



The Arena Man

Steve Englehart

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Legendary comics writer Steve Englehart returns to the adventures of Max August in *The Arena Man*, the fourth novel in his fantasy thriller series.

Max August was once a regular guy, before he learned the ways of magick and immortality and became a staunch crusader against the supernatural forces of evil. Though immune to the effects of time, Max is not indestructible, and now he must face the vast, worldwide conspiracy known as the Necklace.

Max has only a few allies in this fight among them: Pam, an apprentice in the alchemical arts, and Vee, a chanteuse with an uncanny knack for all things magick. But the Necklace is plotting a massive catastrophe fueled by the magical power of a demonic entity; using Black Ops helicopters to massacre tens of thousands of spectators in a domed stadium, re-awakening terrorist fears and destabilizing the U.S. government. Max will need all his magick, and all the help he can get, for him to have any chance to thwart the attack and survive to fight another day.

The Arena Man Details

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From Reader Review The Arena Man for online ebook

Benn Allen says

Steve Englehart began his writing career as a comic book writer back in the '70s. Working primarily for Marvel Comics, Englehart wrote some classic runs on such titles as "The Avengers" ("The Celestial Madonna" arc), "The Defenders" and "Captain America and the Falcon" (the infamous "Secret Empire" arc). Late in the '70s, Englehart moved over to DC Comics and wrote for that company for a time. A tenure that included a very popular and famous run on "Batman's Detective Comics" which many consider a gold-standard for the Batman character. In the '80s, he began to work on some alternative comics company, particularly Eclipse Comics, where he created such characters as Coyote and Scorpio Rose.

It was also in the early that Englehart wrote the first Max August novel, "The Point Man". It would take him some thirty years before he returned to that character with the novel, "The Long Man", which in turn was followed by "The Plain Man" and more recently (like three years ago), this, the current Max August novel, "The Arena Man".

The Max August series are essentially supernatural thrillers, in which the titular character, assisted currently by his lover, Pam Blackwell, fight against evil magical forces. In particular, their adversary is a shadowy organization known as the Necklace. In each of the last three books, Max and Pam fight to prevent the Necklace from world domination through the use of magic.

Despite how corny and cliched that might sound, the books are highly entertaining and well-written. Englehart moves the story along at a quick, smooth pace and includes some fairly interesting people.

The only major problem I have with this book and the previous ones is Englehart has yet to go beyond his earlier days as a comic book author. Max and Pam's mystical talents are stand-ins for the usual superheroic powers and the Necklace is not that far removed from the evil organization, Hydra, seen in various Marvel comic books. Being a comic book fan (still), I don't necessarily find this a huge drawback, but I do wish Steve Englehart's style and skills evolve beyond the superheroic comics he wrote.

But still, "The Arena Man" was a fun read. I liked it a lot and look forward to the next installment of the series. (And judging by the ending of "The Arena Man", I'm surprised there hasn't been a fifth of the Max August series.) It's also a change of pace from the previous two books in that August doesn't really do much in the battle against the Necklace. Instead, various supernatural and members of the Necklace are battling it out amongst themselves. It's not something you may notice right off, but it is a change of pace.

Jeffrey says

In this alternative history world, Steve Englehart continues his storyline about Max August, a timeless wizard and warrior trained by the great Cornelius Agrippa to fight evil wizards and evildoers. Although the world is interesting, this novel is flat. The author seemed mostly to be treading water and keeping the series going by focusing on the development of other characters and the evil doers.

Max is training his disciple Pam Blackwell in how to also become timeless and a wizard. Meanwhile, Max's old girlfriend, a wizard, was almost killed in a prior novel, but her spirit went into the body of another woman. Max has been searching for her for years, but the girl, who after nearly going insane from having

two minds in one body, has finally forged a new personality, Vee, who is a singer.

Vee has in her hands a magical book written by Cornelius Agrippa, from which she is learning magic.

Max and Pam find out that the Gemstone, a vast evil conspiracy led by a bunch of fanatics who dream of taking over the world, have been attacking people in America in black helicopters that are travelling through magical portals. It seems that Peter Quince, an evil mage that Max previously defeated, is helping the Gemstone, but Max does not know what their ultimate target is.

The leadership of the Gemstone is fractured. The leader is being protected by a diabolah, basically a star like being that can control humans. Peter Quince, the wizard who works for the Gemstone is possessed by a demon.

Max infiltrates the Gemstone forces on the ground while Pam ends up in sub alternate universe hunting for a powerful talisman before the demon can get it. The novel spends a lot of time with Pam on her quest, with the various machinations of the Gemstone, and the plots of their leaders and with Vee, who has her own confrontation with an artificial person, a psychic vampire who seeks to imprison Vee and ingest her vitality and wizard powers. Vee must choose a means of destroying the evil vampire.

Naturally the diabolah and the demon square off in a mostly nonsense battle and Pam ends up fighting Quince, while Max is barely involved.

Fourth book was not the charm in this series.

Brian Palmer says

In a world beset by secret conspiracy, one man and one woman stand alone... The book feels quite cinematic at spots, but keeps the deft characterization of a novel. It takes the modern world and applies a bit of secret history -- magic does exist, although only usable by a few people -- and mixes in conspiracies and secret societies in a nice blend of action and characters.

The two main heroes are partners and magic-users; but it's been made clear that they're not equally powerful in magic. But magic is kept in the background for a good chunk of the book, which focuses on the problems of gathering intelligence and letting people know what's going on, when lies flow easily to everybody's lips. Even in the conspiracy, limitations are explored, and characters have different motivations and backgrounds; there are some nice parallels among characters but each feels different. I'm trying to avoid spoilers, so I'll wrap up; but I think this is a very well executed book, and doesn't feel too encumbered by the rest of the series (which I have not read).
