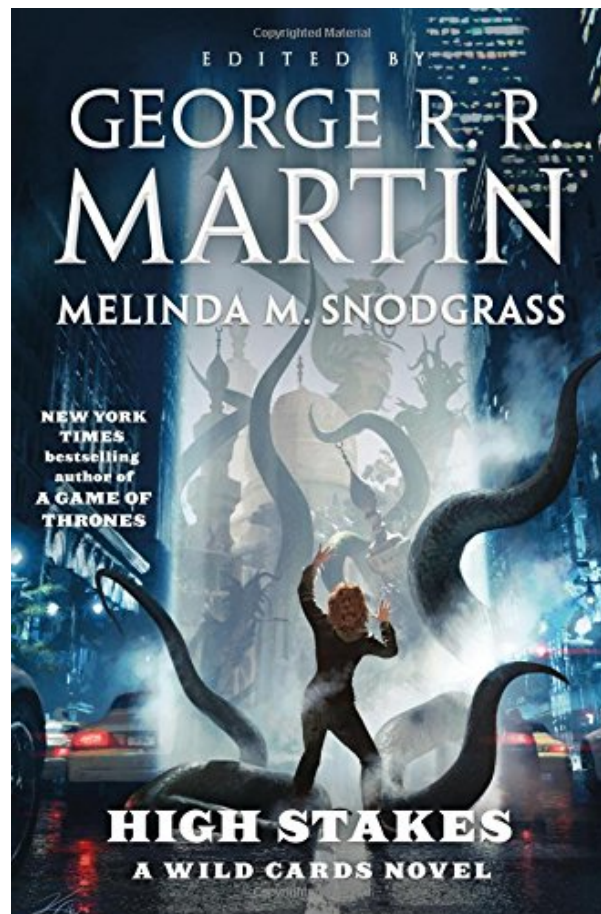


**HIGH STAKES: A WILD CARDS NOVEL BY
GEORGE R. R. MARTIN, WILD CARDS
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Perfect for old fans and new readers alike, *High Stakes* (Wild Cards) delves deeper into the world of aces, jokers, and the hard-boiled men and women of the Fort Freak police precinct in a pulpy, page-turning novel of superheroics and Lovecraftian horror.

After the concluding events of *Lowball*, Officer Francis Black of Fort Freak, vigilante joker Marcus "The Infamous Black Tongue" Morgan, and ace thief Mollie "Tesseract" Steunenberg get stuck in Talas, Kazakhstan. There, the coldblooded Baba Yaga forces jokers into an illegal fighting ring, but her hidden agenda is much darker: her fighters' deaths serve to placate a vicious monster from another dimension. When the last line of defense against this world weakens, all hell breaks loose, literally....

The Committee in New York sends a team of aces to investigate. One by one, each falls victim to evil forces--including the dark impulses within themselves. Only the perseverance of the most unlikely of heroes has a chance of saving the world before utter chaos erupts on Earth.

Edited by #1 New York Times bestselling author George R. R. Martin, *High Stakes* features the writing talents of Melinda M. Snodgrass, John Jos. Miller, David Anthony Durham, Caroline Spector, Stephen Leigh, and Ian Tregillis.

Now in development for TV: Rights to develop *Wild Cards* for TV have been acquired by Universal Cable Productions, the team that brought you *The Magicians* and *Mr. Robot*, with the co-editor of *Wild Cards*, Melinda Snodgrass as executive producer.

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A review of the ACTUAL book *High Stakes* by a long-time *Wild Cards* fan

By Matthew F.

I just put down *High Stakes* a few minutes ago, so I am writing this review while it is still fresh in my mind...

First of all, to establish my *Wild Cards* bona fides, I have been reading this series since the late-ish eighties, own all of the previous volumes (in print), own copies of both the Steve Jackson *GURPS Supers Wild Cards* (*GURPS*) and *Green Ronin Mutants Masterminds Rpg Wild Cards RPG* books (even though I don't play), and I own the original *EPIC Comics graphic novels Wild Cards (Graphic Novel)*, as well as the (imho) inferior *Dabel Brothers comic series* from a few years ago. While I love *ASOIAF*, to me *GRRM* was the guy (well one of them) behind *Wild Cards* before I even picked up *A Game of Thrones* years later.

Basically, the entire series is a gritty, more naturalistic take on the superhero comic book genre. It's also an alternative history series. The world of *Wild Cards* diverges from ours mostly in 1946 (but actually a few years earlier with the exploits of the original *Jetboy*), when an alien virus is released over Manhattan. A lot of the summaries I've read recently make it seem like the virus killed millions of people around the world, but in the books it infects probably thousands, maybe tens of thousands, initially in the New York area (and then over the years and decades continues to lead to outbreaks worldwide). The main thing to keep in mind is that of those infected, 90% die (draw a "Black Queen"), 9% become disfigured mutants ("Jokers"), and a mere 1% gain super-powers ("Aces"). Basically the virus was bioengineered by an alien species nearly identical to humans to boost their own powers, and they decided the test the virus on humans first.

From 1946 on, history diverges in both large and small ways. For example, in the 1950's several prominent

Aces are interrogated by Joe McCarthy and suspected of being communists. Another example – Fidel Castro becomes a MLB manager. In the Wild Cards series, the Aces are what we would mostly consider superheroes (or super-villains), but they are vastly outnumbered by the others afflicted by the virus called Jokers. Jokers become a very visible minority group around the world; and, in New York City, they have their own neighborhood in Manhattan called Jokertown. There are all sorts of great stories told by numerous authors that take place throughout the decades, but most of the stories take place from the mid-80s and onwards. I highly recommend the first book in the series, Wild Cards I, which demonstrates great world building and tells several decades of stories in one volume.

Another important aspect of the series is that it's always been a collaborative effort between multiple authors, with George RR Martin writing many stories and editing most of the books. Unlike comic books from DC and Marvel, there is no ret-conning in Wild Cards. Everything that happens has ramifications in the world later on, even seemingly random throw-aways... Also, characters grow and age and die – and they don't come back (well, not really...hmmm, kinda).

High Stakes is the third novel in the most recent trilogy in the Wild Cards series, the previous two being Fort Freak (Wild Cards) and Lowball: A Wild Cards Mosaic Novel. Overall, I think High Stakes is the 23rd volume in the series. While I think you could possibly read this book without having read volumes 1-20, you would be much more confused if you hadn't read the two immediately preceding this book, especially Lowball, which feeds directly into the beginning of High Stakes. This trilogy begins with a focus on Jokertown, especially on "Fort Freak", which is the nickname for the local police station, in the book of the same name. By the end of Lowball, the second book, the trilogy's scope has become international, and when High Stakes begins, it's not only international but existential.

Something has been let loose in the world, something powerful and malevolent, and it grows stronger with each passing moment. It then becomes up to the main characters in High Stakes to figure out what's happening and how to stop it. The story centers on a few major characters and their various plots as they eventually overlap. Francis "Franny" Black is a NYPD officer, based at Fort Freak and a "nat" or "normal" human being, whose late father was also an NYPD officer in Jokertown. At the end of Lowball, (SPOILERS) he successfully rescues kidnapped Jokers from an illegal gladiatorial fighting ring, in conjunction with the efforts of one of the kidnapped, a Joker/ Ace named Marcus (Infamous Black Tongue). They both find themselves stranded abroad in Kazakhstan when people around them in the city of Talas start acting strange and murderous. What had just seemed like a victory may in fact be the beginning of a defeat. These two characters go their separate ways for the most part, Franny ending up with a seemingly evil former Soviet Ace, and Marcus with his Ukrainian girlfriend and eventually a village of Central Asian Jokers.

Another character who we briefly meet in Lowball is Mollie Steunenberg (Tesseract), an Ace thief with the power to create portals between various places in the world. She had been using (SPOILER) this power against her will to kidnap Jokers to Kazakhstan, and at the beginning of High Stakes, she's trying to put all of this behind her while making another score, which ends very badly for her.

Meanwhile, Franny eventually finds himself back in NY, where he is able to help shed light on what's really at stake (the END OF THE WORLD!). There are other characters featured in the story, including Bathsbeba Fox (The Midnight Angel) who has enhanced strength, flight, and can summon a flaming sword when she wishes it. She, along with her Ace husband Billy "Carnifex" Ray, are US government Aces who are initially investigating the disappearance of another member of their team.

We soon encounter other Aces, members of a UN sponsored force called the Committee, the focus of the previous trilogy. Among them are Michelle Pond (The Amazing Bubbles), who absorbs kinetic energy

almost without limit, and can then release it in the form of “bubbles” (kind of like Sebastian Shaw in X-Men: First Class); Klaus (Lohengrin), who can encase himself in a supernatural suit of armor and wields a similar ghostly longsword; and Barbara Baden (Babel), an Israeli Ace who can let anyone understand another person no matter what language they speak and, conversely, she can make no one understand anyone else. The Committee is tasked with investigating the odd happenings in Kazakhstan, and Lohengrin and Bubbles lead a team of other super-powered Aces into this bizarre realm which seems to be some sort of Hell on Earth. Things go bad from the beginning of this mission and soon spiral out of control, with the various characters (Aces, Nats, and Jokers alike) encountering all sorts of vile creatures and desires within themselves, some barely retaining and others completely losing their sanity, like in some eldritch horror. Since this is essentially a super-hero book, you can assume that things somehow work out in the end, but not without an amazing amount of death, destruction and personal loss.

There is a lot of horrible imagery in the book, but that’s somewhat par for the course for a series which regularly dealt with death, deformity, blood magik, and war crimes (among other things) over the years. I appreciated all of the call backs to previous Wild Cards stories, including the immediately preceding “Committee” Trilogy (Inside Straight (Wild Cards), Busted Flush (Wild Cards), and Suicide Kings (Wild Cards)). Midnight Angel I believe was introduced in George R.R. Martin's Wild Cards XVII: Death Draws Five, and her husband, Agent Billy Ray, was introduced earlier, in Ace in the Hole (Wild Cards) or even prior to that book. Suffice to say, what happened in Death Draws Five has an interesting connection to this book.

If I was unfamiliar with the series, then I am not sure how much I would enjoy it. It’s hard to get into this book without at least having read the previous two in the trilogy, so I wouldn’t recommend High Stakes as a stand-alone read. And the depiction of what was happening in Kazakhstan did not feel especially original to me, it just felt like the Wild Cards version of an end of the world type scenario like Crossed, Vol. 1 or one of the messed up scenes from Event Horizon (1997) [Blu-ray]. But as the latest in the series, I was satisfied with my return to the world of Wild Cards. I am glad to know that there will be more books in the series in the future, and I am mostly excited to see what becomes of the recently announced TV series (if it actually happens!). Oh, and George – finish Winds of Winter already!!

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.
quite a fun read.

By Dennis DePalma

A worthy addition to the Wild Cards canon, High Stakes is fast-paced and filled with twists and turns. Very enjoyable read, though the editing on this installment in the series was not quite as tight as we have seen previously. There are notable contradictions between the various story threads, and it's not clear whether that's meant to reflect unreliable narrators or if the different story lines simply did not get in sync. Either way, quite a fun read.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.
the best endorsement for a series you can give a series

By Chuck

Read every book in a series and not yet tired of it yet, the best endorsement for a series you can give a series.
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