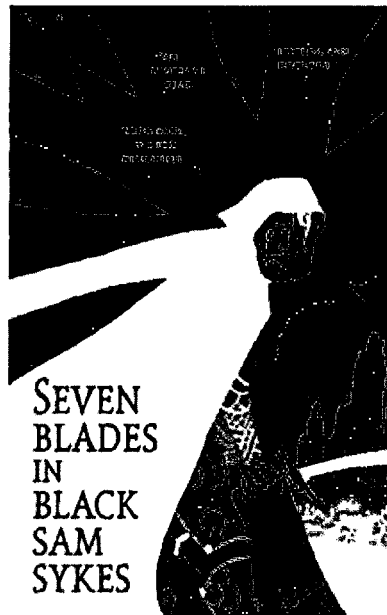


A Rollicking Tale of Revenge: Sam Sykes' *Seven Blades in Black*

Martin Cahill

Thu Apr 11, 2019 2:00pm | 4 Favorites [+]



Over the course of his first six books, Sam Sykes has worked very hard to illustrate his vision of what fantasy fiction can be, focusing not just on epic battles between magic users, but also on the price they pay, and what the horrors they see can do to their heart, mind, and soul. He shows us not just the heroes of an age working together to vanquish a great evil, but also the horrendous friction that can result from a half-dozen very different people working together, and the sense that maybe that there's more to the story behind that great evil than one might suspect. And there's not just the sweat and steam of flirting between protagonists on display, but also the agonizing heart-pain of loving someone who you fear you'll never understand, and who is just as scared that you'll leave them before they have a chance to open up.

For Sam Sykes, fantasy is much more than what we've come to expect; it has to have some nuance, some damn heart, while also presenting the reader with massive, magical battles that are so intense that they make you feel as if you're about to fly out of your seat.

If you agree with that thesis statement, then *Seven Blades in Black*, Sykes's newest novel in his Grave of Empires series, is categorically for you.

Meet Sal the Cacophony. Chained up, bereft of her infamous weapon (the dragon-headed Cacophony best known for firing magical bullets), and held by officers of the Revolution, Sal's in a tough spot. She's about to die, or so she's told. But not before she answers some questions about the swath of destruction she's been involved in for the last few weeks, and about the names she's keeping on the list in her pocket. Even knowing that execution is coming, Sal's in no rush. She'll spin this yarn in her own time, in her own way. It's a yarn about the turncoat mages of the once-Imperium. It's about a land called the Scar barely hanging on to any sense of life. It's about being loved and hating that you're going to hurt someone before you can actually love them the way they deserve. It's about a girl, a gun, a grudge, and what happens when revenge becomes your life.

So begins *Seven Blades in Black*, with Sal the Cacophony telling the reader her story. And from page one, Sykes doesn't let up. Starting several weeks prior, Sal jumps into her story of vengeance across the Scar, a desolate and barren wasteland home to mages, Revolutionaries, Imperium spies, cultists, monsters, assassins, and much, much more. This novel is packed to the brim with worldbuilding, much of it incredibly chewy and thought-provoking, as Sykes unravels the complex history between the Imperium and the Revolution, which is as much about magic as it is about autonomy. The balance that Sykes strikes here—between introducing knowledge to the reader and going ninety miles an hour towards the next plot objective—is very well executed, and comes off as the work of someone in absolute charge of his craft. Even when the story is rocketing toward its next destination, there's always a second to breathe and fully contemplate a new facet of the world, and vice versa—just when you think you have a quiet moment to catch your breath, a brand-new horror or enemy or monstrosity comes plummeting from the sky and you're off running again.

Of course, a story like this is nothing without strong characters, and Sykes has succeeded on that front in spades, populating the Scar with a bevy of bastards, mages, engineers, soldiers, spies, and more, all painted with a delicate touch; in this broken world, where everyone is just trying to survive, people don't have much time to argue about morality. From Cavric Proud, a fresh-faced officer of the Revolution and a deep believer in their mission, to Liette, a scary-brilliant Freemaker and lover of Sal who keeps getting hurt by her and yet always comes back, Sal has surrounded herself with a motley crew of survivors; she is the unscalable wall they all continually bounce off.

And what of Sal herself? Sykes has succeeded in creating a thorny, complex, complicated, and broken protagonist, whose soul is so bruised, whose heart is so broken, that her idea of helping her friends is to continue to push them away from her; after all, when you're someone who has been through hell and has been left shattered, what good is reaching for someone else's hand? All you'll leave them with is broken glass in their palm, and pain. But Sal, for all her beliefs about herself, and all her vicious ideas about how the world works, cannot walk away from doing the right thing. Walking the line between hero and anti-hero, Sal the Cacophony is a difficult, broken woman that I couldn't help but root for at every moment.

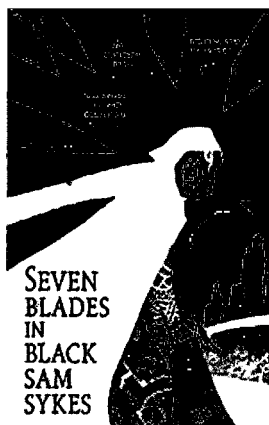


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Seven Blades in Black is a massive book, but it speeds by at a quick clip, as Sal keeps the narrative moving and Sykes moves back and forth in time between the death sentence interview and the story itself. Could it have been streamlined some? Sure; there's more than one occasion when Sal does go on, describing events and details with bombast, adding flavor to the story she's telling. But then again, that bombast, that flavor, that point of view of a woman who knows the Scar and this story so intimately—that's exactly what makes the book work so well; tackling a few extra pages of such descriptive and delicious prose as filtered through the inimitable Sal is a small price to pay for a great read.

Sam Sykes has taken his talent for fantasy and all of his ideas of what the genre could be, what it can and should strive for, and distilled them all into *Seven Blades in Black*. A rich, thoughtful story about broken people, oppressive systems, and the cost of vengeance, populated by characters who live in the middle of the moral gray zone and will keep your eyes glued to the page, *Seven Blades in Black* delivers all of that complexity *and* epic battles between mages, fought while on the backs of giant birds in the middle of a magically-haunted wasteland. Come and join Sal and the Cacophony for a story—I guarantee you won't guess how it ends.

**SEVEN BLADES IN BLACK**by **Sam Sykes**

Pub Date: April 9th, 2019

ISBN: 978-0-316-36343-3

Publisher: Orbit

Another ultraviolent doorstopper opens the Grave of Empires fantasy trilogy, from the author of *God's Last Breath* (2017, etc.).

Welcome to the Scar, a continent ravaged by the vicious and seemingly endless war between the elitist Empire and the egalitarian Revolution. To this once beautiful land came the famous Sal the Cacophony riding a giant bird named Congeniality. She carried a sword named Jeff, a sentient but bloodthirsty gun named, yes, the Cacophony, with whom she's made some sort of deal, and a must-kill list of seven renegade mages. Later, as the story opens, somehow the Revolution has captured her. So to delay being executed she explains why she came to the Scar and what she did

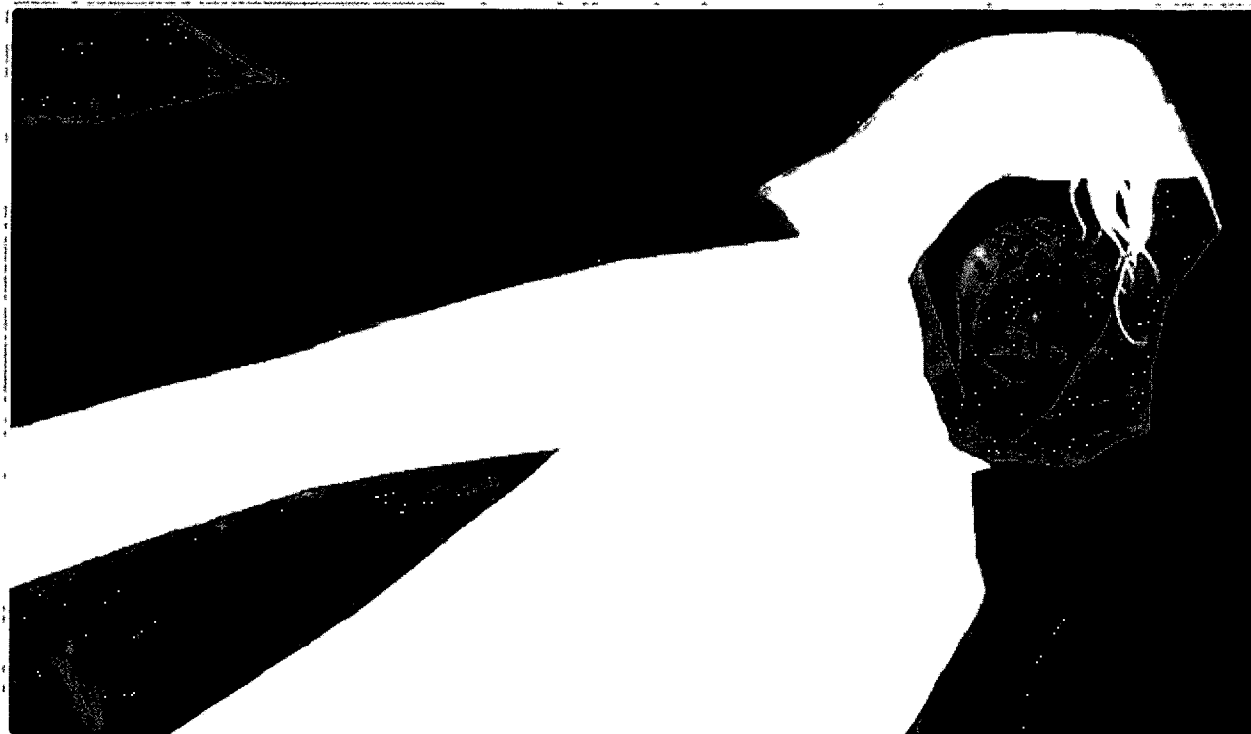
there. Her captors listen since one of their own soldiers is involved. She wanted revenge, obviously, but the details won't be disclosed for several hundred gore-soaked pages. We do wonder, though, if her will, indomitable though it may be, is stronger than the magics arrayed against her and if she's blinded herself to anything beyond retribution. All this evolves naturally out of the gritty, well-developed background, Sal's persuasive and involving backstory, and Sykes' intriguing ideas on how and why magic works here and how it's wielded. The characters are larger than life—they have to be to handle the flashes of black humor and profanity-laden dialogue. If you hadn't guessed, the action's ferocious, bloody, and unrelenting—but no matter how loud the explosions or piercing the screams, the antagonists always have time for a merry quip, a stinging rejoinder, or a philosophical discursion. While the author's previous offerings have often proven hollow at the center, with disappearing plots and long, soggy passages, this one's compulsive from start to finish.

All in all, something of a breakthrough. Will Sykes sustain it?

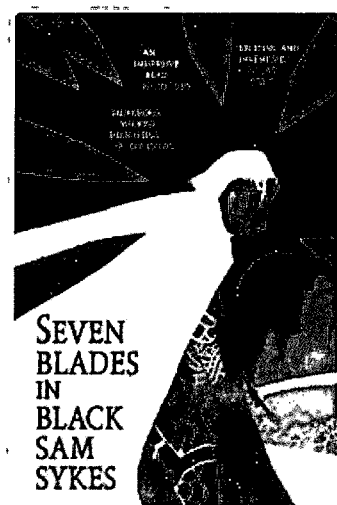
THERE WILL BE BLOOD

Sam Sykes' *Seven Blades in Black*: Magical, Memorable, and Soaked in Blood

by Nicole Hill / April 4, 2019 at 2:00 pm [Share](#)



I was left with several distinct impressions upon turning the final page of Sam Sykes's latest series starter, the 700-page *Seven Blades in Black*.



Seven Blades in Black

Paperback \$15.99 | ~~\$17.99~~

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The first was sheer delight at Sykes's ability to come up with good character names. This story is filled with them: names that dance on your tongue and light the fire of your imagination, which only burns brighter as you begin to explore the world they inhabit (which actually also happens to be on fire for most of the novel).

There's Cavric Proud, a soldier with the tender heart; and Stark's Mutter, a town destroyed. There are villains of the highest order: Galta the Thorn, Riccu the Knock, Jindu the Blade, Vraki the Gate. There is Twenty-Two Dead Roses in a Chipped Porcelain

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Vase, a nom de guerre to rule them all; and
Congeniality, the bird of war.

And then, of course, there's Sal the Cacophony.

Sal, you see, is the the other element of the book you won't be able to forget upon closing it, even after you move on to other books, other characters, and other worlds. Because Sal is one of the most full-bodied and delicious fantasy anti-heroes in recent memory.

A battle-scarred outlaw magician, Sal is one-half of the reputation that precedes her in every town she haunts, ceaselessly hunting the names on her own personal hit list. The other half is the Cacophony, the fiery-tempered magical gun forever ready and willing to unleash mayhem upon the world.



**Tome of the
Undergates (Aeons'
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Sal is foul-mouthed and constantly running afoul of both the imperial empire and its revolutionary foes. She is troubled by her own violent past. She is also troubling; she can't leave a place without leaving a massive pile of bodies behind. She is flawed and flawlessly rendered. And she is funny, favoring a gallows humor you'll get to know up close and personally through her point-of-view narration.

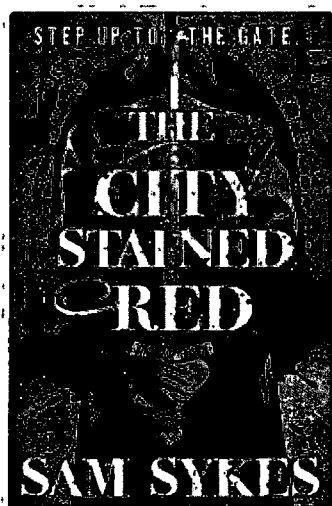
Sal's presence is magnetic, which explains why she's able to draw so many fascinating characters into her orbit as she trails a bloody path for vengeance. When we first meet her, she's being interrogated by the hard-nosed general Tretta, to whom she recounts her life story. (Between this and Jenn Lyons' buzzy debut, *The Ruin of Kings*, it's been a good year for jailers with a lot of time on their hands.)

Tretta's mission is to extract information and execute the prisoner. But even as Sal takes the long way around in delivering the information Tretta seeks, he finds it hard to cut off the conversation.

Who can blame her? It's a helluva life story.

For that matter, who could blame Cavric Proud, a revolutionary soldier first abducted by Sal, then pulled into her intoxicating web of revenge? When it concerns our roguish magician with a cause, who could blame Liette, expert alchemist, for silencing her logical mind and lapping at the rage spilling over from her lover's heart?

Sal's orbit is littered with characters who are simultaneously repulsed and spellbound by her, a tension that may mimic your own feelings as the death toll mounts and *Seven Blades in Black* races toward a satisfying conclusion (though it is but the first novel in The Grave of Empires series).



The City Stained Red
(Bring Down Heaven
Series #1)

Paperback \$16.99

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Of course, you may be wondering: what exactly *happens* in this book? Fair question, but it's fitting that we've gone this far without divulging any of the plot's secrets—because secrets are mostly incidental to Sal, who cares only for her bloody-minded. That's kind of the point.

Sal's focus is on her own vengeance for past wrongs and horrific trauma. That her prey also intend to inflict unimaginable suffering on the Scar (Scar being the name of the wild and well-imagined wasteland Sal calls home) is of interest to her, but mostly as justification—a shield of righteousness for her singular pursuit.

All told, the seeds of Sykes's previous series (**Aeon's Gate**, **Bring Down Heaven**) are in full flower here: militarized magic, smart-mouth sorcery, complex worldbuilding, and lots and lots of gore. They are all

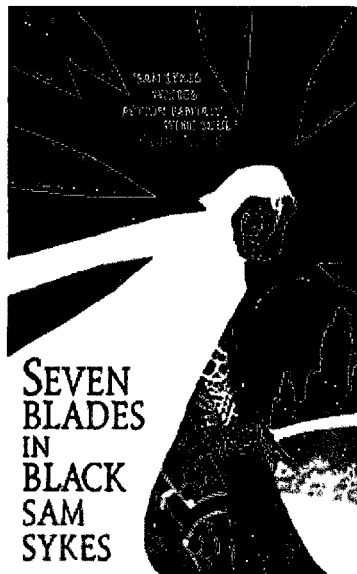
entwined around the shoulders of a woman well-equipped to carry an entire world.

While many in the Scar regret wandering along the paths trod by Sal the Cacophony, you most certainly won't.

Seven Blades in Black, Sam Sykes – Book Review



Hello Humans! Welcome back to another book review. It feels like so many amazing books are being published this month and today's featured title is no exception. *Seven Blades in Black* is the first book in a new series from Sam Sykes – an author who, I'll confess, I had never read before. I went into this knowing that I was getting a fantasy novel and that was pretty much it (I suck at reading book descriptions and it only backfires 40% of the time) and was met with a book that delighted me throughout!



Goodreads Summary:

Among humans, none have power like mages. And among mages, none have will like Sal the Cacophony. Once revered, now vagrant, she walks a wasteland scarred by generations of magical warfare. The Scar, a land torn between powerful empires, is where rogue mages go to disappear, disgraced soldiers go to die and Sal went with a blade, a gun and a list of names she intended to use both on. But vengeance is a flame swift extinguished. Betrayed by those she trusted most, her magic torn from her and awaiting execution, Sal the Cacophony has one last tale to tell before they take her head. All she has left is her name, her story and the weapon she used to carve both.

Vengeance is its own reward.

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I've said this before but, for me, a five-star rating is more of a gut feeling than anything else. It's that need to keep reading, to find out the end, to keep journeying with the character(s) even beyond the last page. This was, for sure, a five-star read for me, I haven't really left this world yet even though I'm already 15% into the next book. I'm going to try and articulate all the things I liked about this book but you'll have to excuse me if it comes out a bit garbled...

The worldbuilding! I loved the world these characters inhabited. The magic system was one of my favourite things, the idea that different kinds of magic have a different 'price' or 'trade' is nothing particularly new but it came across so well in this story and it was used in a very clever way throughout the book. I also thought that the conflicts and cultural clashes were clever but still made sense within the story, you get the sense that the main character, Sal, is a part of something much bigger than just this story, which is always a win for me.

I also thought that the 'technology' was really well done, the various means of transport, from riding on the back of giant birds to huge ships, are a great indication of the richness of the world Sykes has created here. I can't wait to read more set in this universe and to expand it even further. There's something a shade of steampunk in it without feeling aggressively 'coggy'. It's great – what more can I say?

Sal as a character, just...yes. I found myself getting vibes of *Spellslinger* in this book – though it's not as YA as *Spellslinger* is, which is obvious from the western/fantasy crossover but also it's the no-nonsense humour of the characters. If you're the kind of person who clutches their pearls when they hear a swear word then *maybe* skip this one. Sal is a great example of a character who knows that they're not exactly morally good but instead of having a crisis about it every five minutes she embraces it and gets on with what she's doing. It was so refreshing to read this kind of character and I have a feeling Sal is someone to whom I'll be comparing fantasy heroines in the future...

This book is a punch in the face – but in a good way. I pretty much loved everything about it. It was quippy without feeling smug and that's not something easy to pull off. I honestly can't wait to read more.

My rating: 5/5 stars