

Berserk

Written by Stephen Dranger

Introduction and (non-spoilery) synopsis: Berserk is a dark action-adventure anime set in a vaguely medieval era. We follow the protagonist, Guts, as he falls in with the Band of the Hawk, a band of mercenaries led by the charismatic Griffith. This 26 episode series tracks the rise of the Band of the Hawk and the shifting personal allegiances of its mercenaries until the unexpected events of the final three episodes. (Well, that's about as explicit as I can be without spoiling anyone!)

Personal review: Berserk is dark and rather gothic in tone. It starts out as a straightforward action series, with a lot of violence and gore in each episode, but becomes a lot more interesting once the focus shifts to the dynamics between the characters and Griffith's quest for personal power. The whole series is tightly plotted, with very little filler, and works extremely well on many levels: as a tragic account of one man's hubris, as an action adventure, as a horror story and even, yes, as a love story.

I hated Berserk till about the eighth episode. I thought it was mindless, violent and poorly animated. Then, suddenly, I began to care about the characters and the story. More than many other series, Berserk is a story that takes a while to build up momentum, but it's well worth the wait. I watched Berserk the first time mainly to figure out where the story was going, but I rewatch it because I really like the characters. Quoting from something I wrote a while ago: "the interaction between the swordsman and his fellow mercenaries, terse as it is, is surprisingly effective in making us care about these characters."

The anime only covers one arc of the manga, but I think it works well as a stand-alone unit. However, the manga is still going strong - the 31st volume was published in September 2006 - so if you're dying to know what happens next, you can either check out the original manga or the translated Dark Horse Comics version. The best online resource that I've found is <http://skullknight.net>>skullknight.net.