

Conqueror

By Conn Iggulden

Review by Jonathan Aird

About a year ago I reviewed the first four books of Conn Iggulden's treatment of the epic story of the rise of the Mongol Khans. This is the fifth, and final, installment in the series and deals with the rise to power of Kublai Khan. Again, I will try to avoid giving away too much of the plot although of course being historical fiction there are certain 'fixed' events which cannot be avoided, some of which (such as dates of death) are revealed again in the family tree of Ghengis Khan and his descendants which is found at the start of this book.

I had hoped in my previous review that 'Conqueror' would be a return to a more eventful story, after the political wrangling that had taken up much of volumes three and four, and in this hope I was rewarded. The story concerns the rivalries of Kublai and his three brothers, which offers a nice symmetry to the first two volumes and Ghengis and his brothers. However, the Mongol empire is pretty vast already at the start of 'Conqueror' and so the opportunities to interfere with each other's plans are vastly diminished – each has a substantial realm to control, as well as any scheming to become Khan of the whole nations. Much of the book is concerned with Kublai's first attempt to conquer the Sung empire (this sees a return appearance of the last Chin emperor in a nice side plot), and with his brother Hulegu's military campaigns against the Persian Empire (with a return appearance of the clan of Assassins – one of the best subplots of the novel). This plays to Conn Iggulden's strengths as an author, as it allows him to use a smaller cast of central characters with the consequent opportunities to better define them and their motivations. There are also plenty of battles and sieges as Hulegu and Kublai develop their different strategies for campaigns which will allow them to carve out their own Khanates. Tension is maintained, for those who don't know the history in detail, by spending a good amount of time developing the characters of the enemies of the Khans. Once several chapters have been spent with a particular character, one naturally expects him to continue in the novel for some time – and sometimes they do but on other occasions they are quite suddenly and surprisingly swept away in, usually, violent events.

In many ways, this is the best book of the series – as it avoids most of the stylistic or descriptive writing techniques which had been interesting when first used in 'Wolf Of The Plains,' but became a little repetitive after three books. So, there is a lot less of the semi-random horse riding, the softening of curds under saddles before eating is not dwelt on, and there are far fewer complicated discussions held by characters who are involved in riding at full gallop accompanied by tens of thousands of men doing the same. People dismount in quiet spots and discuss their strategies, which is simply far more believable.



There is one somewhat annoying story-telling twist that Iggulden uses in this book and indeed, I now realise, did in earlier books in the series. When he reaches a point in a character's development that he has to be defined as, simplistically, a 'goodie' or a 'baddie' he often does this through their sexual preferences. Otherwise typical characters (that is violent, ruthless, and self-assured) who, out of the blue and based on no historical evidence, develop homosexual tendencies are *always* the bad guys. Anyone who turns out to have a particularly large harem is also very unlikely to do well in the long run -- although some major characters do manage to get away with this. It's only a small point but I do hope it isn't common to all of Mr Iggulden's writing as I want to but have yet to read the Rome series and, once noticed, it is a *big* giveaway on likely plot development.

On the whole though this is an excellent conclusion and from the author's notes at the end of the book it certainly is the last volume of an excellent series. When one finds oneself looking forward to a lunch break or the ending of the day so that it's possible to spend some time with a book, then the author has done the job well. I found this volume as compelling as the best of the earlier volumes. It led to a few late nights absorbed in the emerging tale, and in many ways it was written in a more developed and tauter style. I'd recommend this book, and this series, to anyone interested in a gripping and exciting tale well told.

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Conn Igguldon
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