

SPECULATIVE FICTION REVIEW by Stephanie Young

TITLE *The Dance of Time*
AUTHORS Eric Flint & David Drake
PUBLISHER Baen
COPYWRIGHT 2006
PRINTING 2006

This is the sixth and final book in the *Belisarius* series. I read the first three books of this epic as e-books. For those of you who are not familiar with Baen, they are one of the most electronic -format friendly publishers in the genre. Several of their hardcovers contain a CD filled with goodies like cover art, screen savers, and totally free copies of selected works by the author of the book as well as others in a variety of reader formats (I chose Mobipocket since they didn't have Palm Reader)

I liken it to a drug dealer, you get the first taste free, and then you're hooked. In my case, I filled in the whole series in paperback except for this one. I also discovered John Ringo's *Posleen* series this way and now have all of those as well.

As you would expect in any book or series from Eric Flint, it is heavy on the history. *Dance of Time* picks up the saga in 533 A.D., not long after the fifth book, *Tide of Victory*. Belisarius is a Roman general who forges alliances with several armies and kingdoms to fight the Malwa, whose empire covers northern India and what is now Pakistan and Bangladesh.

The science fiction aspect is the crystalline life form from the future Belisarius carries named *Aide*. *Aide* was sent by the Great Ones who have transcended physical bodies, to help Belisarius defeat the Malwa who are led by *Link* who is an A.I. sent to this time by the New gods to change the history of earth by having the Malwa empire take over the world and use eugenics to create 'perfect' humans.

The battle scenes are graphic and frequent but the story is much more than that. It effortlessly weaves the stories of the leaders, with people not on the front lines, all of whom find out about themselves and battle adversity to make a difference in the world.

One such character I loved is Anna, wife of Calopodius the Blind. At the tender age of nineteen, she ventures across India to join her husband. After being nearly raped and murdered, she hires two soldiers as bodyguards and manages to turn everyone in her path upside down, almost single-handedly turning the system of hospitals from maggot-ridden middens, to facilities that save the lives of the soldiers lucky enough to make it there.

Drake and Flint wrap up the saga in a very satisfying way, leaving no loose ends. The scene with Belisarius and *Aide* at the very end had me sobbing. That scene alone was worth reading all the books.

If you haven't read any of the series yet, do start with *An Oblique Approach* and read the rest in order. The series takes a while to get into, especially if you are not a history fan, but by the end of the second book, *In the Heart of Darkness*, you'll be glad you did.

I give it 4.5 out of 5 rings of Saturn.

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