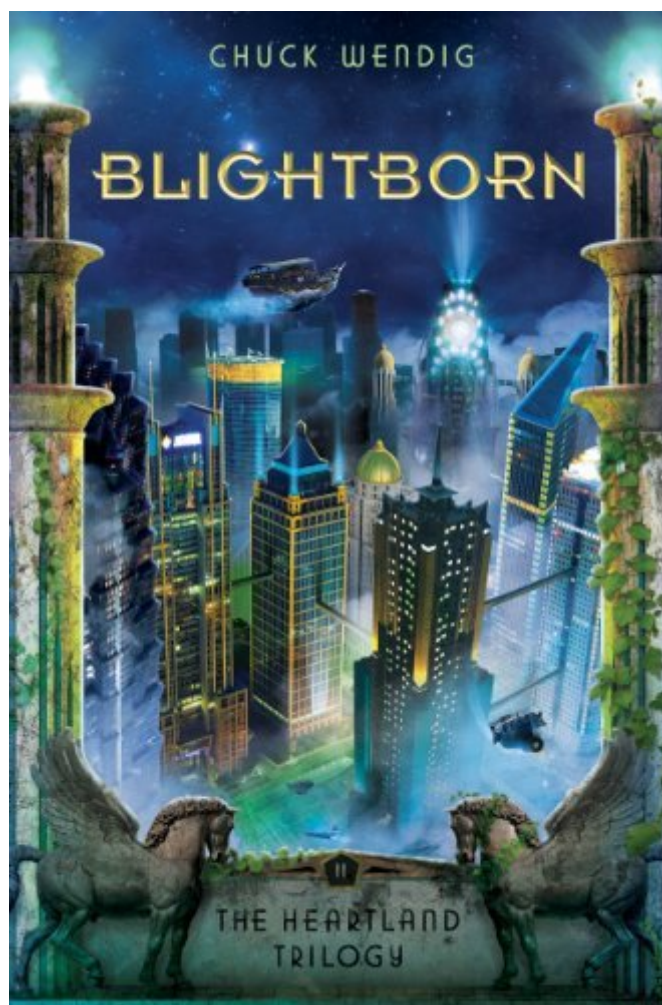


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# Blightborn (The Heartland Trilogy Book 2)



## Synopsis

Cael McAvoy is on the run. He's heading toward the Empyrean to rescue his sister, Merelda, and to find Gwennie before she's lost to Cael forever. With his pals, Lane and Rigo, Cael journeys across the Heartland to catch a ride into the sky. But with Boyland and others after them, Cael and his friends won't make it through unchanged. Gwennie's living the life of a Lottery winner, but it's not what she expected. Separated from her family, Gwennie makes a bold move—one that catches the attention of the Empyrean and changes the course of an Empyrean man's life. The crew from Boxelder aren't the only folks willing to sacrifice everything to see the Empyrean fall. The question is: Can the others be trusted? They'd all better hurry. Because the Empyrean has plans that could ensure that the Heartland never fights back again. Chuck Wendig's riveting sequel to *Under the Empyrean Sky* plunges readers into an unsettling world of inequality and destruction, and fleshes out a cast of ragtag characters all fighting for survival and, ultimately, change.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

[This review is based on an advanced copy received by the publisher through NetGalley.] Blightborn, the latest release from the ever-prolific Chuck Wendig, and second in his cornpunk The Heartland Trilogy, follows swiftly on the heels of Under The Empyrean Sky's conclusion. With the world building out of the way, and many of the main cast's rivalries set up in Empyrean, Blightborn allows Wendig to go hog-wild and blow stuff up, upend expectations, and expand on the premise of The Heartland series in fine fashion. When last we saw the intrepid crew of the sky ship Betty- spoilers for Under The Empyrean Sky -Cael had learned that his father was illegally growing fresh produce and had killed the mayor. His girlfriend, Gwennie, was a lottery winner and elevated, along with her family, to live aboard one of the Empyrean's floating cities and escape the hardscrabble life of the dirt-farming Heartlanders. Needless to say, Cael wasn't going to let that happen without a fight, and he and his teenage crew of Blue Sky Scavengers set out to cross the desolation of the Heartland and, somehow, win her back. Unfortunately, that ticked the hell out of his Obligated bride-to-be, and the dead mayor's son, and rival to Cael for Gwennie's affections, had an awful large score to settle. Returning to these characters in Blightborn, Wendig delivers fully on the conflicts established at the close of book one, and creates even larger obstacles for his cast to contend with, while driving new wedges between them. As expected, the Empyrean's lottery is a double-edged sword: the promise of elevation too good to be true, and it comes wrapped in the caul of class-warfare. As Gwennie quickly learns, life in the Empyrean sky is hardly a joy, and even less so for a pure-bred Heartlander like she and her family, who are separated, exiled, and forced into labor. Beneath the floating flotilla, Cael and his friends are trying to make it to a loading depot, with grand designs of boarding a sky ship (after losing Betty in the previous book) and making their way upward. Along the way, they are beset by raiders, Boyland's crew, a murderous hobo who wants to catch the wanted trio (they're considered terrorists by the Empyrean overlords and have a hefty bounty hanging over their heads), and the blight, a ravenous disease that stems from the genetically modified corn fields that cover the Heartland. All of this ties neatly into a bit family history that Cael is unaware of and provides some terrific background to his now-absent parents, which helps to fuel and shape his own quest and place in the Heartland. Wendig is an author who has been on absolute fire of late. His Miriam Black books are among some of the finest paranormal thrillers I've had the pleasure to read, and Mookie Pearl from The Blue Blazes (watch out for subtle nod toward that book early on in Blightborn!) was a fun new character whose return I'm greatly looking forward to later this year in The Hellsblood Bride. The Heartland series is a wonderful departure from either of those

previous series, and, in some ways, proves to be a bit darker and deeper. While Miriam's visions of death and ordeals with serial killers isn't exactly light-weight stuff, there's a buoyant flippancy to that series, thanks in large part to her natural sarcasm that lends for a natural sort of humor. There are far less funny shenanigans, wry observations, or witty back-and-forths in this cornpunk entry, but that's life in the Heartland. Wendig is focused more on exploring the struggles of a violent class warfare and food politics. That's not too say the read is dry and dreary "far, far, far from it. Rather, it simply strikes me as, tonally, a more serious work, and that tone grows naturally from the characters and the world they inhabit, as well as the threats they face. It's dark story of survival and impossible odds. One thing I appreciated was the increased focus on the female cast members, particularly Gwennie and Cael's sister, Merelda. The two find themselves on opposite ends of the social spectrum, with the latter having become the mistress of the flotilla's chief security officer and hiding her true Heartlander roots. Their roles are necessarily expanded after having gotten a bit of a short-shrift in the previous book, but they shine nicely in Blightborn, and it was great to see Gwennie so prominently in on the action (especially since she's the one who taught Cael how to throw a punch!). I won't spoil her role in the book, but she does carry a lot of the thematic weight mentioned earlier in regards to the class struggle, and it's juicy stuff. Blightborn is a heftier, more serious work than its predecessor, and Wendig is clearly crafting an epic trilogy of terrific scope with this series. It's also quite a bit darker, which is pretty common in middle entries "the stakes are higher and the threats more formidable. The Initiative, which is teased a bit before finally being revealed in the book's third act, is a horrifying manipulation that perfectly illustrates the evil and grandiose ego of the Empyrean rulers, and their sense of entitlement. Wendig has also planted a good number of compelling seeds that will bear beautiful fruit come book three. I'd expect the conclusion of this story to release next year, but damn if that's not going to be a long, brutal wait. Alas, that's life in the heartland.

Back and better than ever, Wendig brings with him a multitude of new characters whose lives weave in and out of each other in peculiar, stunning, and at times raunchy ways. The rotating points of view of this series make it manageable, and through that I'm starting to understand that Wendig uses that as a form of description as opposed to the common info-dumps we often see in fiction today. The ending allows me to step back and see that Wendig is crushing a true "piss-blizzard" of a story into a snowball that is rapidly gaining momentum down the plank of a flotilla, with the fate of the Heartland as a whole literally up in the air. The images I have in my head from this series is nothing

short of astounding, as it literally moves through my brain-mass in the same manner as watching a movie in vulgar, action-packed, high-voltage, gloriously bloody fashion. I'm a huge fan of how the main cast is slowly but surely starting to flip their middle fingers to the Empyrean - but not without their fair share of deceptions and lack of trust along the way. It appears they've gained some unlikely allies in Balastair and Agravanto, and I'm excited to see how that turns the tables in The Harvest.

Blightborn picks up pretty much where Under an Empyrean Sky leaves off. Since I read this back-to-back with The Harvest, I won't go as in depth as I normally might because the details blur together. Our main cast has been split up (which seems to be pretty standard for these kinds of stories; I've done it myself) and situations escalate. Everything proceeds very logically and the characters' flaws often come back to bite them in the ass. The story is done well-enough that by the time I got to book two in the series, it felt less like a dystopian story (though it clearly is) and more like rural fantasy. I guess there's no reason it can't be a rural fantasy set in a future dystopia. The Heartland could be the American Great Plain at some specified point in the future, but it doesn't have to be and this is a strength. I don't think the more fantastical elements of the story (and the Blight is definitely more like fantastic nature magic than a real-world mutation or disease) would work as well if one could pinpoint where and when in the real world this story is supposed to have taken place. By the time I was 3/4 of the way through the story, I started to get annoyed that some of the characters were making the same mistakes and I thought "Are these people stupid?" Well, no. Well, some of them are, but what I mean is: they're young. It's easy to forget that these characters are still teenagers. I don't think any of the main characters are yet twenty. Most teenagers think they're invincible and really need to be hit on the head before they learn a life lesson. So, it might get annoying, but it is realistic. More on that in The Harvest review. Blightborn is a good necessary follow-up to Under an Empyrean Sky. Even more than its predecessor, when you reach the end, you'll want to jump right into The Harvest. So I did.

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