

The Runes of the Earth

What Has Gone Before

'The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever'

As a young man – a novelist, happily married, with an infant son, Roger – Thomas Covenant is stricken with leprosy. In a leprosarium, where the last two fingers of his right hand are amputated, he is taught that leprosy is incurable, and that his only chance of survival is to reject all hope of relief. Instead he must dedicate his life to avoiding anything which threatens his ability to protect himself. Horrified by his illness, he returns to his home on Haven Farm, where he finds that his wife, Joan, has abandoned and divorced him in order to protect Roger from exposure.

Other blows to his emotional stability follow. Fearing the inexplicable nature of his illness, the people around him cast in the traditional role of the leper: a pariah, outcast and unclean. In addition, he discovers that he has become impotent – and unable to write. Grimly he struggles to go on living; but as the pressure of his loneliness mounts, he begins to experience prolonged episodes of unconsciousness, during which he appears to have adventures in a magical

realm known only as the Land.

In the Land, physical and emotional health are tangible forces, made palpable by an eldritch energy called Earthpower. Because vitality and beauty are concrete qualities, as plain to the senses as size and colour, the well-being of the physical world has become the guiding ethical precept, the religion, of the people of the Land. When Covenant first encounters them, in *Lord Foul's Bane*, they immediately greet him as the reincarnation of an ancient hero, Berek Halfhand, in part because he has lost two fingers, and in part because he possesses a white gold ring – his wedding band – which they know to be a talisman of great power, able to wield ‘the wild magic which destroys peace’.

However, Covenant chooses to interpret his translation to this magical place as a form of hallucination or dream. Shortly after he first appears in the Land, his leprosy and impotence disappear, cured by Earthpower; and this, he knows, is entirely impossible. Further, he knows that any acceptance of the idea that he holds some magical power will be a betrayal of the principles upon which his survival depends. Therefore he responds to his welcome and health in the Land with unbelief: the harsh, dogged assertion that the Land is not real, and that attributing mystical or restorative powers to him

serves only to undermine his ability to endure his actual life.

Because of his Unbelief, his initial reactions to the people and wonders of the Land are at best dismissive, at worst despicable (at one point, overwhelmed by his reborn sexuality, he rapes a young girl, Lena, who has befriended him). However, the people of the Land decline to punish or reject him for his actions. As Berek Halfhand reborn, he is beyond judgment. And there is an ancient prophecy concerning the white gold wielder: 'with the one word of truth or treachery,/he will save or damn the Earth.' The people of the Land know that they cannot make his choices for him. They can only hope that he will eventually follow Berek's example by saving the Land.

At first, such forbearance conveys little to Covenant, although he cannot deny that he is moved by the ineffable beauties of this world, as well as by the kindness of its people. During his travels, however, first with Lena's mother, Atiaran, then with the Giant Saltheart Foamfollower, and finally with the Lords of Revelstone, he learns enough of the history of the Land to understand what is at stake.

The Land has an ancient enemy, Lord Foul the Despiser, who dreams of destroying the Arch of Time – thereby destroying not only the Land but the entire Earth – in order to escape what he perceives to be a

prison. Against this evil stands the Council of Lords, men and women who have dedicated their lives to nurturing the health of the Land, to studying the lost lore and wisdom of Berek and his long-dead descendants, and to opposing Despite.

However, these Lords possess only a small fraction of the power of their predecessors. The Staff of Law, Berek's primary instrument of Earthpower, has been hidden from them. And the lore of Law and Earthpower seems inherently inadequate to defeat Lord Foul. Wild magic rather than Law is the crux of Time. Without it, the Arch cannot be destroyed; but nor can it be defended.

Hence both the Lords and the Despiser seek Thomas Covenant's allegiance. The Lords attempt to win his aid with courage and compassion; the Despiser, through manipulation. And in this contest Covenant's unbelief appears to place him on the side of the Despiser. He refuses to acknowledge the power of his wedding band. Like the Land's beauty and magic, it threatens his precarious grasp on life and sanity.

Nevertheless Covenant cannot deny his response to the Land's apparent transcendence. And as he is granted more and more forbearance and even friendship by the Lords and denizens of the Land, he finds that he is now dismayed by his earlier violence towards Lena. He faces an impossible conundrum: the Land cannot be real, yet

it feels entirely real. His heart responds to its loveliness – and that response has the potential to kill him.

Trapped within this contradiction, he attempts to escape through a series of private bargains. In *Lord Foul's Bane*, he grants the Lords his passive support, hoping that this will enable him to avoid the demand that he learn how to use his ring. And at first his hopes are realised. The Lords find the lost Staff of Law; their immediate enemy, one of Lord Foul's servants, is defeated; and Covenant himself is released from the Land.

Back in his real world, however, he discovers that he has in fact gained nothing. Indeed, his plight has worsened: his experience of friendship and magic in the Land has undermined his ability to endure his outcast loneliness on Haven Farm. When he is translated to the Land a second time, in *The Illearth War*, he knows that he must devise a new bargain.

During his absence, the Land's plight has worsened as well. A number of years have passed in the Land; and in that time Lord Foul has gained and mastered the Illearth Stone, an ancient bane of tremendous power. With it, the Despiser has created an army which now marches to overwhelm the Lords of Revelstone. Although they hold the Staff of Law, they lack sufficient might to withstand the evil horde. They need the strength of

wild magic.

Other developments also tighten the grip of Covenant's dilemma. The Council is now led by High Lord Elena, his daughter by his rape of Lena; and in her person, he begins to experience the consequences of his violence. It is clear to him – if to no one else – that she is not entirely sane. In addition, the army of the Lords is led by a man named Hile Troy, who appears to have come to the Land from Covenant's own world. His presence radically undermines Covenant's self-protective Unbelief.

Now more than ever Covenant feels that he must resolve his conundrum. Again privately, he offers a bargain. He will give the defenders of the Land his active support. Specifically, he will join Elena on a quest to discover the essence of Earthpower in its most concentrated form, the EarthBlood. But in return he will continue to deny that his ring holds any power. He will accept no responsibility for the ultimate fate of the Land.

This time, however, the results of his bargain are disastrous. Using the Illearth Stone, Lord Foul slaughters the Giants of Seareach. Hile Troy is only able to defeat the Despiser's army by giving his soul to Caerroil Wildwood, the Forestal of Garroting Deep. And Covenant's help enables Elena to find the EarthBlood, which she uses to sever one of the

necessary boundaries between life and death. Her instability leads her to think that the dead will have more power against Lord Foul than the living. But she is terribly wrong; and in the resulting catastrophe both she and the Staff of Law are lost.

Covenant returns to his real world knowing that his attempts to resolve his dilemma ultimately serve the Despiser.

Nearly broken by his failures, he visits the Land once more in *The Power that Preserves*, where he discovers the full cost of his actions. Dead, his daughter now serves Lord Foul, using the Staff of Law to wreak havoc. Her mother, Lena, has become entirely insane. And the defenders of the Land are besieged by an army too vast and powerful to be defeated.

Covenant still has no solution to his conundrum: only wild magic can save the Land – and he cannot believe in it. However, sickened at heart by Lena's madness, and by the imminent ruin of the Land, he resolves to confront the Despiser himself. Powerless, he has no hope of defeating Lord Foul. Nevertheless he would rather sacrifice himself for the sake of a magical, but unreal, place than preserve his outcast life in his real world.

Before he can reach the Despiser, however, he must first face dead Elena and the Staff of Law. He cannot oppose her; yet she defeats herself when her attack on

him draws an overwhelming response from his ring – a response which also destroys the Staff of Law.

Accompanied only by his old friend, the Giant Saltheart Foamfollower, Covenant finally gains his confrontation with Lord Foul and the Illearth Stone. Facing the full force of the Despiser's savagery and malice, he at last finds the solution to his conundrum, 'the eye of the paradox': the point of balance between believing that the Land is real and believing that it is not. On that basis, he is able to combat Lord Foul by using the dire might of the Illearth Stone to trigger the wild magic of his ring. With that power, he shatters both the Stone and Lord Foul's home, thereby ending the threat of the Despiser's evil.

When he returns to his own world for the last time, he learns that his new-found balance benefits him there as well. He knows now that the reality or unreality of the Land is less important than his love for it; and that knowledge gives him the strength to face his life as a pariah without fear or bitterness.

#### 'The Second Chronicles of Thomas Covenant'

For ten years after the events of *The Power that Preserves*, Covenant lives alone on Haven Farm, writing novels. He is still an outcast, but he has one friend, Dr Julius Berenford. Then, however, two damaged women

enter his life.

His ex-wife, Joan, returns to him, violently insane. Leaving Roger with her parents, she has spent some time in a deranged commune which has apparently been manipulated by Lord Foul to desire Covenant's destruction. Recognising the Despiser's handiwork, and hoping to spare anyone else the hazards of involvement, Covenant attempts to care for Joan alone.

When Covenant refuses his aid, Dr Berenford enlists Dr Linden Avery, a young physician whom he has recently hired to work with him. Like Joan, she has been badly hurt, although in entirely different ways. As a young girl, she was locked in a room with her father while he committed suicide. And as a teenager, she killed her mother, an act of euthanasia to which she felt compelled by her mother's illness and pain. Loathing death, Linden has become a doctor in a haunted attempt to put aside her past.

At Dr Berenford's urging, she intrudes on Covenant's treatment of his ex-wife. When Joan's commune attacks, seeking Covenant's death, Linden attempts to intervene, but she is struck down before she can save him. As a result, she accompanies him when he is returned to the Land.

During Covenant's absence, several thousand years have passed in the Land, and the Despiser has regained his power. As before, he seeks to access Covenant's

wild magic in order to break the Arch of Time and escape his prison. In *The Wounded Land*, however, Covenant and Linden soon learn that Lord Foul has fundamentally altered his tactics. Instead of using armies and warfare to goad Covenant, the Despiser has devised an attack on the natural Law which gives the Land its beauty and health.

The overt form of this attack is the Sunbane, a malefic corona around the sun which produces extravagant surges of fertility, rain, drought and pestilence in mad succession. So great is the Sunbane's power and destructiveness that it has come to dominate all life in the Land. Yet the Sunbane is not what it appears to be. And its organic virulence serves primarily to mask Lord Foul's deeper manipulations.

He has spent centuries corrupting the Council of Lords. That group now rules over the Land as the Clave; and it is led by a Raver, one of the Despiser's most ancient and potent servants. Pretending to resist the Sunbane, the Clave extracts blood from the people of the Land to feed the Banefire, the true source of the Sunbane.

However, the hidden purpose of the Clave and the Banefire is to inspire from Covenant an excessive exertion of wild magic. And towards that end, another Raver afflicts Covenant with a venom intended to cripple his control over his power. When the venom has

done its work, Covenant will be unable to defend the Land without unleashing so much force that he destroys the Arch.

As for Linden Avery, Lord Foul intends to use her loathing of death against her. She alone is gifted or cursed with the health-sense, the ability to directly perceive physical and emotional health, which once informed and guided all the people of the Land. For that reason, she is uniquely vulnerable to the malevolence of the Sunbane as well as to the insatiable malice of the Ravers. The manifest evil into which she has been plunged threatens the core of her identity.

Linden's health-sense accentuates her potential as a healer. In addition, however, it gives her the capacity to possess other people; to reach so deeply into them that she can control their actions and emotions. For this reason, Lord Foul has chosen her. He intends to cripple her morally: he wishes to transform her into a woman who will be willing to possess Covenant in order to misuse his power. Surely, the Despiser believes, either Covenant or Linden will give him what he wants.

And if those ploys fail, Lord Foul has other stratagems in place to achieve his ends.

Horrified in their separate ways by what has been done to the Land, Covenant and Linden wish to confront the Clave in Revelstone; but on their own, they cannot

survive the complex perils of the Sunbane. Fortunately, they gain the help of two villagers, Sunder and Hollian. Sunder and Hollian have lived with the Sunbane all their lives, and their experience enables Covenant and Linden to avoid ruin as they travel.

However, Linden, Sunder and Hollian are separated from Covenant near a region known as Andelain. They are captured by the Clave while he enters Andelain alone. It was once the most beautiful and Earthpowerful place in the Land; and he now discovers that it alone remains intact, defended from the Sunbane by the last Forestal, Caer-Caveral, who was formerly Hile Troy. There he encounters his Dead, the spectres of his long-gone friends. They offer him advice and guidance for the struggle ahead. And they give him a gift: a strange, ebony creature named Vain, an artificial being created for a hidden purpose by ur-viles, former servants of the Despiser.

Aided by Waynhim, cousins of the ur-viles, Covenant hastens towards Revelstone to rescue his friends. When he encounters the Clave, he learns the cruellest secret of the Sunbane: it was made possible by his destruction of the Staff of Law thousands of years ago. Desperate to undo the harm which he has unwittingly caused, he risks wild magic in order to free Linden, Sunder, and Hollian, as well as a number of *Haruchai*, powerful warriors who at one time served the Council of Lords.

Unfortunately, a Raver has been at work torturing Linden, and she is now effectively comatose. When she has recovered somewhat, she and Covenant set out with Sunder, Hollian, Vain and a small group of *Haruchai* to seek for the One Tree, the wood from which Berek originally fashioned the Staff of Law. Covenant hopes to devise a new Staff with which to oppose the Clave and the Sunbane.

Faring eastward, towards the Sunbirth Sea, Covenant and his companions encounter a party of Giants, seafaring beings from the homeland of the Giants of Seareach. One of them, mute Cable Seadreamer, has had a vision of a terrible threat to the Earth, and the Giants have sent out a Search to discover the danger.

Convinced that this threat is the Sunbane, Covenant persuades the Search to help him find the One Tree; and in *The One Tree* Covenant, Linden, Vain, and several *Haruchai* set sail aboard the Giantship Starfare's Gem, leaving Sunder and Hollian to rally the people of the Land against the Clave.

The quest for the One Tree takes Covenant and Linden first to the land of the *Elohim*, mysterious and cryptic beings of pure Earthpower who appear to understand and perhaps control the destiny of the Earth. The *Elohim* agree to reveal the location of the One Tree, but they exact a price: they cripple Covenant's mind, enclosing his consciousness in a kind

of stasis, purportedly to protect the Earth from his growing power, but in fact to prevent him from carrying out Vain's secret purpose. Guided now by Linden's determination rather than Covenant's, the Search sets sail for the Isle of the One Tree.

Unexpectedly, however, they are joined by one of the *Elohim*, Findail, who has been Appointed to ensure that Vain's purpose fails – and to bear the consequences if it does not.

Linden soon finds that she is unable to free Covenant's mind without possessing him, which she fears to do, knowing that she may unleash his power. When events force her to a decision, however, she succeeds at restoring his consciousness – much to Findail's dismay.

At last Starfare's Gem reaches the Isle of the One Tree. When one of the *Haruchai*, Brinn, defeats the Guardian of the One Tree, Covenant, Linden and their companions are able to approach their goal.

But their hope of obtaining the wood for a new Staff of Law is an illusion fostered by Lord Foul's manipulations – and by Findail's refusal to aid the Search in any way. Covenant's purpose is in fact the threat to the Earth which Cable Seadreamer has foreseen. Covenant's approach to the One Tree and his power begin to rouse the Worm of the World's End; and the Worm's awakening will accomplish Lord Foul's

release from Time.

At the cost of his own life, Seadreamer succeeds at making Linden aware of the true danger. She in turn is able to forestall Covenant. Nevertheless the worm has been disturbed, and its restlessness forces the Search to flee as the Isle sinks into the sea, taking the One Tree beyond reach.

Defeated, the Search sets course for the Land in *White Gold wielder*. Covenant now believes that he has no alternative except to confront the Clave directly, to quench the Banefire and then to battle the Despiser; and Linden is determined to aid him, in part because she has come to love him, and in part because she fears his unchecked wild magic.

With great difficulty, they eventually reach Revelstone, where they are rejoined by Sunder, Hollian, and several *Haruchai*. Aided by a Sandgorgon of the Great Desert, they break down Revelstone's gates. Then Covenant, Linden and their friends give battle to the Clave.

After a fierce struggle, the companions corner the Raver which commands the Clave. There the Sandgorgon and Seadreamer's brother, Grimmand Honninscrave, succeed at 'rending' the Raver, although Honninscrave perishes in the attempt. Then Covenant flings himself into the Banefire, using its dark theurgy to transform the venom in his veins. With the danger that he will

destroy the Arch thus diminished, he is able to quench the Banefire with wild magic.

When the Clave has been dispersed, and Revelstone has been cleansed, Covenant and Linden turn towards Mount Thunder, where they believe that they will find the Despiser. As they travel, still followed by Vain and Findail, Linden's fears grow. She realises that Covenant does not mean to fight Lord Foul. That contest, Covenant believes, will unleash enough force to destroy the Arch. Afraid that he will surrender to the Despiser, Linden prepares herself to possess him again, although she now understands that possession is a greater evil than death.

Yet when she and Covenant finally face Lord Foul, deep within the wightwarrens of Mount Thunder, she is possessed herself by a Raver; and when she wins free of that dark spirit's control, she is no longer willing to interfere with Covenant's choices. And in fact he does surrender, giving Lord Foul his ring. But as the Despiser turns wild magic against Covenant, slaying his body, the altered venom is burned out of Covenant's spirit, and he becomes a being of pure wild magic, able to sustain the Arch despite the fury of Lord Foul's attacks. Eventually the Despiser expends so much of his own essence that he effectively defeats himself; and Covenant's ring falls to Linden.

Meanwhile, she has gleaned an understanding of

Vain's purpose – and of Findail's Appointed role. Vain is pure structure; Findail, pure fluidity. Together they contain the necessary elements for a Staff of Law.

Using Covenant's ring, Linden melds Vain and Findail into a new Staff. Then, guided by her health-sense and her physician's instincts, she reaches out with the restored power of Law to erase the Sunbane and begin the healing of the Land.

When she is done, she fades from the Land and returns to her own world, where she finds that Covenant is indeed dead. Yet she now holds his wedding ring. And when Dr Berenford comes looking for her, she discovers that her time with Covenant and her own victories have transformed her. She is now truly Linden Avery the Chosen, as she was called in the Land: she can choose to live her old life in an entirely new way.