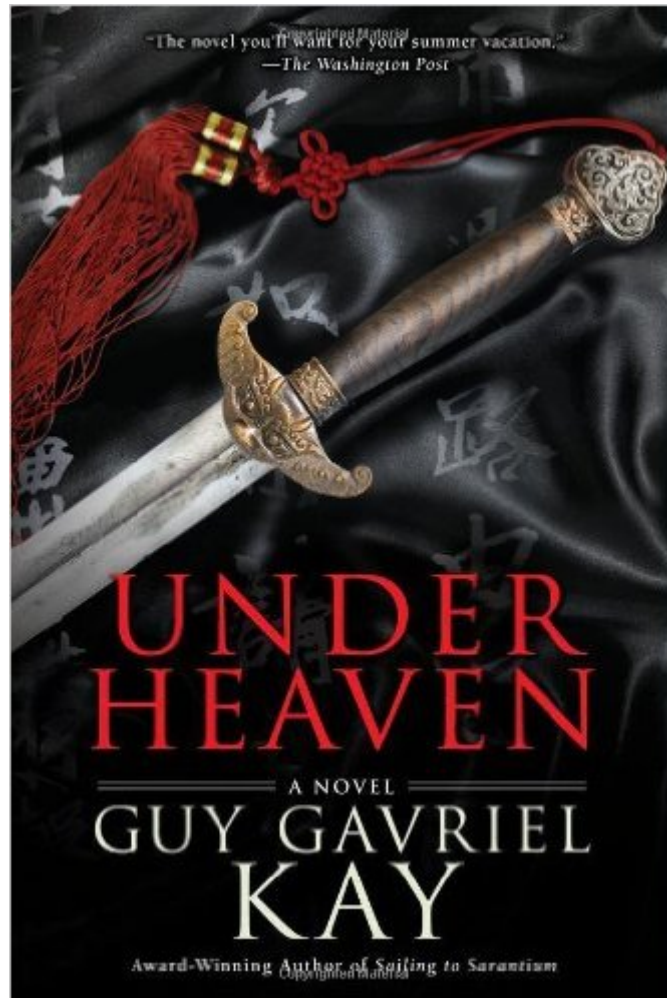


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Under Heaven



Synopsis

View our feature on Guy Gavriel Kay's *Under Heaven*. In his latest innovative novel, the award-winning author evokes the dazzling Tang Dynasty of 8th-century China in a story of honor and power. Inspired by the glory and power of Tang dynasty China, Guy Gavriel Kay has created a masterpiece. It begins simply. Shen Tai, son of an illustrious general serving the Emperor of Kitai, has spent two years honoring the memory of his late father by burying the bones of the dead from both armies at the site of one of his father's last great battles. In recognition of his labors and his filial piety, an unlikely source has sent him a dangerous gift: 250 Sardinian horses. You give a man one of the famed Sardinian horses to reward him greatly. You give him four or five to exalt him above his fellows, propel him towards rank, and earn him jealousy, possibly mortal jealousy. Two hundred and fifty is an unthinkable gift, a gift to overwhelm an emperor. Wisely, the gift comes with the stipulation that Tai must claim the horses in person. Otherwise he would probably be dead already...

Book Information

Paperback: 608 pages

Publisher: Roc; Reprint edition (May 3, 2011)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0451463897

ISBN-13: 978-0451463890

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 1.2 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (221 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #112,336 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #102 in [Books > Science Fiction & Fantasy > Fantasy > Myths & Legends > Asian](#) #988 in [Books > Literature & Fiction > Genre Fiction > Historical > Fantasy](#) #8994 in [Books > Literature & Fiction > Literary](#)

Customer Reviews

Guy Gavriel Kay's "Under Heaven" is perhaps his best exercise to date in creating a rich world in which characters, politics, and an intricate plot collide, in this case the tale of an empire on the brink in an alternate early dynasty China, Tibet, and Mongolia. Unfortunately, Kay's decision to rapidly unwind the masterful plot in 50 pages shortchanges the work he does in the previous 500. 4 stars."Under Heaven" is Kay's first venture outside of European-based alternate world history, and as you'd expect, the academic underpinnings are extraordinarily well done - an author's note at the end describes much his original source material, and is probably worth the price of the book itself.

(One note as to how far out of his comfort zone Kay ventures: a common theme for many Kay fans is the occasional link to Fionavar running through his books, and there's only a marginal such one in this.) In a sentence or two, the plot isn't terribly complex: a middle son of a good but not great family finds himself suddenly thrown into the heart of palace intrigue and power in an Empire on the brink of change, with all the resulting tragedy and drama one would expect from that setting. The difference with Kay is that while far too many fantasy writers would destroy the setting with cardboard characters, Kay's strength is making them and their actions not just believable but engrossing. "Under Heaven" plays to this, where constant first person exploration of the motivation of almost all of the critical characters means that the villains are not merely black and white but human, and whatever that takes away in villainous tendencies is more than made up for by keeping the reader on edge as to what they'll do next.

I picked up this novel with some apprehension and great excitement also. GGK has honed some of my favorite novels, such as *Tigana* and *The Lions of Al-Rasson*. At the same time, his two most recent works have had much less impact upon me as a reader. I am happy to say that *Under Heaven* harkens back to the former novels. There are numerous strengths to this novel. The story is tightly written focusing on a central cast of characters. This is refreshing in an era where fantasy stories are told in trilogies, tetralogies, and even decalogies. In its scope, it is not epic fantasy. Rather it is fantasy that focuses on humanity. It focuses on the emotions, decisions, and experiences that define who we are. The characters are fully fleshed out, intimately written. Like GGK's greatest works, he pulls you into the struggle of his cast of characters and then pulls on your heart strings as life and death bring change, for good or bad, to that cast. In this, I was reminded of the last chapters of *Tigana*, though this novel fell just short of that incredible standard for me. It may even be incorrect to define this novel as fantasy. It has minor elements of fantasy, heavy elements of historical fiction, and above all is simply excellent literature. There is no magic and there are no non-human characters. However, the well written story should appeal to fans of any genre who are simply looking for a good read. Are there weaknesses to the novel? Certainly none that are glaring or stood out to me. There are a few gritty scenes, but nothing that approaches that of modern fantasy standards set by GRRM or Joe Abercrombie.

Guy Gavriel Kay has built his (rightfully) strong reputation as a writer by melding together scrupulously researched history with just enough of the touch of the fantastic to bring his books into the realm of "fantasy." Some of his best books include re-imaginings of Renaissance Italy

("Tigana"), the Byzantine Empire (the two books of the "Sarantine Mosaic"), and Medieval Spain ("The Lions of Al-Rassan"). In "Under Heaven," Kay leaves medieval Europe behind but brings his unique approach to a re-imagining of Seventh Century Tang Dynasty China -- and this book is every bit as good as its predecessors! In "Under Heaven," the action revolves around Shen Tai, son of a celebrated "Kitan" [Chinese] general. As the book begins, Shen Tai is on a quest to honor his deceased father's memory by burying some of the tens of thousands of bodies left from a titanic clash between the Empire of Kitai and its rival, the Kingdom of Tagur [similar to Tibet]. Here, Kay's trademark touch of the fantastic is initially provided by the fact that the tens of thousands of dead soldiers have left behind their very real--and very unquiet--ghosts, giving Shen Tai an aura of the holy man (or madman) in his quest to bury as many bodies as he can in an act of honor to his father. When his quest is honored with an extravagant gift of 250 legendary horses (when one such horse would be a fortune), Shen Tai does not know whether it is in fact a gift or akin to receiving "poison in a jeweled cup.

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