheless perfectly paced and deftly told. Hats off to the author and his editors! Looking forward to the rest of the series.

Emma says

Here lies Araxes, City of Countless Souls, where death is the pretty shitty beginning of a whole new ‘life’, comprised immediately and forevermore of servitude and toil. No perks. No escape. *No food*. For newly dead Caltro Basalt, this means being late for a very important date, a mysterious appointment in the Cloudpiercer. Instead, his murder takes him on another path, no less dangerous, with stakes higher than life or death and deadly enough to topple more than kings. Power over souls may be everything, but in this cutthroat business, where high politics is more knife in the back than honeyed words, the dead have their own role to play, especially when the gods come calling.

People say a story is a window into another mind, another world. I believe they are more mirrors than windows. In them, we glimpse ourselves dressed up as characters. And like any reflection, the truth we see can be hard to swallow.

If this reflection shows us anything, it's that greed lies at the heart of the human experience. The author's depiction of a corrupt, covetous, and unscrupulous society, one which has created a comprehensive money and power making industry around the enslavement of the dead, feels depressingly real. It's a detail rich, thoroughly thought out creation, with potential threaded through every layer and more than enough to say about the nature of slave societies to ground it in real life. Cleverly adding to the veracity of this overwhelmingly unpleasant place is the ‘primary’ material at the opening of each chapter, including excerpts of the extensive bureaucracy surrounding the trade and sources or ‘documents’ detailing important historical, political, or legal points relating to the business of shades. Ranging from funny to pointedly relevant, these snippets are effective ways of getting a real feel for both the wider world and how things are supposed to run in Araxes. But in a place where death is ever present and people are pretty quick to chose murder as a means of getting ahead, even the king himself is so afraid of being killed that he's apparently locked himself away in a vault, passing his orders on little notes through a tiny letterbox. Of course, the criminal underworld have found a way to make it all work. Such is the inefficacy of the system of government that, at one point, the soul stealers mention how they can rely on its cumbersome nature to protect them from the consequences of their methodological slaughter - it takes years to get things done, so even if a victim complains, it's a problem for another time. Anyone who's had to deal with government departments for anything important will nod their heads in grim understanding. For shades such as Caltro, this means nobody's coming to help - he's going to have to get himself out of this mess. And he's going to complain about it as loudly and frequently as possible while doing so.

The problem is that nobody else in the book is even close to as interesting as Caltro. And he is interesting. Bit selfish, bit whiny, but brilliant with it. I can really get behind his ‘seriously I just came here for an appointment and now i'm dead and you want me to save the damn world’ bad attitude. I feel that, I really do. He dominated the story to such an extent that I didn't want to spend time with anyone else, but the limitations of having a main character as a ghost slave mostly stuck within the confines of one place means that alternative pov chapters are necessary. Other characters are colourful enough, such as local crime Boss, Boran Temsa, the heir to the throne, Sisine, and Nilith, a mysterious woman dragging the body of her dead husband and its attached shade across the desert. They all have their moments, and I loved some of Temsa's crew, especially Miss Ani Jexebel, who is quite the woman, but there wasn't enough depth there to really, truly grab me. With some characters, the author's choice to provide less information was plot driven but even

then the end payoff wasn't worth the feeling of why-is-this-here disconnection while reading their sections. On the other hand, you've got Caltro who, amongst other things, is being murdered right after arriving in town, shut in a sarcophagus for snooping where he shouldn't, and chatting to a god in the body of a reanimated cat (massive props for getting a talking cat into the story). He is living the not-living dream. I genuinely can't wait to see what happens next, his bad luck is already impressive, I have no doubt it's going to be legendary.

This feels to me like a series which still has the opportunity to grow into itself. Like the abrupt ending, there's a sense that there should be that little bit *more*. The incredible worldbuilding and fun hook give it rock solid foundations, but the variation in character appeal means that it doesn't yet make impact it should. There's serious grounds here for building something spectacular, but it's just going to take a little longer to get there. And I certainly don't have any problem waiting, i'll be there for whatever comes next.

ARC via author for fantasybookreview.co.uk

Haïfa says

A big thanks to Ben Galley for providing an ARC of Chasing Graves, in exchange for an honest review.

Spoiler-free review. Please note that the quotes in this review are taken from the ARC edition and may change in the published edition.

You can find this and more at Novel Notions.

When Ben Galley revealed the cover of Chasing Graves and after hearing that it was an Egyptian mythology-inspired fantasy, I knew I had to read the book. My only experience with Galley's writing before CG was with The Heart of Stone and it was a book I very much enjoyed because of its writing, atmosphere, philosophy and the humanity and depth he insufflated in his not quite human main character. Knowing that, I had the feeling I would embark in a deep and atmospheric reading journey with Chasing Graves and I'm happy to say I wasn't wrong.

Caltro Basalt, master locksmith and occasional thief, crossed the Troublesome Sea to get to Araxes (capital of the Arc) after he received a mysterious letter offering him a job. As the ship brings him closer to the city, his curiosity turns into dread. For though the City of Countless Souls is the most thriving city in the Arctian Empire and the Far Reaches, it is also by far the most dangerous. Gangs of soulstealers roam its streets. Unaware and unprotected travelers are murdered and transformed into Shades (or ghosts) to be bound and sold in order to serve eternally.

"To a criminal in Araxes, broad daylight only meant they could see better."

I chose to write this short introduction about Caltro because I feel like his story is central (told in 1st person) and that all the other plots and POVs will eventually intersect with his story at some point. Caltro's POV also felt a lot more intimate than the others. The struggles and tribulations of his new life were raw but his

introspection never lacked humor and sass. The readers will appreciate that the regrets and tragedy that tinted his narration are never too melodramatic or don't weigh down the plot. I do however wish we knew more of Caltro's past before his arrival to Araxes to appreciate his slow development more and understand why he was chosen for a certain cryptic task.

"The part of loss that cuts the deepest is that you never know which moments are the last until they've already been and gone. The last meal, the last kiss and such."

We also follow three other POVs that were told in 3rd person and in my opinion, this storytelling choice made for a very interesting narration style.

- * Sisine, princess of the Arc and Queen-in-Waiting: intriguer, irascible and very ambitious,
- * Boran Temsa, a greedy and cunning Arctian criminal and boss of a soulstealer gang,
- * Nilith, a surprising and very determined woman, dragging a corpse and its unbound ghost across the desert and hoping to reach Araxes before it's too late. Hers is probably my favorite POV because of her tenacity. The variety of encounters she made was interesting to read and her eventful journey was the only one that took me outside of Araxes to explore a more exotic area of the Arc.

"The Tenets were written by the Nyxites, then came the Arc's Code, adopted halfway across the lands. Society was upheaved. The gods perished. Dynasties were built. Murder became fashionable."

Society was indeed upheaved but only the wealthy, and by wealthy I mean those who owned the most Shades, rose to the top of the pyramid. The Arctian society is a dreadfully rotten one; built on greed, the thirst for power and enslavement of the souls of those dead in turmoil, or more frequently simply murdered, enslaved and denied the most basic human rights. Galley also incorporated pretty engaged parallels with capitalism and interesting observations of human nature, which are elements I deeply enjoy in my Fantasy reads. A special mention to the writing too! I mentioned it in my review of Heart of Stone and I need to say it again here: Galley's writing is both simple and elegant, with lovely turns of phrases and clever (and funny) metaphors and puns.

"Any silence longs to be filled, and a lonely mind is wont to fill it with thoughts and made-up whispers, as if the nothingness is too unbearable."

Now before I conclude this review, I want to get back to the Egyptian mythology aspect I mentioned at the very beginning. I think the book had a few similarities: the landscape (desert and oases, sea, dusty cities, and an important river), the pyramidal structures, polytheism and the concept that death is a temporary interruption of life. But while the ancient Egyptians made great efforts to ensure a comfortable and happy afterlife to their dead, the Arctians (mostly) condemn them to eternal servitude. And while the Nile's water nourishes the living, the Nyx's water is used to revive the dead. I hope we will learn more of the dead gods

in the next installments to see if there are stronger inspiration from the Ancient Egyptian deities there!

"Religion had died in my country just as it had in this one."

The pacing was well balanced but I think the book would have benefitted from more action and shocking twists. I'm not saying there weren't any, because there were. But some were sadly predictable because we had glimpses into the antagonists' head and plans. Also, though I really enjoyed reading Caltro and Nilith's perspective, some parts of their journeys didn't really grab my full attention. This is a very personal and subjective feeling and I honestly can't put my finger on what truly didn't work for me and where. However, I'm imputing it to perhaps the wrong timing and my mood at the time.

It's time for me to conclude this already long review! *Chasing Graves* was just as atmospheric, dark and original as I expected it to be. It's a great first book to a series I sincerely can't wait to complete. There is still so much more left to explore in lore, characters (and their hidden agendas) and promising plots and developments to come. I look forward to reading the sequel!

Note:

The next books will be available soon! The author announced on Twitter that the series was complete and that he'd be releasing the sequels at a 1-2 months interval!

Esmerelda Weatherwax says

I think this is my first 5 star in months. I loved everything about this and I'm working on writing a full review today.

Fantastic.

T.L. says

Chasing Graves is a dark, witty romp—delightful, original, and beautifully paced, it oozes confidence.

4.5/5

Full review to be posted on The Fantasy Hive!

Justine says

Firstly, I'd like to thank the author for giving me an advanced copy of this book. I was so intrigued with the concept of an original fantasy world built with an Egyptian flavor that it was instantly pushed to the top of my TBR - I am so glad for this decision. *Chasing Graves* is a deliciously dark tale of treachery, secrets and

murder filled with a cast of truly detestable characters whose intentions cannot ever be taken at face value. The only drawback of reading the first installment of a series before its official release date is the grueling wait for its sequel!

Araxes, the sprawling City of Countless Souls, where wealth is measured by the amount of bound dead slaves owned, lies within the heart of The Arctian Empire. As renowned locksmith Caltro Basalt arrives upon its docks with a promise of employment, he quickly finds himself being pursued by a group of brutal killers that violently heave him into the city's infamous soul trade and sold to the mysterious Widow Horix. Nilith ventures across the Long Sands with her dead husband's corpse - and ghost - in tow; her timely arrival at the Gem of the Arc her sole ambition. Boss Boran Temsa makes a living illegally selling souls to the city's aristocracy with a hunger for power that will allow him to finally emerge from the shadows. Princess Sisine grows weary of her father's inability to rule the empire and wickedly schemes to take control by any means necessary. All the while, as the people of The Arc deal in death and betrayal, the believed dead gods plot to come back to the land of men.

Of all the things that deserve praise, it's impossible not to begin with the outstanding character development. In my opinion, Galley has given breath to some of the finest and most complex voices in modern fantasy. Caltro is incredibly snarky and self-indulgent, yet I couldn't help but feel sympathy for his wrongful enslavement. Nilith is a strong, badass woman who can handle herself in a multitude of adversarial situations, but I had to keep reminding myself she murdered her husband and dragged his corpse through a desert in order to bind his soul. Sisine appears to be a calculating and merciless queen-in-waiting, but she's set to inherit a city so corrupt that her extreme measures may be just what Araxes deserves. Temsa is a despicable murderer and soulstealer, however, he's charming and an unfortunate product of his violent environment only attempting to raise his station. This three-dimensionality made it insanely enjoyable to get acquainted with each and I'm really looking forward to learning more about them.

The setting and environments are beautifully built with striking detail, transporting you directly into this peculiar, yet familiar world. From the diverse districts of Araxes to the endless expanse of the Long Sands to the alien peak of the Firespar, every aspect of this world is so distinct and tangible. The pacing changes based on the character of focus and the situations they're embroiled in, at times passive and other times breakneck, which I found to be extremely refreshing. The prose is articulate and picturesque with seriously cynical undertones, making this an entertaining read.

Chasing Graves is one of the most unique stories I've read this year and ended with a cliffhanger that had me internally screaming for more. It's a strong start to a new series and I'm really excited and looking forward to seeing what happens next. Due out December 7th, this is one you really need to add to your to-read list.
