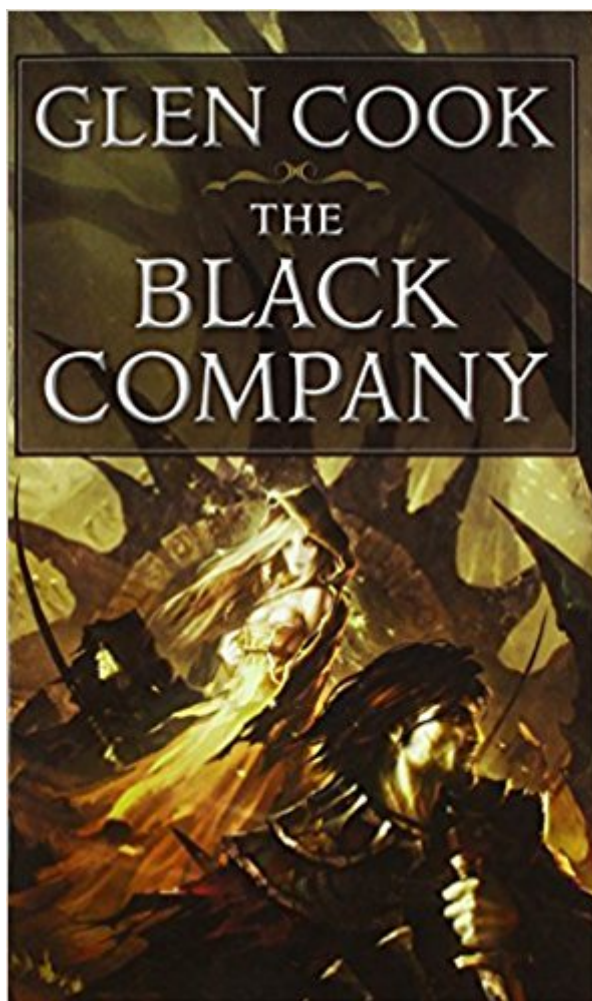


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The Black Company (Chronicles Of The Black Company #1)



Synopsis

Some feel the Lady, newly risen from centuries in thrall, stands between humankind and evil. Some feel she is evil itself. The hard-bitten men of the Black Company take their pay and do what they must, burying their doubts with their dead. Until the prophesy: The White Rose has been reborn, somewhere, to embody good once more. There must be a way for the Black Company to find her... So begins one of the greatest fantasy epics of our age. —Glen Cook's Chronicles of the Black Company.

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Customer Reviews

Born in 1944, Glen Cook grew up in northern California, served in the U.S. Navy, attended the University of Missouri, and was one of the earliest graduates of the well-known "Clarion" workshop SF writers. Since 1971 he has published a large number of SF and fantasy novels, including the "Dread Empire" series, the occult-detective "Garrett" novels, and the very popular "Black Company" sequence that began with the publication of *The Black Company* in 1984. Among his SF novels is *A Passage at Arms*. After working many years for General Motors, Cook now writes full-time. He lives near St. Louis, Missouri, with his wife Carol.

Chapter One: LEGATE There were prodigies and portents enough, One-Eye says. We must blame ourselves for misinterpreting them. One-Eye's handicap in no way impairs his marvelous hindsight. Lightning from a clear sky smote the Necropolitan Hill. One bolt struck the bronze plaque sealing the tomb of the forvalaka, obliterating half the spell of confinement. It rained stones. Statues

bled. Priests at several temples reported sacrificial victims without hearts or livers. One victim escaped after its bowels were opened and was not recaptured. At the Fork Barracks, where the Urban Cohorts were billeted, the image of Teux turned completely around. For nine evenings running, ten black vultures circled the Bastion. Then one evicted the eagle which lived atop the Paper Tower. Astrologers refused readings, fearing for their lives. A mad soothsayer wandered the streets proclaiming the imminent end of the world. At the Bastion, the eagle not only departed, the ivy on the outer ramparts withered and gave way to a creeper which appeared black in all but the most intense sunlight. But that happens every year. Fools can make an omen of anything in retrospect. We should have been better prepared. We did have four modestly accomplished wizards to stand sentinel against predatory tomorrows — though never by any means as sophisticated as divining through sheeps' entrails. Still, the best augurs are those who divine from the portents of the past. They compile phenomenal records. Beryl totters perpetually, ready to stumble over a precipice into chaos. The Queen of the Jewel Cities was old and decadent and mad, filled with the stench of degeneracy and moral dryrot. Only a fool would be surprised by anything found creeping its night streets. * * * I had every shutter thrown wide, praying for a breath off the harbor, rotting fish and all. There wasn't enough breeze to stir a cobweb. I mopped my face and grimaced at my first patient. "Crabs again, Curly?" He grinned feebly. His face was pale. "It's my stomach, Croaker." His pate looks like a polished ostrich egg. Thus the name. I checked the watch schedule and duty roster. Nothing there he would want to avoid. "It's bad, Croaker. Really." "Uhm." I assumed my professional demeanor, sure what it was. His skin was clammy, despite the heat. "Eaten outside the commissary lately, Curly?" A fly landed on his head, strutted like a conqueror. He didn't notice. "Yeah. Three, four times." "Uhm." I mixed a nasty, milky concoction. "Drink this. All of it." His whole face puckered at the first taste. "Look, Croaker, I. The smell of the stuff revolted me. "Drink, friend. Two men died before I came up with that. Then Pokey took it and lived." Word was out about that. He drank. "You mean it's poison? The damned Blues slipped me something?" "Take it easy. You'll be okay. Yeah. It looks that way." I had to open up Walleye and Wild Bruce to learn the truth. It was a subtle poison. "Get over there on the cot where the breeze will hit you — if the son of a bitch ever comes up. And lie still. Let the stuff work." I settled him down. "Tell me what you ate outside." I collected a pen and a chart tacked onto a board. I had done the same with Pokey, and with Wild Bruce before he died, and had had Walleye's platoon sergeant

backtrack his movements. I was sure the poison had come from one of several nearby dives frequented by the Bastion garrison. Curly produced one across-the-board match. "Bingo! We've got the bastards now." "Who?" "He was ready to go settle up himself." "You rest. I'll see the Captain." I patted his shoulder, checked the next room. Curly was it for morning sick call. I took the long route, along Trejan's Wall, which overlooks Beryl's harbor. Halfway over I paused, stared north, past the mole and lighthouse and Fortress Island, at the Sea of Torments. Particolored sails speckled the dingy grey-brown water as coastal dhows scooted out along the spiderweb of routes linking the Jewel Cities. The upper air was still and heavy and hazy. The horizon could not be discerned. But down on the water the air was in motion. There was always a breeze out around the Island, though it avoided the shore as if fearing leprosy. Closer at hand, the wheeling gulls were as surly and lackadaisical as the day promised to make most men. Another summer in service to the Syndic of Beryl, sweating and grimy, thanklessly shielding him from political rivals and his undisciplined native troops. Another summer busting our butts for Curly's reward. The pay was good, but not in coin of the soul. Our forebrethren would be embarrassed to see us so diminished. Beryl is misery curdled, but also ancient and intriguing. Its history is a bottomless well filled with murky water. I amuse myself plumbing its shadowy depths, trying to isolate fact from fiction, legend, and myth. No easy task, for the city's earlier historians wrote with an eye to pleasing the powers of their day. The most interesting period, for me, is the ancient kingdom, which is the least satisfactorily chronicled. It was then, in the reign of Niam, that the forvalaka came, were overcome after a decade of terror, and were confined in their dark tomb atop the Necropolitan Hill. Echoes of that terror persist in folklore and matronly admonitions to unruly children. No one recalls what the forvalaka were, now. I resumed walking, despairing of beating the heat. The sentries, in their shaded kiosks, wore towels draped around their necks. A breeze startled me. I faced the harbor. A ship was rounding the Island, a great lumbering beast that dwarfed the dhows and feluccas. A silver skull bulged in the center of its full-bellied black sail. That skull's red eyes glowed. Fires flickered behind its broken teeth. A glittering silver band encircled the skull. "What the hell is that?" a sentry asked. "I don't know, Whitey." The ship's size impressed me more than did its flashy sail. The four minor wizards we had with the Company could match that showmanship. But I'd never seen a galley sporting five banks of oars. I recalled my mission. I knocked on the Captain's door. He did not respond. I invited myself inside, found him snoring in his big wooden chair. "Yo!" I hollered. "Fire! Riots in the Groan! Dancing at the Gate of Dawn!" Dancing was an old time general who

nearly destroyed Beryl. People still shudder at his name. The Captain was cool. He didn't crack an eyelid or smile. "You're presumptuous, Croaker. When are you going to learn to go through channels?" "Channels meant bug the Lieutenant first. Don't interrupt his nap unless the Blues were storming the Bastion. I explained about Curly and my chart. He swung his feet off the desk. "Sounds like work for Mercy." His voice had a hard edge. The Black Company does not suffer malicious attacks upon its men. * * * Mercy was our nastiest platoon leader. He thought a dozen men would suffice, but let Silent and me tag along. I could patch the wounded. Silent would be useful if the Blues played rough. Silent held us up half a day while he made a quick trip to the woods. "What the hell you up to?" I asked when he got back, lugging a ratty-looking sack. He just grinned. Silent he is and silent he stays. The place was called Mole Tavern. It was a comfortable hangout. I had passed many an evening there. Mercy assigned three men to the back door, and a pair each to the two

"It was a night for screams. A broiling, sticky night of the sort that abrades that last thin barrier between the civilized man and the monster crouched in his soul. The screams came from homes where fear, heat, and overcrowding had put too much strain on the monster's chains." "There are no self-proclaimed villains, only regiments of self-proclaimed saints. Victorious historians rule where good or evil lies. We adjure labels. We fight for money and indefinable pride. The politics, the ethics, the moralities, are irrelevant." "They sit around together like a couple of rocks, talking about the same things boulders do. They are content just to share one another's company." "Consider little children. There are not many of them not cute and lovable and precious, sweet as whipped honey and butter. So where do all the wicked people come from?" "Little girls are twice as precious and innocent as little boys. I do not know a culture that does not make them that way." "There was always a breeze out around the Island, though it avoided the shore as if fearing leprosy. Closer at hand, the wheeling gulls were as surly and lackadaisical as the day promised to make most men." So this was a book that I should not have liked. It kinda ticked off a pet peeve. But I can't help myself. I enjoyed Croaker's (yes, that's the character's name) voice entirely too much. I mean, with names like One-eye, Silent, and Tom-Tom how could you not at least be swept away in the entertainment? And as you can see by the above, there were some great quotes in this book. Soooo, story? I'm not sure. I guess I can sum it up by saying that a mercenary group gets a contract to work for the bad guys and ends up going on a campaign to further their employer's advances. Because our protagonists are portrayed as

neither good nor evil, it makes for some interesting observations. And my last sentence should warn those who love old school clearly good vs clearly bad that this might not be the book for them. While I consider Croaker to be inherently good, some of those in his company are not. And he works for the bad guys. He does stuff for the bad guys. So fair warning. What was my annoyance?

Summaries. I can't believe I'm going to say this, but some of the scenes were just lumped into a summary paragraph. I mean, to the point where it was almost like, "We went north and fought and won." Nothing that simple, but it sure did feel like it. That happened a lot. Normally I wouldn't mind, I mean, I'm not a fan of descriptions, but I felt a bit cheated out of some action. Matter of fact, even the action scenes felt a bit summed up. If Croaker fought, it was pretty much lumped up as that, instead of giving us a play by play of his moves, or how many bad guys he took on. I found it as enjoyable as annoying. I will say, dialog mostly advanced the story. I like dialog, so this worked. Another thing that took me a bit to adjust to was Cook's writing style. Scenes could be a bit confusing at times, especially the beginning. You kinda feel tossed around. It's a lot to adjust to right from the get go. There were breathtaking sentences, but I'd say most of it read choppy. At first, I wasn't a fan, but as the story progressed I actually found it captivating. A few examples: "One-eye grunted, discarded. Candy picked up and spread. One-eye cursed." "The list was disappointing. I gave it to Elmo. He cursed, spat, cursed again. He kicked the planks we were using as a card table." As you can see, it's very short, abrupt, and choppy. Somehow it works, though. It fits with the characters, and I found myself not noticing it the farther I read. The world was fleshed out enough for me, but those crazy into world building might find it lacking. I didn't really get a good feel for it, but then again, I'm not one to usually notice an underdeveloped world. I like a story that moves. How about those characters? I can't say that I love one over another. There was a group • the main group the story focuses on • that I loved. All of them. They were each well built, flawed, unique, and interacted with each member differently. I liked that aspect. Most of all, I think I enjoyed Croaker's voice; how he spoke, how he observed, his morals and lack thereof. He wasn't my favorite character • I'd actually be challenged to name one • but he kept things moving along. Not only were the "good" guys entertaining, but some of the "bad" guys were equally developed. Cook did a great job at portraying some pretty dark characters and I found a few of them as captivating as some of the

good guys. I will definitely be picking up the second book. I've heard it's better, and I'm curious to see where the story goes. We've got a peek towards the direction we'll be traveling, and I'm excited about it. But most of all, I look forward to hanging out with the gang again. The great banter and wide cast makes it delightfully entertaining. And now that I'm adjusted to Cook's style and know what to expect, I think I'll be able to sit back and enjoy the second one more. Overall, this book's got some great cussing, it moves along nicely, it's choppy and delightfully free of lengthy descriptions, it's got a great set of characters, and some deep thoughts. I'd recommend it to any fantasy lover.

I enjoyed this book so much that I'm now neck deep in the series. If you're a fan of the Malazan series, then you should really give this one a shot and see what you think. If you enjoyed following Fiddler and the Bonehunters, then you'll probably feel at home following the Black Company in their escapades. It has the same militaristic feel to it, along with secret plots, back stabbing, epic battles, magic, and all in a much smaller scope than the Malazan series. The story is told primarily from the perspective of Croaker, the company physician and annalist, and it appears that the story is essentially being told from the annals. Any time the story is being told in first person, you know it is from Croaker's point of view. Everyone else is referred to in third person, which I really appreciate because it helps you keep track of who you are following and what's currently going on. It's a somewhat simple story in scope, at least in comparison to other Epic Fantasy novels (Wheel of Time, Malazan Book of the Fallen) but I quickly came to appreciate the smaller scope of the story. The series is still deep enough to be enticing, but not so deep that you get lost at every turn trying to make sense of it all. You don't really get any of the "fluff" either that longer books have big chunks of (or in some cases, entire books filled with fluff.) I love the story, I love the characters, my only complaint really is that I wish they were a bit longer. I'm chewing through these books so fast, but enjoying every minute of it.

Just discovered this great read. For any who are familiar with the manga series "Berserk" or ever played the Kingdom Under Fire old xbox games, will feel right at home in the Black Company. There is a good blend of drama, humor and fantasy intrigue. The setting and locations are standard dark fantasy stuff (very Lord of Rings-ish without the metahuman elements), but it's the characters that sell the story. There is great use of personal perspective in experiencing how things play out, since

the main protagonist is a surgeon/scribe in the morally ambiguous Black Company. Experiencing the story through the moral filter of a hired sword, allows the whole good vs. evil story to come through more eloquently, which is the strongest aspect of the writing. There is no clean cut motivations and all sides play for power no matter the intent. Having only read the first in the series, I am looking forward to the rest of my time dug in with the grizzled band of mercenaries.

The writing style was different than what I was used to. There could have been so much more detail about the battles and the relationships between people. I would have liked a bit more explanation about the powers the wizards had. It was hard for me to get through this book, but it ended in such a way that I think I'll continue the series. I might not pick up the second one for a while still, but I think I'll end up finishing the series. Disclaimer: I'm pretty used to the epic world and relationship building in the Wheel of Time series and Brandon Sanderson's work, so I'm a bit primed for a different storytelling style.

A story about a mercenary group working for the evil empire. A fun concept is what holds this book together. The fantasy aspect is interesting, as well as the characters interactions. The magic system and world is not as fleshed out as one would like. There were points that were confusing even after rereading. It was however an enjoyable read, and looking forward to the next installment of the series.

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