



THE ACE OF SKULLS

REVIEWED BY KRISTY CAMPION

The Ace of Skulls (2013) is the final instalment of the four book series *Tales of the Ketty Jay* by Chris Wooding. This fast-paced steampunk fiction is set in a post-bellum period after the First and Second “Aerium Wars,” which come tantalizingly close to mimicking historic real-world conflicts.

Wooding skillfully combines the style of the postwar years with a cunning mixture of science and magic, religion and politics. The result is a rich and intriguing world through which the crew of the *Ketty Jay* airship maraud, and while few anti-heroes wouldn’t try to rob an orphanage, Captain Darian Frey, and the freebooting crew of the *Ketty Jay*, fail to do even that.

The characters are a comedic goldmine, from the womanising liar Captain Darian Frey to the self-loathing aristocrat Crake and his soulless golem; the sarcastic half-daemon Jez; a drunken surgeon; a twitchy Aerium War veteran; a mind-bogglingly stupid pilot; and a crack house urchin. Oh,

and a cat with more personality than the average Disney princess.

The crew half-drunkenly rampage from one ill-planned adventure to the next. The Third Aerium War, long-promised in previous novels, finally starts and the *Ketty Jay* is, naturally, right in the thick of it. Despite their general depravity, the crew is driven by a misguided sense of honour, which comes precipitously close to getting them killed. Indeed, Wooding mocks their brushes with death, especially in the context of a looming Third Aerium War that they find themselves haplessly involved in.

The underlying themes concern the unpredictability of life and luck. The ace of skulls is a card game, similar to poker. The ace is the wildcard of the deck, which can make or break you irrespective of the other cards. Luck, then, is the difference between life and death for these freebooters, who are themselves something of a wildcard.

This theme elevates the novel from merely entertaining to something far more meaningful. The plot is driven by the choices of the characters, who are given the opportunity to betray each other according to their capricious natures, or stand together with the loyalty of a real aircrew. The true wildcard lies in their decisions to stand by each other, even when their instincts tell them to abandon ship.

The novel’s only weak point concerns the half-daemon Jez, specifically, her inner battle against the daemon within her. The reader empathises with Jez’s human desire

to retain her individuality, and is intrigued and repelled by the daemon's contending yearning to dissipate all sense of self within the safe, brainless conformity of the greater daemon community's hive mind.

However, Wooding disassociates himself from Jez long before the half-demon's internal conflict has manifested properly in the text. The attempt to substitute Jez, the only female lead, with the unlovable urchin Ashua Vode is also painfully transparent. Wooding's handling of this situation makes for a jarring moment in an otherwise harmonious text.

This is the only clumsiness within an otherwise outstanding novel. The crew of the *Ketty Jay* are delightfully flawed, and instead of puritanically trying to turn them into upstanding citizens, Wooding wittily celebrates their vices, even as they rise courageously to overcome challenges. Wooding stays true to his characters' quirks to the end, and successfully rounds up the series.

The crew of the *Ketty Jay* tread perilously close to destruction, but when the tale is delivered with such panache, you almost don't mind that it's the luck of the draw.

The Ace of Skulls by Wooding, Chris. London: Gollancz, 2013. ISBN 978-0575098114. RRP \$12.99. pp. 496.



DOOMED

REVIEWED BY MOLLY HOEY

Doomed (2013) is the second instalment of Chuck Palahniuk's trilogy on Madison Spencer, who is 13, chubby and dead. With *Doomed* Palahniuk has maintained his dedication to both the romantic and Menippean folk traditions, offering a tender yet glib look at our fear and fascination with morality, death and consequence. *Damned* (2011), the first instalment in this trilogy, saw Madison come to terms with her damnation, conquering Satan and his demonic hordes. *Doomed* is the inevitable revelation that defeating Lucifer was never going to be that straightforward.

In a previous review of *Damned* I criticised three areas of Palahniuk's first instalment: it didn't really explore any of the ideas it dealt with, the narrative voice was "irksome," and it lacked character development. Well I am happy to bow to the fact that perhaps Chuck knows best, and perhaps all creators have a grand scheme in mind.