



Dancer's Lament

Ian C. Esslemont

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Esslemont's all-new prequel trilogy takes readers deeper into the politics and intrigue of the *New York Times* bestselling Malazan Empire. *Dancer's Lament* focuses on the genesis of the empire, and features Dancer, the skilled assassin, who, alongside the mage Kellanved, would found the Malazan empire.

Dancer's Lament Details

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From Reader Review *Dancer's Lament* for online ebook

Stefan Bach says

Dancer's Lament, first book in *Path to Ascendancy* series, is not a prequel.

It's the first book of a new series set in the early history of the *Malazan Empire*.

Distinction very important to indicate less we woke Ian's ire.

But, in all seriousness, it is my hope that (*when finished*) people in future will start *Malazan Book of the Fallen* series from this book instead of *Gardens of the Moon*, written by *Steven Erikson*.

While this book stands on its own, without any need of your prior knowledge to be read, it will hopefully invoke both interest to explore this world further and also give much needed (*and endlessly complained about*) introduction to abrupt start of Steven Erikson's *Gardens of the Moon*. (*Less anyone ever again utters those heretic words such as: "I don't understand" or "I'm lost" and "this is hard" etc.*)

But again, seriously, even after three reads of the main series, while reading this book, I found myself surprised with my lack of understanding of certain things and events, both of which this book explained and clarified to me and prepared me for next one.

This is my first read of Ian's book and I honestly didn't know what to expect.

It's no secret that I hold dear and very close to my heart *Malazan Book of the Fallen* series, and consider it as a peak of epic fantasy and best it has produced in history of the genre.

And that's the (*quite unfair*) reason why avoided Ian's previous books in which story is parallel and overlaps that of main series.

For some twisted reason I feared my opinion and enjoyment would be sullied if it happens that Ian fails to deliver.

But now that I'm reading chronologically everything that was written about this world I wanted to embrace every single thing in it and enjoy journey with everything it has to offer.

After finishing this book I think I'm even more excited about this journey, if that was possible.

Dancer's Lament is different than main series and *Kharkanas* prequels.

First and foremost in its approach.

Focus of this book is to tell personal story of very few POV characters – just three actually – where consequences of their actions are almost immediate and glaringly obvious to reader.

It's also written without that romantic philosophical prose (*which was shockingly apparent especially after archaic prose in Kharkanas*);

there is constant feeling of progress without characters (*and yours*) pondering throughout.

It's less metaphorical.

Which doesn't mean it lacks depth. It's simply a matter of angle of approach to this world.

Story and Characters.

Story is set in inland city *Li Heng* of Central *Malazan Empire*'s continent *Quon Tali*. The city itself is under the rule of powerful sorceress *Shalamant*, known as "*The Protectress*" and her coterie of five mages.

Together they give resistance to the siege of *Li Heng* under ambitious king of *Itko Kan, Chulalorn*, and

constant infiltration of the city with his assassins *Nightblades*, as well as whip-sword wielding bodyguards sent on a 'diplomatic mission'.

In the city is also young *Dorin*, trained assassin, trying to work his way up in criminal underground and gain reputation despite his young appearance and there is also *Wu*, seemingly a charlatan or very incompetent mage, trying to gain access to secrets of a certain misplaced and forgotten *Warren (Realm of magic)*.

Dorin's relationship with Wu is as funny and precious as that of *Cotillion's* with *Shadowthrone*. That's all I'm going to say about that.

We follow three POV characters, and each separately provides us with glimpses of different parts of the story.

With already mentioned Dorin we see how Li Heng's simple citizens cope with siege, as well as exploration of magic realm with his quite unfortunate crossings with Wu.

We get to experience battles those sieges inevitably bring through the eyes of mage *Silk*, as well as other side's perspective of the conflict with whip-sword Kanese girl *Iko*.

All of them, in their own experiences of the world around them, get to grow, shape and change their views, first and foremost of themselves, then of the people and in the end of the world itself.

Beside them, one of the most interesting characters was definitely The Protectress herself.

At first glance she seems like another bland and overpowered character, but when she sees certain elder Warren resurfacing, with realization what that means and which *Son* might be summoned to inspect this occurrence, you would think she is paralyzed with fear.

And if you are familiar with history of the world, you'll notice it's not just fear that makes her 'eyesight fall', but deep shame and regrets of injustice long time ago committed.

You'll find yourself empathetic to her character.

As for other characters, yes, you can expect cameos of major ones, which is always great.
(view spoiler)

All in all, I think Esslemont stroked perfect balance with action and character focus, adding familiar humor to the mix, which brought a very solid entrance to both Path to Ascendancy and Malazan Book of the Fallen series respectively.

3/5

Deadhouse Landing ~/~

Path to Ascendancy Book 3 ~/~

Ultimate Malazan Chronological Reading Order

Jason M Waltz says

This absolutely delivered on all cylinders. There is not a single change necessary, I loved every moment. The development of Dancer, of Shadowthrone, and of their relationship is well-drawn, exhilarating and

illuminating. So many clever scenes and exchanges appear, the layers presented throughout are intricate and so far-reaching I know there are some I won't fully recognize until a reread or book 2.

Dancer is everything I could image, his background, growth, internalizations, motivations. I can trace direct lines between many of his future decisions and actions with those he makes here. His relationship with 'Wu' is spectacularly crafted from opening pages to close.

I enjoyed a fun return to the Malazan world and magics, and the characters (names and deeds and conversations) live up to the best in any of the preceding titles by both authors. It felt really good to be home again.

I still rank MOI as my favorite MBOTF title, but this stands just as tall as the best of all the rest. I will say this is by far the best back story prequel for an integral beloved character I have ever read, let alone highly anticipated.

Esslemont has amped his game beyond belief with this baby, and I loved it.

12-11-17: reread did not disappoint, satisfaction and delight found on all fronts. great to be back among friends again.

Scott says

Amazing! This was my first book from Esselmont, and it definitely won't be my last. I thought this did such a great job expanding on some of the history from the Book of the Fallen; we get to see the making of the Dancer/Kellanved relationship, which always intrigued me in the main series.

I can't wait for the next book to come out!

Scott Hitchcock says

ICE has finally produced the 5* book I've been waiting for and this is better than some of the Erikson books for the first time.

The differences for me are that for the first time he used empathy for the characters and the people in general. Second he did foreboding and portentous events with the correct leveling. In the past he either overdid it beating you in the head with a shovel or did in a way that only confused the issue. Third his general writing style has come so far since Night of Knives.

This still isn't an Erikson book which has its pluses and minuses. The end convergence and the sorrow build into the characters isn't at the same level. You don't need to follow every word so cautiously feeling you'll miss something completely if you don't. When completed you don't feel like you fought Tyson circa 1991 either. ICE has stuck to his style and perfected it. The story is much more straightforward which is nice at times when the author just gives you an information dump.

The biggest thing is anybody who has read the main series.....who doesn't want to know Kellanved and

Dancer's story? Plus there's a host of others we get a clearer picture of or in some cases a view not scene before at all.

I cannot wait until November and Deadhouse Landing.

James Tivendale says

Dancer's Lament is the first of Ian C. Esslemont's Malazan novels that I have read and it was a thoroughly enjoyable experience. It is the first installment of the Path to Ascendancy trilogy. The book is more linear than the previous series entrants that I have read written by Steven Erikson. It is more story driven and less about the world building, however, it still contains a large cast of dramatis personae and the book is complemented by some amazing and very memorable set-pieces.

The action follows the stories and point of views of three characters. Dorin Rav/ Dancer (enough said), Iko (a female sword dancer/guard) and Silk (a vain mage) and how they are affected by a war that takes place at Li Heng and also the inner politics of the city's underworld.

The point of view I found the most intriguing was, of course, Dancer's. Mainly to see the foundation of his relationship with a certain shadowy mage (known as Wu in this story but you know who this person is ;)) and about Dancer's past and training. Wu and Dorin's banter right from the start is great. At some points they seem like a married couple bickering, however, you see the underlining current of respect being built between them throughout the novel. In some books, you can dislike certain POV perspectives and almost speed read those parts - I didn't have this problem with any of these characters. In fact, knowing that these other characters are involved in later ICE books other readers may find extra layers of awesome in their sections that I couldn't see.

I don't want to say too much about the plot. I do not want to reveal anything to my unfortunate American cousins where this hasn't been released yet. What I will say though is a lot of the characters are very cool and likable. Ullara (a bird loving stable girl), Shalmanat (the protectress of the Li Heng) and even the notorious feared beastly creature that haunts the radius of the city. One point I have to say is awesome is when we realise where the name Dancer originated from.

Some people have posted gripes with the way that Ian writes and his skill not being anywhere near that of Steven Erikson. I had no problem with his pace, descriptive nature, the way he presented the world's ideology/ history/ magic and it was a story that I devoured. Maybe his writing has improved but I am looking forward to reading other books of his. Return of the Crimson Guard is high on my priorities to read now. I am intrigued also to see how some of the characters introduced to me here who aren't as frequent in Erikson's novel's (such as the Crimson Guard) behave and develop in ICE's other books.

Would this be a good entry point for the whole Malazan world for a new reader? Perhaps. Due to the limited amount of POV's and the many stunning events make this a good stand-alone read. Maybe I take it for granted though as I am aware of the history, magical systems etc.... that would be lost/ confusing on a new reader and they may be out of their depth. I'd recommend going the normal route with Erikson first but if you like the sound of this review and you haven't read Malazan - by all means take a gamble and let me know what you think! :)

I can't wait for the next installment. Thank you, Ian. Peace x

Michael Britt says

I've slept on this rating, and I'm still calling this a 5 star book.

"He was Dancer now, and Dancer from now on."

This review is up at my new blog that I'll be doing with a few friends check it out here

First of all, the Dramatis Personae in this book had me confused in so many ways. The only name I even recognized was Dassem and K'rul. As we find out, not everyone's name that we've come to know had that name in the beginning. With that said, let's get into the review, shall we?

Dancer's Lament is the first installment of the series that will show how the Malazan Empire came to be. We get to follow Dorin Rav, a young man of Tali who aspires to be an assassin; Silk, a Li Heng city mage; Iko, the newest recruit in the king's body guard aka Kanese Sword-Dancers; and Sister Night, a powerful ancient sorceress. This story does take place in Quon Tali, but mostly stays in the city-state of Li Heng which, before now, had enjoyed relative stability, for centuries, under the guidance of the powerful sorceress known as the Protectress. Suffice it to say that she's not too happy about the arrival of our 2 trouble makers Dorin Rav and Wu. The former is a very skilled assassin eager to join a guild and the latter is a Dal Hon mage who is much harder to kill than they expected. For all the Book of the Fallen veterans, you may recognize these two *wink wink*. We also have a new and ambitious king and his forces from Itko Kan are marching upon Li Heng. He has sent his own assassins, the Nightblades, on ahead of him along with rumors that he has inhuman, nightmarish forces at his command.

If I would've read Esslemont's Malazan Empire series, I'm sure I would've recognized so many other characters. But since I haven't, I missed out on a bit of the story. Reading his Malazan Empire series isn't necessary to enjoy this book, but it helps to do so so you can get the full scope of this book. I still thoroughly enjoyed this book even without getting those references. We get to see so many characters from the Book of the Fallen here, and it was so cool to be able to see most of the big players as kids here. I would love to mention just how many characters make cameos, but it has a much more jaw-dropping effect when you read it and stumble upon them for yourself. I think that was half of what made me love this book so much. Seeing so many major players before they were....well..major players.

And my goodness this was a great installment in the Malazan world. It was, in my opinion, on par with any of Erikson's books. It has a completely different feel to it, but in a very good way. It's a small, quaint story without a broad sweeping universe playing a role and without massive 100k people battles. It's also very straightforward narratively, without a lot of flowery prose, and without a lot of analogies or metaphors. But it is also very competent, so don't take simplicity as an indication of poor writing. I think it's the simplicity that made this so enjoyable. Erikson's writing can be so complicated, at times, so it was nice to get an "origins"/Malazan story where I'm not constantly wondering what something really means, being able to take everything at face value. Also, none of the 2 page philosophical musings was pretty nice.

Dancer's Lament makes me so excited for what's to come in the Path to Ascendancy series! It's got just about everything I loved from the Book of the Fallen, but in a more compact and easier to read package. Highly

recommend to anyone who has finished the main series and is looking for some more of that Malazan fix. I would also recommend thinking about possibly reading Esslemont's Malazan Empire series first. Just so you can fully enjoy this one. But it's not necessary if you feel like skipping them for now.

Emma says

Reread edit: so much love for this on the second read through. Next book out in November so if any Malazan fans haven't picked this one up yet, get to it....it's well worth your time.

My experience of this book was entirely that of gleeful absorption and joyful celebration... because it's about Dancer and Kellanved. If you have read Erikson's Malazan books and these two characters aren't on your favourites list, then you need to read the series again, because you're reading it wrong.

My main concern was that learning more about these two would lessen the frustrating, yet enticing, mystery they represent, but it was not the case. Seeing them in their less than fully formed state is frequently amusing, but also chilling, because we know the future, and that future starts here.

The only actual review-like addition I'm going to make to this piece of enthusiasm is that I really enjoyed Esslemont's style in this book. Having only read Night of Knives before now, the skill level he showed in this novel has increased tenfold. He nails the humour and there are moments of unsettling menace that chilled me. I'm already eager for more.

Huge thanks to Ian C. Esslemont, Random House/Transworld Publishers, and Netgalley for this copy in exchange for an honest review.

Ctgt says

Couple of things. I'm a huge fan of the main Malazan series, loved it. I have read several ICE books and have been underwhelmed. This book is different and reminded me of why I loved the main series. Great characters, great interactions, great dialogue, great action. If you've read the main series you know the great duos and everyone has a favorite. Mine was Tehol & Bugg but you could go with Quick Ben & Kalam, Whiskeyjack & Dujek, Gess & Stormy, Tool & Toc, Icarium & Mappo...the list goes on and on. This book continues that tradition, the duo of Dorin(Dancer) and Wu(Kellanved) is fantastic, mixing humor with annoyance and exasperation and maybe even a budding friendship. Add in a nice group of supporting characters that I cared about and you have a great read. I liked the way the author started the story at a time when both characters are feeling their way through their powers/skills and make plenty of mistakes and miscalculations.

This is what I was hoping for with the other ICE books.

Chris says

copy from Netgalley in exchange for a review

Dancer's Lament is the first in a new fantasy series by Ian C. Esslemont. It's set in the Malazan universe (which he shares with Steven Erikson), a place where gods meddle in the affairs of men, where mages throw fire and vanish into shadows, and where monstrosity and divinity keep remarkably close company.

In this case, the book begins the story of Dancer – a newly minted assassin-for-hire, with a rather high opinion of himself, and a skillset which almost marries up with that opinion. As the text opens, Dancer is shown as cold, arrogant and pragmatically selfish; though he's also not cruel, and there's a current of wry humour and self-awareness running beneath his internal monologue which makes it entertainingly charming. The author manages to show us Dancer as a man with a degree of practicality, looking for work and needing to gain a reputation and a client base – the mindset of a tradesman, who happens to deal in murder. In a parallel mental track, Dancer is also rather anti-authoritarian, at the start of the narrative, he hasn't run into anyone who is really worth listening to for some time. This blends with a personal dislike of sadism and petty cruelties to make a man rather ill-suited to work in the world of crime.

As the narrative moves along, Dancer does undergo a gradual shift in character. If just as cool to humanity generally, he seems to collect a small group of people who he cares about, exposing the underpinning of his humanity. Esslemont shows us a man driven to succeed, defining who he is, and what he is (and is not) willing to do in order to achieve his goals. It's believable, compelling and great fun to read.

Alongside Dancer is his partner, the mage Wu. A schemer, a byzantine plotter, and a man with a seemingly questionable grasp on reality. The reader doesn't get into Wu's head, but his presence helps define Dancer for us, as the latter reacts against several of Wu's insanities. The relationship that builds between them is delightful – often humorous, occasionally deadly serious, and often rather odd. They make an excellent duo, and Wu's lackadaisical attitude, matched with a laser-like mental acuity, make him a great pair with Dancer.

There's a supporting cast here as well; I particularly enjoyed the City Mage, Silk, whose efforts to protect his city and its ruler from harm were entirely understandable; that it was laced with a subtle undercurrent of romance was unexpected, but pitch perfect. But there were others – the aloof and mysterious Protectress, the extremely strange gang of City Mages acting alongside Silk, and an array of underworld denizens and mysterious characters. As ever with the world of Malazan, it feels like many of these may resurface, their agenda as yet obfuscated. I suppose we shall see in the next books in the series.

The book centres on the city of Li Heng, a city surrounded by walls and defined by its enmities. We spend a lot of time in the lower dens of the city, amongst the various bizarre and downright unpleasant characters that live and work there.. It's a heaving place, scurrying with effort and intensity, with undertones of fear and the promise of violence on the edge of every word. Credit to Esslemont for making the place feel very real, and also for making it seem very much like a place that I wouldn't want to visit.

The contrast with the higher echelons of the city is, I imagine, deliberate. Here the pace is more languid, though consequences for a mis-step probably no less acute. The city mages live in a world of marble walls and darkened catacombs, and there's a wonderful blend of the clean and the eerie in their world.

In the end, Esslemont has built a city that I can believe exists, an organic entity running on the hopes and fears of its denizens. It's portrayed well enough that I cared what happened to the city as a whole, alongside

the characters, and that indicates a very well drawn world.

Plot-wise – well, no spoilers, as ever. Dancer and Wu’s peregrinations through the city are entertaining, their freelancing escapades shifting from humour to cool violence and back again, in a way which makes it difficult to stop reading. Alongside this intimate portrayal of the beginnings of a partnership, there’s a broader epic sweep – battles, sieges, demons. War-magic and monstrosities. Heroism, cowardice, and the occasional bout of humanity. They’re all on show here, drawing the reader in, ratcheting up the tension, and then delivering the goods.

Is it worth reading? If you’re a Malazan fan already, yes. There’s some great shout-outs to earlier versions of familiar characters embedded in the text, and the story of Dancer and Wu is an intriguing one. As a standalone, for a new reader – again, yes. There’s no need to be familiar with the Malazan backstory to get into this, and it’s a very fine fantasy novel in its own right. It’s a streamlined piece, focused on characters and narrative, not yet embroiled in the sprawling Malazan backstory – so an ideal point to enter that world. In the end, it’s a well written fantasy novel, with epic scope, solid world building, and compelling, believable, entertaining characters – and that makes it worth a read in my book.

Bob Milne says

While I did have a digital ARCs of Dancer's Lament and Forge of Darkness at one point, I hesitated to read then for two reasons. First, I like being able to hold an epic fantasy, to feel the weight of it, and to flip back and forth between chapters, glossaries, maps, and all the rest. It's a reading experience that no Kindle or Kobo can ever capture.

More importantly, however, I struggle with prequels. Epic fantasy, as a genre, is so story-driven that there's a narrative disadvantage in knowing how it all will end. There needs to be a hook, a uniqueness in the approach, and a wide enough cast of compelling characters to make up for the fact that we already know what happens to the heroes - and, in many cases, the villains.

With Forge of Darkness, Steven Erikson's hook is to leap way back, three-hundred thousand years before the Malazan Book of the Fallen, with a book that becomes more mythology than history. It makes for an interesting read, because we know exactly who the players are, and as wide-ranging as the story is, it's only been hinted at or mentioned in passing before. On the other hand, Ian C. Esslemont only steps back a generation or two with Dancer's Lament, telling a much smaller story. A contrary approach in just about every respect, it explores the origins of a few notable characters, while hinting and teasing at the possible identities of others, in a very focused, very constrained manner.

As befits its narrative focus, Forge of Darkness is a big, heavy, bloated story. It is not an easy read, not by any means. It's extraordinarily dry in places, and often approaches a level of melodrama that feels more like a book you were forced to read in high school as opposed to one you chose to enjoy. Too often it gets mired in nonsensical conversations about grand, esoteric concepts, which do nothing to advance the plot, and suffers from a serious pacing issue, with hundreds of pages passing between events of interest.

Dancer's Lament, on the other hand, is told far more simply, with far more immediacy, and drives forward with almost breakneck pacing. It is a far easier read, a book that you can breeze through over a weekend,

enjoying the adventure. It's only flaw is that, without the mythological weight, it feels too much like the coming-of-age story that was so refreshingly absent from the original 16 books, but it's a rare instance of humanizing larger-than-life heroes in a way that works. That said, it was the most enjoyable of the two prequels, a story that recaptures the humor and the adventure of what made the Malazan Empire worth exploring.

Each of these books does something very well. If you could combine the two, get Erikson and Esslemont to collaborate on the narrative, then I think you'd have something really exciting - and, apparently, I'm not the only reader who feels that way. Erikson has put *Walk in Shadow* on hold, citing poor sales of *Forge of Darkness* and *Fall of Light*, while Esslemont seems to be selling very well, with Kellanved's *Reach* looking sure to follow *Deadhouse Landing*. Having said that, knowing that Erikson has chosen to move onto *The God is not Willing*, which will pick up Karsa Orlong's story a few years after *The Crippled God*, has me infinitely more excited than either prequel.

Originally reviewed at Beauty in Ruins

Fernando Martins says

This book had everything to be good.

Dancer? Checked.

Kellanved? Checked.

Dassem? Checked.

The beginning of the partnership that would come to change the world? Checked.

It's only natural that it was a great read for me and that I would give it 5 stars.

I NEED MORE.

Markus says

Sweet Jesus, is this book for real?

Looks like heaven on earth in the Malazan universe to me.

Milo (BOK) says

Never read any of the Malazan novels before but really enjoyed this one. Will have to bump them up my to-read list.

Lee says

WOW! Mr Esslemont. Just WOW!

After building me up with Orb Spectre, Throne and then crushing me with Blood and Bone, I am deliriously happy to announce that Dancer's Lament is your finest work yet.

Fantastic being back in the Malazan world and with a history lesson to be had from two of the most interesting characters in the entire series. Dancers Lament, as all Malazan fans will be aware, is the how Cotillion (The Rope) becomes the man he is that we know in MBotF. His meeting with Ammanas and how their friendship becomes and their goals together.

There are a few gems in here of other characters from ICE's stories and I thoroughly enjoyed meeting some of them. Silk in particular was a fun read.

So I can say I loved this book and wait eagerly for the next in the series. A must read for fan missing the Malazan world.

Rebecca says

Dancer's Lament was one of my most anticipated releases of 2016 and not only was I stunned actually be approved for an advanced copy, I was pleasantly surprised that the book exceeded my expectations. I've read most of Esslemont's other books set in the Malazan empire and thought they were quality stories, but didn't capture my imagination quite as strongly as the Malazan Book of the Fallen series by Erikson. They were an excellent source of enrichment and added depth as well as breadth to the Malazan world as a whole.

Dancer's Lament is by far my favorite book written by Ian Esslemont- I read it in two sittings, which for me at least is unheard of when it comes to these books because they are quite dense in regards to subject matter and require 100% of your attention.

The characters in this story will be most familiar to those who've read the main Malazan Book of the Fallen story arc and it's like finding Easter eggs the whole way through. Dorin, an assassin, is the main protagonist, though other perspectives are shown as the story progresses. I'm sure those familiar to this world can guess who this turns out to be, as with Wu the Dal Honese mage who happens to walk with a cane. It's a great introduction to these characters and I so look forward to seeing what mischief they get into in the coming books. There were some really excellent 'side' character in this book and for the most part, I couldn't place them in the other series. Silk for instance, seemed incredibly familiar (did he end up in the Crimson Guard, or am I crazy?) and I thought he was an interesting character. Ullara was my favorite secondary character, mostly because she took care of all these really incredibly bird of prey and then she basically adopted Dorin too. The appearances of the Azathanai got me really excited- I was like, "I KNOW WHO THIS IS!! HOW ARE THEY INVOLVED??" Also, Hood is involved and at this point in the narrative that means Dassem is involved too!!! I always wished that we had gotten to see him more in the other books, but here he is!

The actual storyline of this was really just classic and it seems as if it will blend seamlessly with the other story arcs and tie everything up in a nice neat little package. I wasn't sure what I was expecting out of this, but I loved how the story details not only the meeting of Dancer and Kellanved but the turmoil and politics

of the Talian continent prior to the Malazan Empire. It's like Erikson and Esslemont are putting all their creative talents into making a world that nearly lives and breathes it's so beautifully rendered.

Dancer's Lament is a must read for current fans and those just starting their journey into the Malazan empire. I would have to say that this is Esslemont's best work yet and I look forward to seeing how he'll tell the rest of this story. For those who want to begin reading these books, I would recommend starting with The Malazan Book of the Fallen series prior to this, but you can start with Dancer's Lament and it shouldn't be too confusing. I found it more enjoyable for having read almost all the other books written by both Erikson and Esslemont.
