**Royal Assassin**

Second entry in Hobb's fantasy series about the Six Duchies and their Farseer kings (Assassin's Apprentice, 1995). At Buckkeep, King Shrewd lies dying, attended only the by the faithful, enigmatic Fool; King in Waiting Verity spends all his time Skilling to befuddle and bemuse the dreaded Red Ship Raiders, while his beautiful, neglected wife, Kettricken, wanders disconsolately. Young FitzChivalry, still ailing after his previous mission, tries to serve both Shrewd and Verity while seeking ways to frustrate the vaulting ambitions of Shrewd's youngest son, the viperous Prince Regal. Shrewd, meantime, has forbidden poor Fitz to marry his beloved Molly, a commoner. Fitz also possesses the Wit, an ability to talk to and empathize with animals, and he bonds with a young wolf he rescues from cruel captivity. Verity builds his own warships, but still can't defeat the Raiders--and the weaker Verity grows, the more the people listen to Regal's treacherous murmurings. Finally, Verity goes into the mountains seeking the Elderlings, a godlike race that helped a previous Farseer king to defeat the Raiders, leaving Fitz to protect Kettricken and Shrewd. Another spellbinding installment, built of patient detail, believable characters, and mature plotting--though, at an unwarranted 608 pages, there are ominous signs that Hobb's beginning to lose control of her narrative. -- *Copyright ©1996, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.* --