

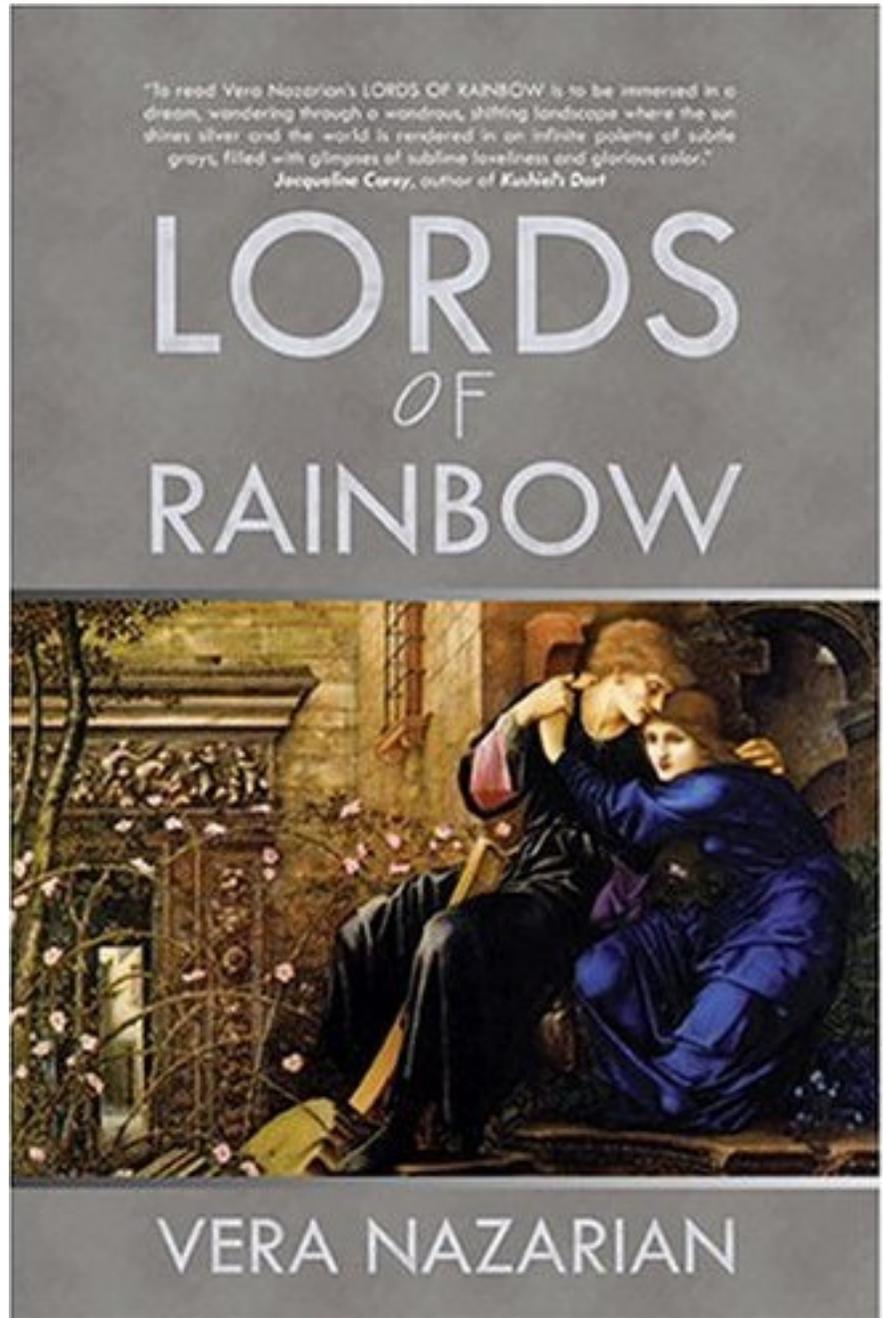
# Lords of Rainbow – Vera Nazarian

Review by John Turing

The idea of the rainbow, of colour, permeates every aspect of this novel. The world we are introduced to from the very beginning is remarkably different from our own in one crucial respect – it is a colourless world, all is “a variegated greyscale”. But the world is never dull. It is filled with an intriguing cast of well developed characters who act primarily for themselves. Nothing is ever as it quite seems. Your first impressions are gradually reinforced through the novel, until, suddenly, they are shattered. *Lords of Rainbow* is one of the best single volume epic fantasies available. Yet, “rainbow is ambiguous”. It is not perfect, far from it. The ending is weak and the novel is predictable and on occasion, the illusion of brilliance she weaves is sometimes shown to be just that, an illusion. The traditional sometimes becomes cliché. The intriguing glimpse of the young Lissean Grelias’ life is barely developed, while the equally intriguing protagonist, Elasant Vaeste, becomes less interesting as the novel progresses. But there is one element constant throughout, the prose. Nazarian is more than merely competent at writing, in times, it reaches the poetic. From the very beginning, it is unique and enticing:

*“Lifting the first, outer veil, you see the sun. It is steel and silver. It begins to sink like an old ship through the churning mass of cloud and mist, casting half-light.”*

From the first page of the prologue, we are introduced to a fully realised world, brought to life by Nazarian’s description:



*“Beneath the sky, chaos. Rock and tree limbs thread ascetic members into fathomless seething earth. Lesser things emerge past the roots of their greater wood-fleshed kin, and anemic shoots are sent to the sky. There is an unresolved hunger, a clamouring cry without sound”*

This brilliant description immediately draws your attention. It distinguishes *Lords of Rainbow* from the countless other epics, with their simple utilitarian prose. Here, at once, the tone of the novel is set. The descriptive passages never become overbearing, they are limited and utterly appropriate. The pacing of the novel is almost perfect. Except for one brief explanatory scene in the middle of the book, Nazarian manages to resist the allure of infodumping. This is a world without colour; at least in the sense we know it. For at the heart of the city of Tronaelend-Lis, lies the Light Guild. Its members, for a price, will create orbs of colour. This is an unnatural form of light, and as you might expect in such a world, this talent is highly prized. Colour is magic. The Light Guild has a uniquely powerful position within the city. The importance of colour is continually emphasised by Nazarian. Each mention of colour is in italics, each noble family has taken a colour to represent them and the religious system is based around colour. The gods of this world, the Tilirr, each represent a colour and with that colour they represents aspects of humanity.

The novel begins outside the city with the mercenary woman, Ranhéas Ylir, in a brief battle against suspected Bilhaar, members of the assassin’s guild. This conveniently introduces her to Elasant Vaeste, head of his family, on the way to Tronaelend-Lis for the wedding of his cousin. Curiously he decided to take no servants and no escort, judging the risk of the journey minimal. The first impression we are given of him is of a calm, calculating intelligent personality; but one who makes the occasional mistake through his arrogance. It is an intriguing personality, and one which holds great potential. Unfortunately, this potential is never entirely fulfilled. Nazarian begins the novel with rapidly changing scenes – in the first one hundred pages the point of view changes every chapter and occasionally, it changes within the chapters. This can be a little bewildering, and certainly it is unusual for a moderately sized standalone novel, but it is effective. Nazarian has two great skills; in characterisation and writing style. Her technique is dazzling and the style rarely slips. My objection to this was not the introduction to these characters, but the fact that many of them were ultimately very minor characters with almost no influence on the story. For once, I feel that the novel could have benefited from being longer. These scenes are, of themselves, worthy of inclusion. In a larger novel of greater complexity, they would have been entirely worthwhile. But this novel was focused on three characters, Ranhéas Ylir, Elasant Vaeste and Lord Bilhaar.

Nazarian is remarkable in that she manages to create some of the most believable characters I’ve seen in all fantasy with just one scene. Her characters, especially the peripheral, manage to extend beyond the archetypes. Carliseral Lirr, a minor character who you could be forgiven for overlooking, is used to demonstrate the postulate “rainbow is ambiguity” with remarkable effect. For Carliseral is both male and female – depending on the day – and there is a scene in which two children puzzle over this mystery, one of the understated moments of genius within the book.

The most disappointing aspect of the novel was the plot. It began with an interesting, original structure, based around the twelve postulates of the rainbow, each scene demonstrating one of these. After these postulates, though, the story itself was rather

dull and predictable, with a few good twists which save the reader from boredom. *Lords of Rainbow*, while brilliantly original in the conception of the world, is rather traditional in its plot. There is the menace of evil and the dark lord (though this has, understandably, much significance in a world without colour) and the story becomes little more than a quest to save the city from this menace and to restore the rainbow. It is, on the whole, very predictable. There are interesting interludes which make this an enjoyable novel and it never falls to the level of a pastiche. There are hints of political intrigue, but these are often simplified.

*Lords of Rainbow* is a high quality single volume epic fantasy, and these are rare. It is deserving of a much wider audience than it has, despite its flaws. The quality of the prose is almost unparalleled within the subgenre and the characterisation is generally strong. The plot may not be the most intriguing or the most original, but it manages to remain entertaining throughout. Nazarian is not, as my initial impressions suggested, an equal to the current pinnacles of epic fantasy, but *Lords of Rainbow* is of an altogether different style to them. It is positive in its outlook but it does not subscribe to the naïve sentimentalism that has dominated the subgenre. It is both original and traditional. The influence is not primarily that of Tolkien but rather of Dunsany and it is refreshing. I have criticised the novel a lot in this review – but that is because it had such potential, yet it fell just short of being a masterpiece. For a debut, it is a remarkably professional novel. I would give it a rating of 8 out of 10. It is a novel that can appeal to most fantasy fans. It is not a masterpiece, but it is an excellent, concise and well paced novel.

