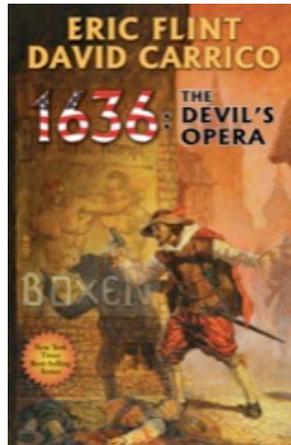


Baen Reader's Group Guide

1636: The Devil's Opera



Welcome to the Readers' Group Guide for the latest installment in Eric Flint's Ring of Fire series, *1636: The Devil's Opera*. An epic alternate history saga, the Ring of Fire often uses dramatic changes to events in the past to examine social structures and societal pressures that are still relevant today. *The Devil's Opera* focuses on a developing art scene in the United States of Europe capitol of Magdeburg and on urban life in a industrial boom town--especially a growing organization of criminal elements and the police forces which defend against them.

1. What does this novel say about the influence works of art have on society? Is our society influenced by art? What works of art do you think have had an influence on our society? What works of art have influenced you personally?
2. Up-timers and down-timers share a sense of justice, but often differ on the means of enacting justice. The police force which Byron Chieske and Gotthilf Hoch serve is modeled after up-time standards, but must sometimes operate differently in the down-time reality. How do the two of them feel about justice? Which other characters express ideas about justice, and how do they differ? Which character's sense of justice do you most identify with and why?
3. There are two Biblical stories examined by the novel, through Simon and his relationship with the old pastor. The first, the story of Samson, clearly parallels Hans Metzger's story. What are some of the parallels? Does Simon's relationship with Hans color his interpretation of the parable? How does Hans Metzger's story reinforce or change your understanding of the Samson story?

4. The second Biblical story is that of Ahithophel. Which characters' circumstances does this story parallel? Are there more than one? What does Simon learn from this story? What did you learn?

5. Marla, Mary, and Amber assume Schardius to be an entitled, overbearing fan (or the 17th century version of one). What do you think about celebrity crushes? When does fandom cross the line into fanaticism?

6. It is intimated several times that, although the broadsheet translation of "Do You Hear the People Sing," "A Call to Arms," is a powerful tool for the Committees of Correspondence and other revolutionaries, Frau Linder's musical version of "Do You Hear the People Sing" is far more powerful and inspiring. Does music amplify the power of words? Why might that be? Can you think of any other examples?

7. Class structures are a recurring theme throughout the Ring of Fire series. Simon, Ursula Metzger, and Sergeant Gotthilf Hoch are all from different classes, but they find common ground. What other relationships within the novel help explore the class structures in Magdeburg and the USE? What do these relationships say about class distinctions in general? What relevance does this have today?

8. Why does Hans accept Herr Schardius's proposal for the fight? Did he do the right thing?

9. One of the factors contributing to the success of Marla's "Do You Hear the People Sing" is the radio broadcast. Ulrik recognizes the power of radio as a tool of communication. Radio today is taken almost for granted--is it still the powerful tool Ulrik knows it to be in his time? What does the radio symbolize to the people of down-time Germany? Is there some other tool in our modern era which serves the same function?

10. The novel deliberately invokes the operatic traditions of theatricality and melodrama. The final chapters alternate between scenes in the opera *Arthur Rex* and the violent culmination of the police investigation into Herr Schardius. Besides the scenes of the actual opera, which scenes in the novel evoke an operatic feel? Why do you think the novel is called *The Devil's Opera*?

11. *Arthur Rex* is intended by its creators to be a parable applicable to the current political situation in the USE. Based on the description of the opera at the end of the novel, what do you think the parallels are? What might the consequences of the performance of the opera be? The opera is in support of Gustav Adolphus; what else does the opera promote? What ramifications might this have for Gustav and the other rulers of the USE?