



The First Law Trilogy

Joe Abercrombie

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The complete First Law trilogy from *New York Times* bestseller and master of grimdark fantasy, Joe Abercrombie.

"The finest epic fantasy trilogy in recent memory." - Junot Diaz

Murderous conspiracies rise to the surface, old scores are ready to be settled, and the line between hero and villain is sharp enough to draw blood.

Unpredictable, compelling, wickedly funny, and packed with unforgettable characters, the First Law trilogy is noir fantasy with a real cutting edge. This boxed set includes: THE BLADE ITSELF, BEFORE THEY ARE HANGED, THE LAST ARGUMENT OF KINGS

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Novels in the First Law world

Best Served Cold

The Heroes

Red Country

The First Law Trilogy Details

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Author : Joe Abercrombie

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From Reader Review The First Law Trilogy for online ebook

Blake Garretson says

The last book destroys the whole series for me. The first two books were decent, and I felt like they were building towards something interesting. However, the ending of the last book is so laughably bad, the first two books are rendered pointless and not worth reading.

Instead of using an easy, clichéd story book ending, the author took an equally lazy route by making every character and plotline end horribly. I think he meant to impress us with his "grittiness" and depth by avoiding the happy ending. Well done, except he just derails everything he had going by abruptly and arbitrarily selecting a crappy outcome for each character. The endings don't fit with the rest of the books at all.

SPOILERS: For instance, Jezal is clearly on a journey from spoiled brat to stately king... then he is jerked back to being a weak puppet. Bayaz is the fatherly wizard with a temper... and then he is suddenly just evil in the third book. Logen is on the path to becoming a good man... then he digs in and is evil despite tons of foreshadowing that his character is developing. This isn't gritty realism. This is lazy writing that thinks it's being clever.

The ending is just shockingly bad, and now I hate all three.

Christopher says

Well, its been almost two months since I started. I did take a break between each book, but still, that is some investment.

I did not do this in the right order, lets get that out of the way first. I stumbled upon 'The Heroes' by accident, immediately realized I was probably a bit in the dark about some things-and yet plowed ahead anyway because what the hell, I was sucked in.

Then a year later I wanted to go back-but wasnt ready to commit to the full trilogy, so I did 'Best Served Cold', which remains my favorite book by this author and possibly the only one that truly stands alone-even if you'll miss some minor things.

But finally, starting on Christmas day, I got to the foundational text as it were. Were this a less famous work, or a less reviewed one I would no doubt go into great detail, which it no doubt deserves.

But Im lazy and there is no need as there is a plethora of reviews for this out so I am going to list the striking things as if I were doing a load of laundry.

1. I knew from previous experience that Abercrombie likes to take characters into unexpected places. The sympathetic become unsympathetic and vice versa as events unfold. In some cases (Monza in Best Served Cold) even there and back again. But in this series I felt only two characters definitively moved in the direction of becoming more sympathetic, but almost all the others became worse with time save two who stayed in about the same place. Given the length and stress of the events described, I thought this a good outcome.

2. Even the things which don't show up in the stand alone novels I have glanced at before were often predictable twists, once you get the gist of what is really going on. Not all bad, just an observation.
3. The battle scenes are excellently written and may be the best since Howard.
4. The handling of Arch Lecter Sult was particularly well done, to make a minor character so loathsome in a cast of loathsome characters was particularly impressive.
5. When it comes to nations, the idea of making the Union both the worst of the states and also the best at the same time was something to also give the author credit for.
6. I wont go into spoilers with details, but by far the objectively worst character in the entire series is also the one which in conventional narratives would not be. This, and the outcome of this, I thought was a nice subtle commentary on the nature of power politics and the people who rise in them. Tack on a much smaller character in the north triumphing as well and the message is rammed home.
7. Best in how messy the ending was, as big conflicts actually are. The climax in real life still is followed by chaos, suffering, unintended consequences, personal tragedy.
8. But also, having read two of the stand-alones, I have to say that I feel this series is better without the magic, the mystery, the ancient-if corrupted-legends. I feel like there were still some tropes here which fade out later, and for the better of the series at that. But again, I didnt really read them in order and maybe that was the intent.
9. Glokta is easily the best and most memorable character, period. The only one I rooted for the entire time from start to finish, despite not classifying him as sympathetic in a conventional way. I loved that character, even if his (unique) italicized inner dialogue often didnt quite catch which lines would be slanted and which werent in my kindle version.

Do recommend.

Siobhan says

Joe Abercrombie is one of those authors that spent far too much time on my to-read list. I was never really sure where to start, unsure of which of his trilogies I wanted to read, but in the end the choice was made for me. My friend gave me a collection of his books, included were the first three books from the First Law world. So it was, I knew where I was to start with Abercrombie's work.

I wasn't overly fond of the first book. In my opinion, it took too long to truly start. The character development was wonderful, yet it seemed to overshadow the story. In essence, I felt as though the first book didn't really move at all. The second book changed that. I really enjoyed the second one. The third book was also great. It wasn't quite as good as the second book, but so much happened that left a smile on my face. Overall, the trilogy took a while to get started but once it was moving it was a lot of fun.

A great trilogy for any fan of fantasy, although it will never be my number one choice in the genre.

Jean-Luc says

Pick your favorite epic fantasy, cynical just-so tale, or grimdark war story. Call it X. Imagine Joe Abercrombie picking up your copy of X, casually tossing it on the ground, unzipping, and pissing on it. "You call that grim, dark, cynical fantasy? *I'll* show you grimdark!" You are horrified that your favorite book/series is being treated so poorly, but you cannot stop turning the page.

This is the box set for Abercrombie's first 3 books:

* The Blade Itself - There's a fencing contest coming up! Jab, jab! The Northmen threaten war from the North. The Gurkhul threaten war from the South. The Inquisition tortures people.

* Before They Are Hanged - A group of people who really hate each other are following Bayaz, the first of the Magi, to the far west to find a secret weapon that could help them defeat the wizard who is the true power behind the emperor. The Empire is knock knocking on the Union outpost in the South. Northmen are invading from the north. The Inquisition tortures people.

* The Last Argument of Kings - The Empire has invaded the Union while the Union's armies are off fighting the Northmen in the North. The Inquisition tortures people.

My summaries do not do these books justice, but here is what you need to know: war is impossibly stupid and counter-productive, rules are for idiots, and happy endings are for children.

Much of these books takes place in the characters heads, because they *hate* each other. They cannot stop thinking about how much they hate each other, except for when they smile and tell each other anything other than what they're thinking. Throughout the trilogy, I was waiting for everyone to grow the fuck up and work together to defeat the forces arrayed against them, but nope! Their hatred outshines everything. I've never seen characters defeat themselves so deftly.

Never have I seen a villain so purely evil, and never have I loathed a villain so passionately. Villains are just antagonists, right? They sit opposite the heroes. You can't have a epic without villains. Even the heroes are villains in the villain's eyes, right? (view spoiler)

As good an author as Abercrombie is, he saves the best for last: there's one last fight, the duel between Logan Ninefingers and The Feared. The Ninefingers foreshadows this reckoning when he reveals he was once Bethod's champion, and when it comes, Abercrombie unleashes his full skill. He goes fucking *florid*. It feels like everything changes color and this fight is the entirety of the universe. Few authors have this much self-control, and right now I cannot even name one. Say one thing about Joe Abercrombie, say he writes a good yarn.

Férial says

Why 3 stars (and not 4 or even 5) ? Just because the third book was so depressing and honestly, a bit boring. Yes, I was bored. Mostly with the repetitions : yes, I understand that when someone "goes to the mud, they'll be buried and then they'll rot. Yes, I know that Glokta is in pain (bloody leg, bloody arse, bloody neck, bloody tasteless food, bloody gums...) *sigh* But I was also bored with the characters development. Or

should I say their non-development ? Or their going-down-again ? There was the faintest glimmer of hope in the second book.

Faintest...and short lived.

I'm not against "darkness" now and then and I don't care about happy endings. But this ?

I wish I had given a higher rating (considering how good the first 2 books were) but I just couldn't (considering how darker-than-this-and-I-might-have-died the 3rd book was).

I'm glad I've read this trilogy though...

...Even if I know I will not put it on my to-re-read list.

Caitlin says

Wow, people are really polarized on this series; they seem to think it's either the greatest thing since sliced bread or it's utterly cliché and tiresome. I'll try to add my own small voice to the middle way and say that The First Law trilogy is neither of these things. Overall, First Law strikes me as a mildly original fantasy trilogy with some interesting world-building touches--- a geography vaguely reminiscent of Europe and Asia; a setting that isn't quite swords-and-horses medieval as Renaissance with its refined fencing and starched uniforms; a seemingly all-powerful Merlin figure ruling from the shadows-- oh wait, that last one is kind of cliché.

Seriously though, for the most part I enjoyed the crap out of this series. The writing is mostly cinematic and engaging, the characters have distinct personalities (so you never lose track of who is doing what, even though it is a massive cast), and the climactic urban battle sequence in the last book is totally satisfying and epic as hell. It's unfortunately rare that a fantasy writer can deliver a climax that lives up to its own hype, and the First Law's climax manages all this and more.

HOWEVER: This series is not without problems, in terms of writing style and exposition. Abercrombie seems to not have realized that we don't need to know everything a character is thinking via dialogue and interior thought. Actions are worth paragraphs of the interior monologues that he often loads his characters down with, especially Glokta--- which is a shame, as he is otherwise one of the more interesting characters I've encountered in fantasy fiction. I could also have done without the clunky ancient history backstory that Abercrombie delivers through Bayaz: okay, I get that the world is ancient and there used to be demons and magic talismans scattered everywhere. It's interesting world-building, but the writer could have weaved hints of the history into the plot much more adroitly to more satisfying effect.

Finally, the ending of the 3rd book actively pissed me off. Not the climactic epic battle; not the loose ends section, or even the overly exposition-y part where "all is revealed". The last ten pages. [WARNING: HUGE SPOILERS] I came all this way with the character of Logen Ninefingers because I was interested in his development and what was going to happen to him, and the only thing Abercrombie can think of to finish the story is to reuse the same "cliffhanger" he used to begin the trilogy!? Some people might consider this circular narrative to be a brilliant twist, but to me it's just lazy writing. A writer should be able to wrap up a story that took THREE BOOKS to tell with something more satisfying than yet another cliffhanger.

Jesús Cañas says

Iba a ser mi lectura del verano, pero al final ha caído en 10 días y eso solo puede ser bueno. Se lee del tirón, entretiene y tiene momentos brillantes.

A otro nivel, se nota que Abercrombie estaba empezando. Repeticiones, inconsistencias, un estilo planito rozando lo ramplón, deus ex machina, similitudes sospechosas con otras sagas fantásticas, cambios de parecer de varios personajes porque le viene bien al autor...

Pero vamos, que uno no viene aquí buscando Proust. Te lo pasas bien y eso ya es mucho.

Satima says

The Blade Itself 2006 ISBN 9780575079793

Before They Are Hanged 2007 ISBN 9780575082014

The Last Argument of Kings 2008 ISBN 9780575077898

All published by Gollancz

This review originally appeared on The Specusphere, a now-defunct webzine, in 2008

In The First Law, UK fantasy writer Joe Abercrombie has produced one of the most impressive first trilogies ever to hit the market. It is remarkable not only because of its brilliantly complex plot and characters, but also because of its fearless investigation of the dark labyrinths of the human condition. Here be no dragons, and hardly a mage or a McGuffin is in sight, either. Instead, we have a blood, sweat and tears tale of the first water, incorporating, as the author puts in on his web site “all the grit, and cruelty, and humour of real life”. Good and evil depend on who’s talking. Good actions are not necessarily rewarded and neither do the bad guys always get their comeuppance. In fact, there are no real “bad guys”: rather, we see the skilful and unskilful behaviours of which we’re all capable held up to us as in a dark mirror of gut-wrenching veracity.

Abercrombie doesn’t write dialogue: he writes characters, and they speak to us. They speak of our own foibles and failures, sins and successes. What’s more, he writes fight scenes where valour and chivalry are in very short supply and love scenes that are heart-aching because we see all too clearly that nothing, not even the flawed emotion we call love, can save us from our own blindness. Technically, Abercrombie achieves this through his deep understanding of the close third point-of-view. Immersion in Abercrombie’s invented world is not optional.

The trilogy is centred on a man the author calls the ‘thinking man’s barbarian’, one Logen Ninefingers. For the most part, Logen does what he has to do and does it well, with as much—and as little—exertion as is needed. Yet in battle he can be a berserker, when his alter ego, The Bloody Nine, takes over and he is as likely to slaughter friend as foe. The story is not only Logen’s: other point-of-view characters include Collum West, a career soldier; his friend, the spoilt aristocrat Jezal Luthor; Glokta, a war hero turned Inquisitor – and Ferro, a runaway slave whose only interest in life is vengeance. Each one has friends and foes and as they interact with each other’s milieus we begin to understand the politics of their world as well as their interpersonal relationships. We meet Bayaz, First of the Magi, and his hapless assistant Quai; Ardee

West, Collum's wayward sister; Brother Longfoot, who will steer a team led by Bayaz on a quest to find the magic stone that will destroy all the enemies of Bayaz, and an assortment of self-seeking politicians and military personnel. But be warned: none of these apparently stock characters turns out to be what they appear.

In book one, *The Blade Itself*, war is in the air and many look to the return of Bayaz to save them. We see Bayaz gathering his team together and realise the conflicting interests his presence arouses. Book two, *Before They Are Hanged*, shows the struggle of the poorly-trained and equipped Midderlands army against the Northmen who have invaded their province of Angland. It also deals with the quest of Bayaz, and has the most surprising ending that any quest story could possibly have. Book three, *The Last Argument of Kings*, deals with the war's climax: an army of religious fanatics led by flesh-eating priests is attacking Midderlands, but their army is still in Angland and the king, newly elected and disastrously married, must hold out until the fighting force returns.

And 'The First Law'? The expression refers to the injunction against using magic from the Other Side. What are the consequences when that law is broken?

Abercrombie can only be compared to George R.R. Martin, but he is, thankfully, rather more succinct, having managed to squash his story into the customary three volumes. And you must read all three books, in order, as close together as possible, if you are to get the most out of this epic. Although each book is well-rounded and skilfully crafted, none truly stands alone. It matters not: once you embark on this tale you will not want it to end.

If you like your fantasy harsh and gritty, can stand a great deal of death and destruction, and if you don't want everything tied up in neat packages with 'happy ever after' stamped on them, you must read this trilogy.

Jasper Williams says

I really loved this series.

Say one thing for the first law trilogy, say it's got really good catchphrases.

Hazel says

The First Law Trilogy probably ranks in my top five debut trilogies of all time. Joe Abercrombie hits the ground running-- this series is nowhere near novice level. It's slick, dark, wonderfully cynical, and has some of the best bash-you-in-the-face fight scenes I have ever read.

The plot is nothing original, mind you, but the characterization definitely is. Unlike much of the Sword and Sorcery fantasy, Abercrombie's characters are deeply personal for the ultimate reason that they are almost always completely self-absorbed. While Jezal, Glokta, Ninefingers and the rest are caught up in plots concerning the destruction/creation/start/end of the the republic/the universe/world as they know it, there is no worrying about saving the world in these novels. There is not much compassion, and Abercrombie

disposes of pretty feelings like heroism and self-sacrifice altogether. Even better, he does away with all the black-and-white morality and gives us nothing but wonderful, shifting, twisted shades of gray.

Plot does get a little draggy and unfocused near the middle, but by that time I was so invested in the characters to care. Besides, Abercrombie ends the entire thing by spectacularly defying my expectations and going out with a bang (MILD SPOILER: or in one character's case, with a spectacular nosedive made even more spectacular by its relationship with the beginning of the series)

If you're sick and tired of noble characters agonizing over how to defeat the Dark Lord, give this one a try.

Katey says

This trilogy was beyond-description fabulous. Characters you love to hate, a dynamic plot and amazing battle scenes have propelled this trilogy into my absolute favorite.

There's no character I've found to love then hate then love again like Sand dan Glotka.

Charles says

The First Law Trilogy: The ultimate literary blue ball experience.

In my Reader's despair, I question the purpose of art and storytelling and compare Abercrombie, Tarantino, and Kubrick in order to understand why this trilogy I loved filled me with existential rage

SPOILER ALERTS

I started out LOVING this series. Apart from the excellent writing and immersive world, I cared about the characters - I wanted the heroes to overcome their poignant struggles and I hungered for revenge against the villains. However, near the end of the third book, I walked away with a heavy heart without finishing. Like turning away from a loved one who has let you down so many times, and you can't bear to see them let you down again, so despite your love for them, you just have to walk away - to protect yourself from another letdown - I had to walk away from this series and save myself yet another ending without resolution, without character growth (only character death/decay), and with endless, meaningless suffering.

I WILL say that this book made me deeply question the purpose of storytelling and whether a story NEEDS resolution. Because this book serves up conflict, struggle, and climax after climax - yet denies the readers resolution and satisfaction - the ultimate literary blue ball experience.

What you're guaranteed in this series:

- 1) gratuitous plot twists
- 2) surprise endings
- 3) anti-heroes

As I neared the end of the trilogy, I began wondering: what is the point of anti-heroes?

Well, there are two types of anti-heroes:

- 1) inherently good, but ruthless
- 2) inherently bad, but likable.

In denying me resolution time and time again, I was forced to ask myself if I hated these books and if these admittedly masterfully-written books were gimmicky garbage. Or was I just bitter I didn't get the ending I deserved?

IS THE BOOK GOOD OR BAD? Well to answer that, I needed to ask

- 1) What is the purpose of art?
- 2) What is the purpose of storytelling?

What is the point of denying redemption to flawed characters? Is it a legitimate storytelling approach to set up a series of tragic characters and leave 100% of the judgment to the audience, or 100% of the resolution to "what if..." scenarios in the reader's mind? Because in our minds and in hypothetical scenarios are the only places we can glimpse resolution.

My problem with these books AREN'T that they don't have happy endings - but that they seem to deny the visceral joy of a happy ending without any intellectual satisfaction of a tragic, but meaningful ending. It's THE WORST OF BOTH WORLDS.

To contrast, Romeo and Juliet, a story with a famously "unhappy ending" - has very clear message about "what went wrong" and the cause of the tragedy that befell the two star cross'd lovers - what if instead we are simply given the tragedy with no message? Imagine a Tarantino-directed version of R&J where we have no prologue or epilogue, and the parents never see the error of their ways from the death of their children...They simply off themselves and then the curtain falls. Is something gained or added to the story if you simply leave out the judgement, resolution, and meaning from R&J?

Does a story lose meaning if the message isn't explicitly stated by the artist?

Clockwork Orange, Full Metal Jacket - how is Kubrick different from yet similar to Tarantino? I believe Tarantino is Kubrick without subtlety and without meaning, Tarantino is pure gratuity...there are messages and redemption latent in Tarantino's stories - waiting there for us, but never delivered by the storyteller. Isn't this simply smearing colors on a canvas and leaving it up to the viewer to construct the meaning (if any)?

Tarantino and Abercrombie are lauded for being "realistic" - but what does *realism* really offer by way of *art*? A photograph is ultra-realistic, but a great painting is art when the artist presents their unique vision of reality- whether beautiful or terrible...Art is a RECREATION of reality, not simply a depiction.

And yet I KNOW Tarantino and Abercrombie stories provide plenty of art...engaging narratives and characters- but they lack the "meta" *meaning* that ties together the artistic *elements*. And this incompleteness is hailed as edgy and bold. But is it instead just lazy? Or even cowardly?

Does the story really gain by having RESOLUTION deliberately withheld by the author? I feel it does not.

Petrik says

I'll make this trilogy review really short as I did full reviews on all 3 books already.

The Blade Itself: 4.5/5 Stars

Before They Are Hanged: 5/5 Stars

Last Argument of Kings: 5/5 Stars

The First Law Trilogy: 14.5/15 Stars

Completely recommended for all fans of dark fantasy!

D. Peach says

A definite for the fantasy enthusiast. This is an amazingly well-crafted trilogy by a master story-teller.

Characterization was by far my favorite part of the book. Every character is thoroughly unique, utterly compelling and terribly flawed. Murderers, torturers, drunks, cowards, and betrayers people the pages. I loved them all, rooted for them, and was equally disappointed and horrified. The main characters are, by and large, trapped in lives they wish they could change. As a reader I kept hoping...hoping...hoping. Corruption abounds and it's extremely difficult to tell the good guys from the bad guys, particularly by the end. All that said, I didn't find the book depressing. There is plenty of humor, moments of nobility, friendship, and sacrifice.

As you probably guessed, this isn't a sweet book with a happy ending. I would characterize the genre as dark, the narrative as gritty. My dear old mom would hate it; I loved it. The plot is exceptionally tight for a trilogy. No wandering tangents, not a scene too many or few, every paragraph engaging. At no point was I able to predict the outcome of the characters' individual tales or the overall story. If you enjoy a page-turner where you haven't a clue as to what's coming, this trilogy won't disappoint.

The book abounds with bloody action. Plenty of cleaving heads in two and severing body parts. The madness of close combat and the berserker loss of control are exceptionally well-written, as is the general grossness of stinky bodies and brown teeth. Dialog is distinctive to the character, word choices for descriptions are rich, not a cliché in the whole book.

Halfway through the trilogy my major concern was that I would soon finish it. And then what? Have to live my life without a great read in hand? I solved that by downloading another Abercrombie book, Best Served Cold. So far it's just as entertaining...review to follow in a week.

Marko says

The characters - oh, the characters!

The First Law trilogy has its flaws. Most of the minor and a lot of the major points of the plot are predictable (though a sufficient number of shocking twists and revelations partly alleviates this), and repetitions of characters' catchphrases can get tiresome, to name the two that bothered me most.

But the characters themselves more than make up for it! Unorthodox, vividly written, with their own

contradictions and personal fights, rarely have I seen such a powerful display of antiheroic creations. The underlying message, that people might change though only slightly and sometimes, is not to my liking, but that doesn't mean it's not a valid viewpoint. The ending is, while dark, fascinating, and shines even more light on the characters' motivations and goals (or at least for one of them).

I'm not quite sure what people mean by "grimdark" when they describe Abercrombie's books. I'd rather use the term "realistic". And while I understand that realism is not something one might look for in escapist literature, the tone of these books was very much to my liking.

I'd wholeheartedly recommend The First Law trilogy to any lover of fantasy literature who has nothing against having his characters more "anti" than "heroes".
