

## How to Fill the Dragon-sized Hole in Your Life, Without Dragons: Joe Abercrombie's *The First Law* Series

Whatever your feelings were when the screen faded on Tyrion and the Small Council, whether they were like Jon Snow betrayed by his black brothers, or Tormund the first time he saw Brienne, or Oberyn when—no, no, let's not go there. However you felt, we were all faced with the same bleak, almost-apocalyptic reality: *The Winds of Winter* still wasn't on bookshelves and the spin-off shows were far from our screens. With a dragon-sized hole (much like the Night King's breach in The Wall, only a thousand times bigger) left in our lives and social calendars, how would we possibly fill it?

After all, dragons need to be fed—and a lot.

Five months on, our mourning is starting to wane, but we are still faced with that same bleak reality. While the streaming giants battle with the Ring-seeking fingers of Gollum (in Amazon's case, literally) to slake our post-*Game of Thrones* thirst (I'm looking at you, *The Witcher*), I would like to direct your attention to the written word. In particular, *The First Law* series by Joe Abercrombie.

I discovered *The First Law* series a few years ago when, as an aspiring fantasy writer, I realised I hadn't ventured very far from the realms of Westeros, Middle Earth, Narnia and all those in-between crossed by Lyra and Pantalaimon. Desperate to change that, I wasn't intentionally trying to find a new series that was similar to *A Song of Ice and Fire* (or any of the others). But what I did find was a series that borrowed from George R.R. Martin's approach to the fantasy genre and then used that to take me to the new realm I was searching for.

### At First Glance

*The First Law* series is set in a fantasy world at war, one reminiscent of medieval Europe and the Mediterranean, where magic doesn't-but-actually-does exist, and is told through the multiple viewpoints of characters who each express a morality more grey than the next. Their individual gritty, humorous and often violent tales weave together to tell an overall unified story. Sound familiar? Does it sound like I'm actually talking about *A Song of Ice and Fire* again?

Well, I'm not. But there's a fair reason for that.

Joe Abercrombie has said reading *A Game Of Thrones* was very influential on his own writing. He saw it as a divergence from the plethora of Tolkien-indebted fantasies that were flooding the market of the '80s and '90s. For the first time in fantasy, Abercrombie experienced a world low on magic and high on realism, where the black-and-white good versus evil was blended together to create characters with grey moralities and evils that were man-(and women)made. Despite the combined size of Westeros and Essos, there was

no room for two-dimensional characters—this was an entirely human world (with a few exceptions). And, as you might expect, Abercrombie found the books to be very unpredictable. He even says as much in his introduction to The Folio Society edition of *A Game of Thrones*:

“Please, I thought, *I know how THIS goes*. What Martin gave me, of course, was the best kind of slap in the face.”

*The Blade Itself*, the first book in *The First Law* series, was published in 2006—five years before the first episode of *Game of Thrones* aired. (Had *The Blade Itself* been published afterwards, publishers would have no doubt touted it as the next *Game of Thrones*.) The series is not a pale imitation of *A Song of Ice and Fire* and it is far from being a poorly veiled rip-off (or even a blatant one). It doesn't blindly promote violence in favour of relatable characters with complex arcs, carefully layered storytelling, a lovingly crafted world, or the recasting of well-loved tropes to subvert audience expectations, which seems to be what a lot of rushed-out would-be successors make the mistake of doing. Instead Abercrombie took his inspiration from Martin and then used that to make something of his own.

Let's start with the similarities (we're in the fantasy genre; there's always bound to be a few). After all, what drew many fans to *Game of Thrones* and *A Song of Ice and Fire* wasn't the fantasy genre but rather the way in which the story was told.

## Some Similarities Then

If you were attracted to *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *Game of Thrones* for any of the reasons listed below, then you will find yourself in safe hands with *The First Law*—well, as safe as you can be in these often ruthless worlds...

### Character-driven Story

Like Martin, Abercrombie uses multiple viewpoints to narrate his story. All are told in third person limited—that is, we follow the thoughts and feelings of one character at a time. Each chapter is written in the distinctive voice of one of the characters—something Abercrombie excels at—giving us a very personal view of each individual. The cast includes a cripple turned torturer, a wayward barbarian-warrior, and a dashing, selfish, glory-hungry nobleman. They are deeply flawed and possess a morality that can be pointed to on the darker end of a greyscale tonal ladder. Though don't be too confident with your finger. With relatable motivations and realistic choices, these characters sometimes edge closer to being the villain than the hero of the story, and vice-versa. Over the course of the series, the characters undergo arcs that remain true to (and even reveal) their characters.

### Unpredictability

We've been here before: we think we know the course these characters will take but the reality is we have no idea what to expect. Prepare to leave your eyebrows permanently raised as plot twists turn from one page to the next, though Abercrombie never bends his characters to the convenience of the plot. Oh no. It is the characters and their (often questionable, always true-to-self) choices that shape the story. If you spot a familiar

trope—and you will do—be aware they are set up only to be dismantled and rebuilt into something new. The same goes for your expectations.

### **Gritty Realism**

*A Song of Ice and Fire* is arguably the most famous and successful example of grimdark (a subgenre of fantasy with a tone, style or setting that is amoral or violent). Fear not—or, perhaps, do—for the *The First Law* series isn't far behind (Abercrombie goes by the name of @LordGrimdark on Twitter, so that should give you some indication of his writing style). The Circle of the World, which is where the story is set, can be as cruel and as ruthless as the Known World. The violence never comes across as gratuitous. It is meant to be entertaining, even shocking, but it is repeatedly used as a tool to explore character, expose the dark underbelly of kingdom politics, depict the reality of war, ponder the price of revenge, and to constantly question the definition of good and evil. In Abercrombie's hands, the line between right and wrong is as about as well balanced as a seesaw in a hurricane.

### **The Treatment of Magic**

While magic is a given in a fantasy world, its treatment is not. Magic may trickle into the story or it can flood it. Sometimes that trickle turns into a stream, without ever calling upon the need for sandbags. Again, Abercrombie takes a very similar approach to Martin. There is magic—there are even wizards (or, as they're known, Magi)—yet most of the characters don't believe in it (at least not at first) and are as amazed, horrified, or disbelieving as we are when a spell is cast. Magic is used sparingly, it has consequences, and it is never used as a Get Out of Jail Free card to find an easy solution to an impossible problem. (Isn't that right, Gandalf?)

### **Overarching Story**

Don't expect every narrative thread to be tied up by the end of the first book, *The Blade Itself*. Some narratives continue into the second, while others are concluded at the end of the first trilogy. A few are left to unravel beyond. Even the three stand-alone books in the series, which are set afterwards and are more self-contained, hint at a wider story happening in the background. As with *A Song of Ice and Fire*, there is an overarching story to the series. There are things at work in the shadowy wings that take time to come into the light of centre stage. Like us, the characters often don't fully appreciate the danger of the situations they are thrust into.

### **Incest**

Speaking of thrusting into, yes, there is incest, but you will have to wait until the fourth book.

### **The Abercrombie Brand**

No, not the clothing retailer. Rather, what makes a Joe Abercrombie book distinctive? While *The First Law* uses inspiration—not imitation—from *A Song of Ice and Fire*, there is plenty in these books to be loved on their own merits. For every similarity, there are a number of differences. It would be a bit like comparing an apple with a pear. Sure, both are fruit and

can be pressed into ciders and baked into pies, but one is actually more round, sometimes red instead of green, and is able to keep the proverbial doctor away on a day-by-day basis.

## **Humour**

Although both authors use the third person limited to tell their story, they are stylistic polar opposites. Most notable in their difference is Abercrombie's use of humour: he places it front and centre, rivaling even Tyrion's quick-witted tongue and sometimes cranking it up to a Pratchett level. Abercrombie's use of humour sometimes acts as a balm to the bite of his gritty realism. The two serve as a counterpoint to each other and never as a contradiction.

## **Battles, Battles, Battles**

While there are shady goings-on, deals being made, broken, remade and rebroken, and political intrigue aplenty, Abercrombie doesn't neglect to give you more battles than you can shake a dueling cane at. There is a barrage-worth of conflict and extended fight scenes throughout the series, both on a personal and a national level.

## **Approach to Worldbuilding**

As is common with a lot of contemporary fantasy series, the story is localised to a few locations in *The Blade Itself* before it (rather, the characters) venture out into the wider world in the following books. While many fans may have found *A Feast for Crows* to be a bit of a tangent to the main narrative in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, Abercrombie manages to widen the scope of his world without detracting from the main story. He uses a comparatively lighter hand when it comes to description, but that doesn't leave his world any less vivid.

## **Pacing**

Characters set out on long journeys—there is even the classic epic quest—and while we witness some of the steps taken to reach their destination, we're not waylaid by them. Just like the characters, the story keeps on moving. Abercrombie's pacing is much like when *Game of Thrones* hit that sweet spot in the fourth season, delivering that perfect balance of creating rising tension and revealing conflict between narratives and episodes. At times he even achieves thriller-esque flashes. This is saying something since Abercrombie's books vary around the 200,000+ word count. Although capable of propping open a door, they remain somewhat slimmer than one of Martin's back-breakers.

## **So What's It About?**

*The First Law* is one of those series, not unlike *A Song of Ice and Fire*, that is hard to summarise without diluting some of the finer details or giving away spoilers if you don't. As aforementioned, the overall story is woven together by individual narratives. Adding to the complication is the fact the series consists of a trilogy, three stand-alone novels, a collection of short stories, and a second trilogy set twenty years after the conclusion of the third book. Well, here goes:

At the start of the series The Union are fighting two wars. One against The Northman in (unsurprisingly) the north, the other against The Gurkish Empire to the south. Logan

Ninefingers is an infamous warrior, a leader separated from his crew and exiled from his home in the north. He leaves behind the Dogman and the rest of his former crew to face the overwhelming threat of the Shanka, a race reminiscent of orcs. In the Union, Inquisitor Glokta, a cripple turned torturer, is tasked with bringing down the corrupt Guild of Mercers. Meanwhile the self-obsessed Captain Jezal dan Luther wants nothing more than to win the annual duelling competition—until, that is, he becomes distracted by the off-limits sister of his friend Major Collem West. Lastly, former-slave and current soldier-quarry Ferror Maljinn is offered aid by a mysterious stranger. Then arrives the bald wizard Bayaz who, in true-wizard style, stirs up mischief with his staff and upsets everyone's day.

The stand-alone books are set after the first trilogy. They introduce us to a new cast of characters and also feature some of the minor characters from the first trilogy, promoting them to more prominent roles. It's almost like if Martin were to write a story focussing on the adventures of The Hound, Grey Worm, Gilly, and Daario—oh and don't forget Hot Pie. (That's if they all survived, of course.) Whilst all three books remain firmly rooted in the fantasy genre, *Best Served Cold* is a story of revenge, while *The Heroes* focuses on a three-day battle, and *Red Country* reads similar to a western.

The collection of short stories are set before the start of *The Blade Itself* and lead up to the second trilogy.

The first book in the second trilogy, *A Little Hatred*, was released just last month. It is set fifteen years after *Red Country*, when the age of magic is clashing with the age of machines, and features a new cast of characters, many of whom are in some way related to the old cast. Expect sons and daughters—as well as mum and dad. Although *A Little Hatred* is the most recent book, this is obviously not the place to start.

## The Books

Out of the nine books, seven are currently published. Before you groan and say “we've been here before”, the remaining two books are scheduled to be released in the next two years. (Another difference you may be pleased to know regarding Abercrombie and Martin is the speed in which Abercrombie has published his books. The first trilogy, the three stand-alone novels and the short story collection were all published within the space of six years. He also managed to release an unconnected trilogy in that time too.)

The books in publication (and reading) order:

### ***The First Law Trilogy (First Trilogy)***

*The Blade Itself* (2006)

*Before They Are Hanged* (2007)

*Last Argument Of Kings* (2008)

### **The Stand-alone Novels**

*Best Served Cold* (2009)

*The Heroes* (2011)

Tom Luck

*Red Country* (2012)

## **Short Story Collection**

*Sharp Ends* (2016)

## ***The Age of Madness* (Second Trilogy)**

*A Little Hatred* (last month, 2019)

*The Trouble With Peace* (expected next September)

*The Beautiful Machine* (expected September 2021)

So there's enough for you to be tucking into for the meantime. And, with two more books on the way, hopefully enough to tie you over in time for those new spin-off shows or, who knows, *The Winds of Winter* itself. Speaking of television shows...

## **Are There Any Adaptations?**

The short answer: nothing official yet. The speculative answer: with streaming giants desperately scrabbling ("*My... preciousss...*") for the next successor to *Game Of Thrones*, it seems only a matter of time before *The First Law* series is picked up, especially with the quality and quantity it has to offer.

## **But Don't Just Take My Word For It**

If you remain on the fence about giving *The First Law* a try, then perhaps George RR Martin can give that little nudge you need. The first thing you see on the inside cover of *Best Served Cold* is a quote from the man himself:

"The battles are vivid and visceral, the action brutal, the pace headlong, and Abercrombie piles the betrayals, reversals, and plot twists one atop another to keep us guessing how it will all come out."

Abercrombie even thanks Martin in his acknowledgements. How cool is that? It seems when you're a fantasy author and you reach a certain peak you get to rub elbows with your contemporaries as a member of the ultimate book club.