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naneia - July 7, 2023, 12:34 am

Review: The Promised Neverland

> "You're suffering because you resist. Just concede... It's just a cycle of suffering and cursing the deaths of others... Accept despair and free yourself from the pain."

I was reading through a discussion thread on reddit for the first chapter of the series and came across this neat comment:

> most authors don't have the talent to follow up on their ultra intriguing and foreboding first chapters

Thankfully, that is not the story of The Promised Neverland*, which follows up a solid first chapter with a truly extraordinary elaboration of the story and world, possibly the best beginning of anything I've ever read. The series turned heads on release, starting as it did shortly after the conclusion of multiple big name long-running manga like *Naruto and Bleach*, and deviating from what one might usually expect from a shonen (it's not every day that one sees an 11-year-old girl as a shonen protagonist), building its own hype rather quickly. The early mysteries of the story are regularly answered in unexpected ways that push the story in an increasingly interesting direction, achieving emotional and story heights in the first 30 chapters that usually take even highly-acclaimed manga two or three times as long to reach. I especially appreciated that the author takes the time to have the characters always ask the hard questions - "What are the problems with this plan? Even if we do this, what comes next?" etc.

I picked up this series at first primarily because the title sounded good, and it has definitely lived up to my hopes in that regard - I really like the multiple ways the title matches different aspects of the story. Beyond the "obvious" interpretation, where >!the Neverland is the farms created by the Promise, where children don't grow up!<, there's also the interpretation of >!the Neverland as the realm of the demon god, where reality is malleable and where promises are made!<, or >!the neverland as the human world that Emma promises to take the children to, where they don't have to grow up and can remain childlike.!<

(Tangent: there seems to be a trope in Japanese writing of an underaged girl living by themselves with no present parents, often raising siblings independently. Emma is not really a typical example of this, given the setting and context, but I saw variations in *Act-age and Bleach in the past - it seems to be quite common. I wonder what's up with this.)

Unfortunately, The Promised Neverland will likely be primarily remembered for being a story without a middle. It very much seems as though at about halfway through the series-as-written the author decided to excise the middle section of the story. I doubt we'll know for sure, but my suspicion is that it's a combination of not being entirely certain how to resolve some aspects of the story, and the notoriously tiring weekly manga grind getting to the author and/or artist. This ends up producing a situation where, although the ending (though that's a sizable proportion to refer to as the "ending") of the story had a bunch of great moments and interesting ideas - alongside some less than great resolutions to some plot points - a lot of scenes that had the potential to be really good ended up falling flat because they didn't get sufficient buildup.

Overall: 8/10, although split between a 10/10 first half and 6/10 ending. The first half is still good enough to make it an easy recommendation for me.