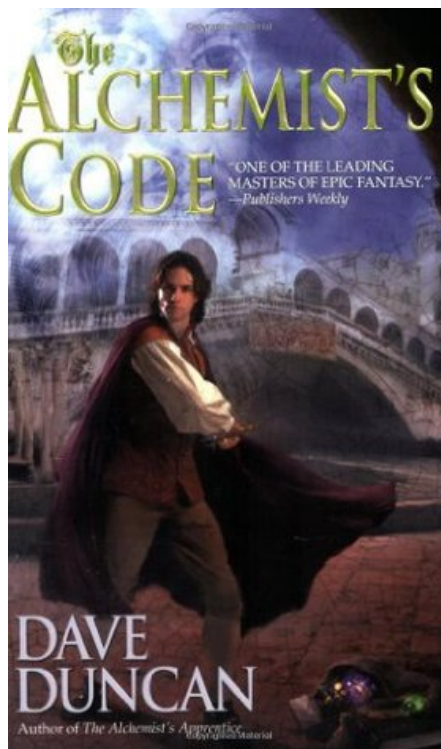




The Alchemist's Code

Dave Duncan

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The legendary Maestro Nostradamus may be able to glimpse the ever-changing future, but even he cannot see the danger that is about to envelop him and his daring apprentice Alfeo when Nostradamus is hired to find a foreign spy by Venice's ruling Council of Ten. The only clues they can offer him are the spy's intercepted messages, encoded in a seemingly unbreakable cipher. But Nostradamus soon detects evil influences working against him, and realizes the spy can only be caught by occult means. He turns to his able apprentice, the young swordsman Alfeo Zeno, whose unique talents may prove essential to unraveling the truth.

The Alchemist's Code Details

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From Reader Review The Alchemist's Code for online ebook

Bob Sharp says

I had not read any of Dave Duncan's work before, but I thoroughly enjoyed these three books. It's obvious he has spent a large amount of time familiarizing himself with the time period these books are set in and I really like his style of writing.

I enjoyed that these weren't the standard fantasy tropes, this was more Sherlock Holmes than Lord of the Rings. It all meshed very well together I thought and I look forward to reading more of Duncan's work.

Holly Scudero says

"The Alchemist's Code" is the fantastic sequel to "The Alchemist's Apprentice." Alfeo Zeno, apprentice to the philosopher and astrologer Nostradamus, is about to become entangled in another mystery. It begins when he runs into an old acquaintance at the theater. It continues when Nostradamus is hired to find the missing daughter of a wealthy noble family (for an outrageous fee), and gets complicated when it turns out that that missing daughter ran off with Alfeo's childhood acquaintance, Danese Dolfin, who is known by most to be a user with little or no morals, suspecting to be using the girl to get in with a rich and influential family. On top of all this, the Council of Ten has hired Nostradamus to track down a spy, a traitor to Venice who is selling secrets to an ambassador somewhere in town. As the stories play out, it becomes clear that they are connected, as evidenced when Danese turns up dead in front of Ca' Barbolano. Who is responsible? What is the identity of the spy wanted by the Council of Ten? How are these cases related? It is up to Alfeo to find out.

I loved the first book, and I equally love the second. Duncan does a great job blending history, fantasy, and mystery together into an invigorating story that hooks and won't let go until the mysteries are solved. I love the first person narrative; telling the story from Alfeo's point of view is a great way of giving you all the information needed at just the right pace, so that you can follow along without being able to guess what's coming. I like the characters too, and their interactions are well written and fun to read. This was a fun book, and I am definitely looking forward to the further adventures of Alfeo!

Cindy says

I love stories set in Venice since then I can imagine that I'm in Venice. This is a good sequel to The Alchemist's Apprentice. I love Nostradamus and Alfeo and Violetta so was glad to read more of their adventures!!

Alice says

Cryptography and espionage in renaissance Venice.

Andrew Gronosky says

The second novel in Duncan's Alchemist trilogy of historical fantasy, *The Alchemist's Code* is equally well-crafted, and slightly more satisfying, than the first installment.

The intrigue and pageantry of Renaissance Venice are captivating. The window it opens into that world is enough to make the novel worth reading. The plot is a little more sophisticated than that of *The Alchemist's Apprentice*. This time, the authentic-seeming magic that Duncan so thoroughly researched and artfully portrays actually makes a difference to the plot. The fact that the plot deals with espionage rather than murder makes it more appealing to me, because it adds a political dimension to the conflict and increases the opportunity for deception and plot twists.

One distraction from the otherwise well-paced story is the exposition of the titular code. This is handled through what amounts to a lecture on cryptography. It's about as concise and lucid an explanation of a symmetric-key cipher as one is likely to find anywhere, but not all readers will appreciate the digression. This is the one instance in the novel where Duncan succumbs to his Achilles' heel: forgetting to "show, not tell."

Like its predecessor, this novel is populated with vibrant characters and deeply rooted in a sense of place and time. It's worth reading just to follow the point-of-view character and to follow his witty internal monologue.

Tim Hicks says

A good sequel and a good read. This one continues the story but brings different aspects into play so it isn't just another go-round on the same wheel.

For one thing, Alfeo actually uses some magic, which of course gets him in trouble; but then, everything he does gets him in trouble.

It's becoming clearer after two books that this book is as much about political manoeuvring as it is about magic or sleuthing.

In my review of #1, I mentioned the parallels with Nero Wolfe. This time, there's even more of the Establishment jawing about arresting our heroes while we know that (a) they really don't want to, because they know they need our heroes to solve cases, and (b) Nostradamus isn't going to be catchable anyway, no matter how close the trap seems to be to springing on him.

Complex plot, rolled out carefully. The same amusing banter. An almost-too-long part about cryptography - I liked it but then I have a maths degree.

On to #3 ... and what a surprise at the end of this book to discover that Duncan lives in Victoria, BC, where I lived for 30 years. Probably passed him in the street a few times. Odd that he didn't choose to live 30 miles away in Duncan, BC.

Cal says

Much better than the first book in the trilogy. The interaction between Alfeo and Vasco is well done. The author presents a very interesting look at the political structure and different classes between nobles and others. This series is very "small" in scope compared to Pandemia.

Scott Marlowe says

Rating

Review

*** This review originally appeared on Out of this World Reviews. ***

The Alchemist's Code is the second in the series of fantasy/mystery tales penned by Dave Duncan and set in the historic, beautiful, and oftentimes dangerous world of 16th century Venice. I reviewed the first book in the series, The Alchemist's Apprentice, not too long ago, and since I found that first book such an enjoyable read, I was eager to jump into this one.

Once more, Alfeo Zeno is our narrator as the ruling body of Venice, the Council of Ten, calls upon Alfeo's master, Nostradamus, to crack encoded messages which they fear contain state secrets. Espionage, a lover's tryst, and a friend from Alfeo's past become intertwined as Alfeo must face down a supernatural threat and his own execution for practicing witchcraft as he is forced to invoke supernatural powers of his own to stop the spy's machinations.

Much like its predecessor, The Alchemist's Code is beautifully written. Duncan does his best to display his command of the written word with eloquent prose and a plethora of words that had me using my Kindle's automatic dictionary feature often.

Alfeo's descriptions of the political and social aspects of Venice are more terse in this book as compared to the previous novel. The same goes for his telling of ancillary characters. In other words, Duncan assumes we've read the first book in the series and don't need this information in as much depth this time around. The doge (the leader of Venice, sort of like a duke but without the power) plays a smaller role in this second book, and his relationship to Alfeo as well as their history does not play the part it did in book one. The same goes for Violetta, Alfeo's lover who also just happens to be a prostitute to members of high society. Filiberto Vasco, however, plays a major role in this novel. Vasco is Alfeo's chief adversary in government, and the one who would most like to see Alfeo burn at the stake for witchcraft. Duncan never goes into great depth regarding this rivalry, though it can likely be attributed to professional jealousy. That, and the two grew up together, and so they share history.

All that being said, while reading the first book in the series will give you good background information about these extra characters and the setting, it is by no means necessary to have read that first book before reading this one. Still, there's also no reason not to; both are well-worth the read.

Duncan once again does a nice job with characterization. Alfeo is a likeable, personable, and sometimes humorous narrator. Nostradamus is aloof, stubborn, seemingly oblivious to the fact that he is tempting fate by challenging Venice's authority but always with an ace up his sleeve. Even Vasco, who makes no secret of

his desire to see Alfeo trip and fall, shines through because of his loyalty to the state and underlying desire to do (what he thinks, anyway) is right.

The Alchemist's Code is a well-written, enjoyable read, full of mystery, intrigue, and action. I'll be picking up the next in the series, The Alchemist's Pursuit, for review soon.

Bruce says

I don't care for mystery novels, which Duncan's Venetian series are, but I enjoyed the characters and the information regarding Venetian history & culture found in this book. I already have the third and final volume of this series and will read it soon!

D.w. says

This is the second tale in the saga of Sier Alfeo Zeno, the apprentice to Nostradamus. And a worthy telling it is.

Duncan provides a lead in where the answers are buried to the riddle that we are soon presented with. And then he weaves in the historical background of the complex government of the Venice.

It is fascinating stuff and dealt with masterly, though into this fantasy and the paranormal come into play in such a way that we wonder is it necessary at all, or is the sleuthing enough to stand on its own feet. As with the first this is a great tale and when it is complete, worth a reread as everything is so richly described and well handled that one feels as if they are apart of Renaissance Venice as well.

Kristen says

This was an entertaining look at Venice and it's intricate and dangerous political wrangling during the time of the doges.

Alfeo Zeno is apprentice to Nostradamus, now a crotchety octegenarian who does what he likes and damn the consequences. Unfortunately, when a murder takes place with the corpse being left in the doorway of the home where Nostradamus and Alfeo live, questions are asked, and many powerful people - including the leader of the Inquisition, who already suspects Nostradamus of dark magical practices - demand that the Maestro provide a solution.

Nostradamus charges poor Alfeo with the legwork of investigating, and while the instructions he gets are vague at best, he must persevere.

The best part of this book is the hilarious relationship between Nostradamus and young Alfeo. The old man behaves atrociously, and appears to disdain and take advantage of his young apprentice. But Alfeo manages to get back his own quite cleverly, and if you read between the lines, you clearly see the respect and affection between the two.

Their combined efforts unearth some very exciting things involved in and leading to the murder, and why it

took place.

If you like historical murder mysteries, Venice as a setting, and/or the era and politics of the doges, this book may be a good read for you. I really enjoyed it.

M.D. says

This is the second of Dave Duncan's Nostradamus books, and a totally enjoyable read. Although the pivotal character is Nostradamus, the main protagonist is his apprentice, Alfeo Zeno, who carries out his master's investigations and gets in trouble in the process. The setting, Venice in the fifteenth century, rife with political machinations and the constant threat of the Inquisition adds to the charm of the story.

In this book, Alfeo must help uncover a spy who uses a complex encryption model to pass on his messages. Nostradamus uses his apprentice's special abilities with the sword, and with the occult, to unravel the plot and unmask the spy.

Duncan's description of Venice is vivid and his characters, from the Doge himself to Giorgio the gondolier, are vibrant and colourful.

Sean Randall says

It was spring half a decade ago when, of the Alchemists Apprentice, I wrote: "whilst an enjoyable enough read, there was nevertheless a feeling of something missing and I'm probably going to put the continuing parts of the series deep in my haystack, which I may or may not get through one day." That day has come, and I picked up Alchemists code yesterday evening.

Whilst I still believe almost every other work of Duncan's is better in many ways, I cannot but help enjoy the style and observational skill of the narrator and, even for one who knows nothing of the era or locale I found the description fairly captivating, the scenery and pomp of the age well depicted. I'll read the third, but this isn't a series to keep me up all night reading, unfortunately.

Katie says

I'm definitely enjoying this series. Thankfully, I see there's a third.

Once again Nostradamus & his apprentice, Alfeo, must solve a murder. This time, it's intertwined with treason, and their progress is hampered by demonic forces. Will they be forced to use some black magic of their own & put themselves at risk of being burned for witchcraft? Ohhhh...wouldn't you just love to know.

I'm going to be looking into Duncan's other works.

Sabrina says

This was a great read, *much* better than the first one. I picked it up hoping for more of what I liked and less of what I didn't, and the book did not disappoint.

The writing style is brilliant. There is some mystery and a murder, but I wouldn't call it a whodunnit. There is a little more action, more magic, and a lot more Vasco. I don't think we are ever given a concrete reason why Alfeo and Vasco hate each other, but it does make their interactions so much fun to watch.

My only complaint is the utter lack of any climax. Like the first book, it ends with Maestro Nostradamus showing off his cleverness with a long-winded explanation of the entire plot. That's it.
