

'COVENANT'

A BOOK REVIEW WITH AUTHOR DEREK THOMPSON
BY CASEY MORRIS



ANALYSIS

Ever wonder what would happen if a novel successfully blended fantasy with a touch of dystopian fiction? What if it were balanced with themes of sacrifice, faith, and self-discovery? That's exactly what Derek Thompson's "Covenant" does in an adventure that brings the power of magic, mysticism, and old

Earth mythology to the paranoia of an alt-reality reminiscent of our own. For the uninitiated (myself included), Thompson's novel succeeds in immersing the reader in the Western mysteries, a tradition that includes Tarot, path-workings, meditation, and the Tree of Life. The protagonist, Syriem, is a resident of Tarsis, a heavily-surveilled city-state ruled by dictator Ces Frayer. Tarsis is patrolled by Targen, a secret police that operates in suppression, blood, and fear. Yet there's something off about Syriem; a chance meeting at a local market introduces him to Isca, a magic-worker who is part of an oppressed spiritual community known as the Thaylin Sarra. Isca is actually a High Priestess in the Thaylin Sarra arts. Her search for a messenger, one who will signal the return of the Righteous One (and possibly relieve the long-suffering Thaylin Sarra) leads her to Syriem. As Syriem's quest unfolds, we learn the significance of the magical Tablet, the Black Rod, and of accepting fate by mastering one's True Will. A bildungsroman with layers of parallel plots, a trove of magic, and above all mystery, "Covenant" is an accomplishment in depth and scope. Thompson's gifts as a storyteller engross as much as they inspire.

Thompson begins at the end of an ill-fated member of the Thaylin Sarra. Errmoyné lives in the community zone, an impoverished area of Tarsis. He holds the Tablet and is expected to deliver it to his successor. Summoning her and visions of Sarrell (the significance of the latter is clearer later) by means of a magic ritual, he meets her in an alleyway. His task done, he's almost immediately apprehended by the Targen who beat him to death. This opening scene sets the tone for much of the deliberation and action of every character in "Covenant." The interfacing of Thaylin Sarra subversion, Targen persecution, and magic foregrounds a source of tension for Thompson: self-discovery is a painful process, one requiring duty and sacrifice. This process isn't straightforward: a higher-calling can damage relationships, particularly those with family and friends. It also brings irrevocable change, as the world of the self reshapes all within and without. Another interesting conclusion of "Covenant" relates to the nature of promises. More than an expression of faith, promises wield creative and destructive forces that sometimes escape the control of those who utter them. It's not that some promises are unbreakable; they're indistinct from will and fate.

Such a promise leads Syriem to Isca. The background of their meeting builds with details about Syriem's upbringing, his friendship with the imprudent Dorrón, and Isca's life as a priestess. An important note is Syriem's inclination to magic, an awareness that rises when he encounters Isca at the market. Seemingly happenstance, Syriem requests Isca to read his palm using sticks.

Yet it's during this ritual that she sees a strange pattern: "The sticks tumbled slyly onto the cloth, revealing the configuration she knew as the Messenger." Astonished, Isca asks him to account. The answer is crucial thematically and stylistically for Thompson, one definitive of the rest of the novel. When Syriem replies "I come because she calls me," he suggests the convergence of many threads. Ostensibly born to parents from Tarsis, Syriem (as is later revealed) was blessed by a Thaylin Sarra priest at birth and bestowed a six-pointed metal star, a talisman of his origins. Isca's perception of him, construed as an energy field affected by emotional and cognitive states, senses this duality. Thompson's phrase for this is "Hybrolen, twice-born." Syriem and Isca subsequently collaborate to affirm and prepare him for his role as Messenger. But what does this role actually entail? Thompson isn't one for spoilers; Syriem's development continues right up to the end. What's clear is that Syriem has a major part in the liberation of the Thaylin Sarra from Targen hegemony. He is to herald a new age, a return to the mythical city of Sarrell (the promised land of the Thaylin Sarra) in concert with the Righteous One. Thompson exerts a lot of effort to portray Syriem and Isca's complex relationship: what starts as a one-sided infatuation, for sexual and less for spiritual reasons, matures as Syriem discovers who he is fated to be. They work, practice magic, pray, and immerse themselves in mystical literature. Scenes of magic rituals, with incense, candles of various hues, sigils, glyphs, and the powers of the Tablet or Black Rod, periodically immerse the reader in new "planes of consciousness."

The text is italicized as a symbol of such transitions. As mentioned above, Thaylin Sarra can perceive auras around others. This isn't an Orwellian prosecution of thought-crime: it's an interpretation of energy emanating from the solar plexus. To top it off, Syriem and Isca's consummation after time away is less cathartic than a respite from the mission they and the Thaylin Sarra must accomplish.

Some readers may feel the novel's action is slow to start. The first half of the book's interweaving of character development, Thaylin Sarra spirituality and magic, and the exodus from Tarsis is a lot to digest. But from chapter 12 onwards, "Covenant" moves with the pace and spontaneity apropos to literary fantasy. Thompson's knack for world building pays off, as a slate of new figures and surprises dazzle the mind's eye. Sadly, Isca's death in a fire, the result of Targen sabotage, leaves Syriem devastated. His pain turns to willpower that's channeled by the arrival of Turor, the Righteous One. Thompson does an excellent job portraying Syriem and Turor's dynamic. The wiser Turor is a foil to Syriem's impulsive curiosity. The mentor-mentee vibe isn't really there as much as an interplay of mutual suspicion, a sense of duty, and a contest of wills. Tarsis' oppressed Thaylin Sarra, in cooperation with aggrieved uninitiates (commonfolk Gentiles), devise a plan to flee: On Ascension Day (the day commemorating Ces Frayer's rise to power), they gather after-hours at the loading dock where Syriem works. Breaking into six groups, they hijack Transvectors and other vehicles before driving through the gates of Tarsis. The attempt largely succeeds:

one group bribes a young border-guard while the other draws on Thaylin Sarra magic to avoid the bullets and bombs of Targen security forces. Save for one Transvector lost in the fray, all reunite in the wilderness beyond. One observation is the impact of magic in these events. Prior to the exodus, Thaylin Sarra magic seemed more nebulous and essentially religious without much bearing on reality. But that changes. Aside from aiding their escape, much emphasis is paid to the two talismans respectively held by Syriem and Turor: the Tablet and the Black Rod. Thompson refers to these as "the Lock and the Key," which together pave the way to freedom. The Black Rod's recalcitrant nature is like the Ring in Tolkien's epic trilogy: it has a mind of its own. Turor has a disinterested air about the Black Rod, admonishing Syriem to listen to his True Will above all else. Regardless, they both succumb at times to its malevolent influence in their pursuit of Sarrell.

Another point here is that interludes of magic come to include religious language, some of which sounds Christian: prior to their flight from Tarsis, the Thaylin Sarra observe the "Eucharist" with candles, flatcakes, and prayer; during rituals performed by Turor and Syriem, the words "Adonai," "Jehovah," and "It is finished" appear alongside quotations from Psalm 23; and the Tree of Life, the Judeo-Christian symbol of immortality, becomes a glyph mapping the world of "Covenant," its eleven city-states, settlements, and hinterlands connected by branching paths. Thompson doesn't explore these connections. He repurposes them in the dystopian yet deeply magical world of "Covenant," implying continuity of faith even if

it involves radically different beliefs and practices. This also hints at the unity of spiritual experience, one that transcends space, time, and worlds real or imagined. The significance of magic reaches a fever-pitch in later chapters. Throughout most of the story, there's talk of the "Enemy" and evil of the "Appren." Thompson devotes some time to the provenance of the Appren, their emergence from a pre-history of warring sects and tribes. What's critical is the role they play in Tarsis as an instrument of Ces Frayer's totalitarian regime. A terrifying adversary comes in Ursephal, an Appren priestess who mutates into a blood-sucking tentacled monster. Her introduction is no less menacing: she tortures and forces a confession out of the arrested Dorron, who bailed from the exodus at the last second. Ursephal's obligation to the Frayer dynasty is illustrated in her partnership with the dictator's jealous niece, Arkastrell. Together, they vow to intercept the exodus and recover the Black Rod. One limitation to this parallel plot is how late Thompson leaves it; we're not privy to the inner-workings of the regime until the closing chapters. Fear and the sinister aims of the Appren feel less potent than they should.

The race to Sarrell and adrenaline-fueled action of the novel's denouement are thrilling to read. From forests to sandy deserts, the expedition traverses lands between settlements and city-states. A few members die in a violent storm, but not enough to fend off a Targen unit's ambush (a clash which raises fears of an Appren spy among them). Slowly, Syriem and Turor's rivalry cools as the

boy learns to master his True Will and to trust the latter's counsel. A detail emerges worth mention. Prior to leaving Tarsis, Syriem had grown close to another family with mixed Thaylin Sarra heritage. Easen, a dissident Tarsien, has a daughter named Athenna. Easen's Thaylin Sarra wife, Buda, disappeared years ago in a presumed Targen cover-up. Thompson's narrative powers shine in the following sequence: Ursephal, the disgusting Appren priestess, takes on Buda's likeness. A ritual with a caged rat gains her access to Dorron's dreams (who's betrothed to Athenna). It's there she encounters Athenna, who mistakes her for her estranged mother. Athenna's True Will dissipates her tentacled wiles in a reversal of love and sympathy. This plot twist is brilliant because it challenges traditional conceptions of good and evil. Not unlike the corrupted hobbit Gollum, whose lust for the Ring morphed him into an unrecognizable beast, Ursephal's thirst for power and dark arts led her astray; it led her to become a monster. Yet the same remnants of humanity Frodo discovers in Gollum abide in Ursephal, a vulnerability that proves fateful for the Thaylin Sarra fellowship. The fluid characterization of Ursephal also bears allegorical weight. In all stories, especially fantasies, it's tempting to view enemies as irredeemable. This occurs in the real-world: everything from personal conflicts, drama at work, to domestic politics and wars offer a version of an us vs. them, good vs. evil narrative. Thompson's achievement, like Tolkien's, is to refuse this oversimplification. It's subtler, even still taboo, to humanize the other side. When Jesus commands to "love thy enemies," he isn't preempting the inevitability of conflict.

He's acknowledging the Tree of Life, the branches that grace and envelop all.

There's no moral equivalence here, however. Appren and its functionaries, headed by Ursephal, are an existential threat to everyone in and outside of Tarsis. They must be stopped. The climatic action takes on epic proportions, as Turor rises as the Righteous One and Syriem embraces his True Will. But before they reach Sarrell, the fellowship must confront a traitor among them. Cordal, a Tarsien, is possessed by Sekha, a shard of the Black Rod turned demon of the Appren. Instead of reaching Sarrell, Cordal convinces many travellers to stay in the abandoned settlement of Dastala, site of a previous massacre by Appren forces. Wary of another ambush and of ceding the Black Rod and Tablet to Ursephal, Syriem confronts Sekha in his astral vision, a "plane of consciousness" reserved for magic. Weakened but not defeated, Sekha wrests himself from Cordal. The treachery intensifies the sense of urgency Turor and Syriem feel to reach Sarrell. Bloodlust and vengeance, a natural response to betrayal for many, evades the fellowship who welcome a sober Cordal back into their ranks. This represents another flouting of clichés, as Thompson preserves the dynamism and high-mindedness of the lead characters. Equally, such restraint isn't coincidental. Throughout many passages, especially those with magical "planes of consciousness," Thompson stresses the theme of mastering one's True Will. A shadow of Nietzschean thought, of the self-overcoming might of the "will to power" suffuses the logic of Thaylin Sarra self-mastery.

Subordinating emotion, magic, and every other rite to one's True Will is a self-overcoming. But the payoff is not the same. For Thompson, True Will liberates more than the empowered self, more than the elect like Syriem, Turor, and Isca. Thaylin Sarra teaches a collective True Will, a shared resolve to transcend oneself for the many, one's city or settlement for Sarrell.

Self-mastery primes Syriem and Turor for the ultimate resolution. The journey is nearly over. The fight for Sarrell, for freedom and restitution is almost won. In their wanderings, the travelers reach the Thaylin Sarra settlement of Crail. Within walking distance of Sarrell, Crail ties multiple loose ends at once: the settlement Matriarch turns out to be Buda, who recognizing Turor soon reunites with Easen and Athenna; many travelers are happy to join the settlement and forgo Sarrell for life in the desert caves. Syriem and Turor return the lost shard, Sekha, with the Black Rod. This facilitates the unity of Lock and Key, a ritual Thompson relates in luminous prose. Angels, intermingling "planes of consciousness," kaleidoscopic colours, and starbursts of death and rebirth fuse to a mind-bending extreme that satisfies aesthetically but is hard to visualize. Perhaps, that's the point. The novel's falling action is tamer, which belies the foregoing tension. Upon reaching the cavern of Sarrell, the narrative abruptly ends: Syriem searches for Isca. Turor returns to his brooding aloofness. Thaylin Sarra rejoice. But what about Sarrell itself? What about its legendary beauty, its rainbow-arched gates? Is such an ending sufficient? Yes. But it certainly leaves room for more.

A half-page epilogue tells of Ursephal, who never featured in the climactic action, burying an unnamed corpse. Yes, her bloodthirsty vengeance and league with the Sehka threatened to derail the mission. But it never really materialized. Most readers may deem this a cue to a sequel, a reasonable choice as the flatness of Thompson's cliff-hanger begs for more.

C O N C L U S I O N

"Covenant" is a skillfully-crafted story that appeals to diehard fans of fantasy and novice readers alike. Thompson does well to balance a vast and complex foundation of knowledge, specifically of magic and the Western Mysteries, with dynamically developed characters who are relatable yet unpredictable. His unflagging style, especially his diction, impresses the mind and ear. One of the most finely executed points is how effortlessly Thompson traces the inner life of his characters. Emotional contours, words, thoughts, dreams, and desires form as much of the narrative tapestry as scenes of magic or heart-pounding action. Another is the mix of genres "Covenant" draws upon: a touch of dystopian and cyberpunk oppression meets magical fantasy. Thompson's allusions to occultism, Christianity, and Norse mythology add even more nuance. For all its merits, a limitation (again perhaps deliberate) is the anticlimactic way things end. It would doubtless please readers (myself included) to continue the story. It would be a joy to read of the fate of Syriem and Isca, the terror of Ursephal, and the splendour of Sarrell.



INTERVIEW

WITH AUTHOR DEREK THOMPSON

One of the first things I noticed when reading your novel is its blend of genres. “Covenant” seems to incorporate elements of dystopian fiction, cyberpunk, and magical fantasy in one narrative. Was that intentional? Were there any influences upon your writing process?

Covenant was written over several years, and had several iterations, so the influences changed and increased as it developed. I agree that it spans genres and for some readers that has been its downfall! However, I think the story comes out as it needs to. There was always going to be a strong magical fantasy core to the novel but I wanted to contrast two cultures (the City States and the Settlements), so *sci-fi/dystopian* also felt right for some elements. Long after I'd completed the book I realised that John Christopher's novel, *The Guardians*, had been an influence for one of the basic premises. I was already familiar with the works of two prominent British occultists in the 20th century – Dion Fortune and Gareth Knight – and tried to interpret some of those ideas about consciousness and the Western Esoteric Tradition. In particular, I drew upon GK's two volumes of *A Practical guide to Qabalistic Symbolism*. I wanted to create a multi-layered novel that, on one level, could be read purely as a story of a magical quest. On another level entirely, for those who already had an interest in esoteric subjects, I wanted to interweave the symbolism (eg : the tarot), meditation elements and mythology to inspire a deeper sort of engagement with the text.

Throughout the story, there are many references to Christian ritual, occultism, and even Norse mythology. Near the end, one character (perhaps Verrsa) quotes Psalm 23. What do these references mean in the context of “Covenant?”

Although you refer to it as Christian ritual, these key ceremonies in the novel show repeated patterns that will be familiar to many who follow other 'paths' as well. The symbolism of the four elements / four directions, and various attributions, for example, are staples of the Western Esoteric Tradition, which is an umbrella term that incorporates Christian, Celtic, Qabalistic, Norse and other belief systems. The five seals on the Tablet, and the five rituals to activate them, can be related (on one level) to the Middle Pillar exercise associated primarily with The Golden Dawn lodges. The Psalm 23 quote was partly a play on words for the Rod reference, but as with everything in Covenant, nothing is there by chance. It's one of the reasons it took so long to create a version I was happy with!

Isca, Turor, Buda and many other characters always return to the theme of mastering one's True Will. They describe it as a way towards obtaining Truth and understanding, possibly spiritual wholeness. I couldn't help but think of Nietzschean philosophy, especially the “will to power,” when reading those passages. Is the Thaylin Sarra idea of self-overcoming influenced by Nietzsche? What's your inspiration there?

The meaning of True Will in Covenant is not inspired by Nietzsche. (I had to look him up to be sure!) True Will, for the Thaylin Sarra is about raising consciousness so

INTERVIEW

WITH AUTHOR DEREK THOMPSON

that one is aligned with a higher purpose – one that may not even be fully understood or benefited from. It's definitely about alignment and service rather than any will to power, although that then requires acting in accordance with True Will.

If it's okay with you, I have to ask about the novel's ending. It seems to leave some major developments unaddressed: Will Syriem reunite with Isca? Will Ursephal seek vengeance against Turor? My question here is: will "Covenant" have a sequel (but no spoilers!), or did you intend the ending to be so open and undefined?

I had always intended to write a sequel (possibly two!), which would go some way to explaining why some characters behave as they do. One of the many significant threads in Covenant is that some time ago a spiritual teacher had four pupils (representing four elements, etc!) but her work was incomplete. Both she and they have now reincarnated in the time of Covenant in order to complete their 'great work'. The sequel gradually reveals who those characters now are, which drives them to a form of resolution. Two things prevented me completing the sequel. Firstly, Covenant did really find a readership, so committing the time and effort again didn't make sense – although I have thousands of words in notes. Secondly, I had a spy thriller published, which led to a series, and then pivoted to write a series of crime thrillers. I still see Covenant as my magnum opus, but it seems my ambitions for it were a bit too magnum! Another writing project I considered was a much shorter guide to Covenant, a commentary reflecting on the symbolism and dynamics, and what I was trying to get across. A couple of snippets: 1. There is a bond of love between Syriem and Isca, and a bond of betrayal between Ursephal and Turor. 2. Isca's daughter is named Alazne, which is a Basque name meaning miracle.

My last question is: many of the novel's antagonists like Ursephal, Cordal, even Dorrion are quite complex. They're driven by selfish motives or (in the case of Cordal) possessed by evil forces. Yet they're also humane, full of doubts and competing desires. What inspired your dynamic characterization of these figures? And why do the Thaylin Sarra treat them, specifically Cordal, with such empathy and patience?

I really wanted to create nuanced and complex characters, whose actions could be at least partly understood in the context of their experiences. As I've indicated above, in the world of Covenant many of the characters are partly driven by a previous incarnation so there's a wider context that isn't entirely clear in Book 1. Although much is made of Turor's True Will, I think that some of the Thaylin Sarra – those who progressed beyond dogma and applied the teachings to themselves – have an innate, albeit unconscious understanding that even someone like Cordal has a part to play in their quest. Albeit he can only act according to his nature (as he understands it), until his state of consciousness rises beyond that basic nature.

ABOUT

DEREK THOMPSON is a novelist and short story writer, living in Cornwall. He has been fascinated by the Western Mysteries, folklore and mythology as long as he can remember.

Website: www.dt-books.co.uk

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/stores/author/B0034ORY08>



This books review was brought to you through Atropos by book reviewer Casey Morris.

Follow us on instagram: [@atropos.magazine](https://www.instagram.com/atropos.magazine)

Follow us on LinkedIn: [@atropos.magazine](https://www.linkedin.com/company/atropos.magazine)