



# The Year of Our War

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## **The Year of Our War** Steph Swainston

Unique among his fellow immortals and mortal folk alike, Jant Comet can fly. His talent is a gift and a curse that has earned him a place in the Castle Circle as Messenger to the Emperor San -- soaring high and free above the bloody battlefields of his world, carrying word back to his master of progress and regress in the ever-escalating conflict between man and the awful armies of giant, flesh-devouring insects.

But while Jant's duty is to remain neutral in the petty squabbles and power plays of the fifty who will neither age nor die naturally, bitter rivalries that have festered for centuries now threaten to incite a savage civil war. And Jant may be the only being alive capable of stemming the onrushing tide of destruction and the unstoppable insect infestation. For only he can gain entrance -- through extreme doses of the narcotic that owns his soul -- into a place of darkest wonders and revelations; a strange and horrific alternate reality that none but Jant Comet believes exists.

A literary triumph of the first water -- bold, stylish, and breathtakingly original -- Steph Swainston's *The Year of Our War* ascends like a rocket to the upper reaches of the imagination and loudly heralds the arrival of a true modern master of the fantastic.

## **The Year of Our War Details**

Date : Published January 18th 2005 by Harper Voyager (first published April 2004)

ISBN : 9780060753870

Author : Steph Swainston

Format : Paperback 385 pages

Genre : Fantasy, Fiction, Weird Fiction, New Weird, Science Fiction, War

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# From Reader Review The Year of Our War for online ebook

## Jason says

2 Stars

I tried to enjoy this highly imaginative fantasy by Step Swainston, but it never got a hold of me. The setting is awesome and the landscape and world building are all top notch. The war with the insects could have been amazing but only was just ok for me. The characters are colorful and a plenty but unfortunately I never identified with or even cared about the main protagonist.

Honestly, I decided not to finish this book as I lost my interest in it. Maybe I will come back to this book and this series another day...for now I pass.

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## Search says

This book features some terrific prose. The writing is honed to a level rarely displayed in debut novels. Features a unique idea, and a very well developed protagonist. Miss Swainston offers some very interesting insights into the mentality of a junkie. Although there is an inherent flaw to her unique idea of having giant insects as the enemy; they aren't all that interesting and they can't have a point of view either.

I Liked this one considerably apart from the weird secondary world. I have a problem with weirdness when it stretches the limit of believe-ability, when my brain starts viewing fictional content in terms of toonish animation rather than the visually crisp dream-like experience, I rely on fantasy to deliver.

Don't get me wrong I love animation but things like three human heads on top of a rat's body or a creature with a hand in-place of a head that communicates through sign language may be delightful for some people but just doesn't work for me. (Not that any of these things actually appeared in the book, this is just an example of why I don't like Mieville-ish or new-weird aspects.)

Overall, though this is a very fine piece of fiction which I must admit in-spite of my reservations because of the secondary world weirdness.

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## Predrag Djokic says

3.75

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## Daniel Roy says

Boy, does Steph Swainston's first book come with a lot of hype. The quotes on the cover and back of the US edition include such cutting-edge authors as Richard Morgan and China Miéville himself. After reading these glowing quotes and finishing this book, I have a theory about cover quotes: writers give them only to authors

that don't threaten their supremacy.

I read the book based on a short but positive recommendation from Emerald City, having otherwise been totally oblivious to any kind of literary hype (China will do that to you!) That being said, I did expect some tasty weirdness and interesting world-building, which is the staple of so-called Weird Fiction. In both these regards, however, *The Year of Our War* is weak.

The setting is not the most intriguing, but it does have promise: Jant, the protagonist, is a cross-breed of two races, which gives him the unique ability to fly. This has made him attractive to the Emperor, who grants immortality to 50 individuals who are the best at their given task. Since Jant is the only one who can fly, he is the Emperor's Messenger. Other members of this Circle of immortals include Lightning, the Fourlands' best archer for 1,500 years, and Mist, the Emperor's sailor.

A twist to this setting is the Insects, man-sized creatures slowly overtaking the Fourlands and converting them to Paperlands, named such for the hard, paper-like substance the Insects use for construction. The Insects are a nice twist on the traditional Fantasy enemy: they're mindless, incomprehensible, and totally ruthless. In a Fantasy setting, they provide a suitably unsettling *Starship Troopers* quality to the conflict, which you usually don't find with your run-of-the-mill gloating bad guy who wants to overtake the Heroes for his own Evil reasons.

Ah, but there's more: see, Jant is also a drug addict, whose heroine-like substance addiction sometimes takes him to an alternate reality he calls the Shift, which is also infested by Insects. The Shift is actually richer in details and more fantastic, filled with man-turtles, women made of worms, and other weird characters.

Whew. Sounds overpacked with crazy details, doesn't it? Well, not really. Truth be told, all of the concepts in *The Year of Our War* sound awesome on paper, but they're only half-realized. Most of the novel is spent with very soap opera-esque characters fighting amongst themselves; you get women rebelling against their abusive husbands, secret love children, drug fiend self-loathing, and a lot of other things that are not that interesting, really. The secondary characters are sketched at best, and lack a certain quality to really make them stand out. For instance, we are told, rather than shown, that the King is a just and mighty King, and that the Emperor is wise and fearsome. When it came to actually showing them in action, they didn't truly stand out. The most annoying is definitely Mist Shearwater, who spouts modern-day truisms in two words, such as "Curiosity. Cat." or "Bitten. Shy." It's annoying the first time, and overwhelmingly irritating after sixty.

This lack of depth is unfortunately also the case for events in the story; you just feel it would have been more interesting if written by a better author. The biggest victim here is the Shift, which sounds on paper like it is meant to be a violent and visceral version of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. You get turtle-men, leopards with square spots, horse-men wearing invisible clothes, and "problemings" who jump from cliffs and fly in the air. Unfortunately, the lack of scope of these ideas means they're just there to decorate the plot and don't bring much atmosphere.

Overall, if you get past the soap opera and the sometimes awkwardly modern language, there are some cool ideas in *The Year of Our War*. It's not a bad book; it just doesn't stand out all that much. And when it's placed next to contemporaries such as *Perdido Street Station*, it only suffers from the comparison. Still, it's Steph Swainston's first novel, so there's hope for a bright future.

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## Nigel says

I read the first two Fourlands when they came out, but they fell off my radar somehow, which is annoying, because I really liked them, and now I like them all the more after years of Grimdark fantasies all over the place. So it's great to revisit the Castle and the Circle and rediscover what made them so fresh and exciting. Set in a world under attack from hordes of giant insects, united by an emperor who grants immortality to fifty individuals chosen for excellence in a particular field or skill who devote themselves to the defence of the Fourlands when not being distracted by petty squabbles and love affairs and addictions. Jant is Comet, the Messenger, the only person in the world with the power of flight. he's also a junkie, addicted to a drug that sometimes lets him travel to another world he calls The Shift. While helping his mentor, Lightning, prosecute his latest love affair with a aristocratic musician who wants to become immortal through her own merits rather than through marriage, the war with the insects suffers a dramatic reversal as swarms of insects breach the front. It doesn't help that a king has died and been replaced by his more cowardly brother, or that open civil war is breaking out amongst the other immortals. The stresses and pressures send Jant more and more to the drug, which takes a physical and mental toll, particularly when he discovers that the current disaster may be all his fault.

Imposing a modernist style and sensibility on classic fantasy to invigorating effect, this feels like a take on the current moment in our world in the same way any given Discworld novel did. The Year Of Our War is witty, but not comic - it has moments of horror, bloody action, explicit sex, surrealism, and essentially office politics and celebrity culture built around a mythic pantheon in the making. It's written in marvelous polished crystalline prose that reminded me of Gwyneth Jones and is an incredibly assured and confident first novel.

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## Adam says

I spent much of my time with Year of Our War kind of annoyed and disappointed, but now that I've finished it I find myself looking back more fondly than I expected. It's a clever dark fantasy with a vaguely punk sensibility and some New Weird elements, somewhere between Perdido Street Station and The Crimson Empire, though not quite as pronounced as either. There are a lot of things going for it, but they're consistently undermined by things working against them. The character work is compelling and unique, but it's often hard to keep track of who's who. Many characters have both a Role and an honorific name as well as a first and last name, and you have to piece together which go together on your own, as well as parsing out their racial and territorial associations. The prose is sharp and so sesquipedalian it gives Mieville a run for his money, but it's also missing some kind of connective tissue that makes it feel awkward and disorienting. Neither is helped by the fact that the structure awkwardly unites what should arguably have been three distinct stories into a single novel, with a few shared characters but largely a new cast and new central problem and resolution and setting.

The worldbuilding is similarly very much my shit but hamstrung by certain choices. The main conceit here is that the fantasy world has been invaded by a species of giant social insects called Insects, and that the various races have created a cadre of immortals and altered their whole social order to deal with this threat, which has persisted in a more or less stable balance for a long time. This is of interest to me in many ways - a meaningful predator of humans, a competing species engaged in major niche construction on the same scale as humans, with a long-term coevolutionary relationship that shapes social institutions, and, of course, they're even insects. Here again, though, those ideas are poorer for the fact that Swainston doesn't seem interested in them at all. That the insects are just called Insects should tell you all you need to know about

how much effort is put into their design and how much flavor they add to the book. And while the Insects have been the unifying military threat for so long that it's unheard of for people to fight each other, it doesn't seem like they've altered their tactics or technology to better fight insects in any way. Given the choice I'd rather have a low emphasis on fights in my fantasy books and while there aren't a ton here, there are a few and they are hard to follow, not particularly fun or relevant to the story, and undermine the sense of history in the worldbuilding. And while the historical events in the story are more or less my kind of fantasy they really do suffer from the lack of context. They put too much emphasis on the geography and politics to treat them as negligently as it does.

The New Weird stuff is confined to its own separate dimension, which only the protagonist is aware of apparently. The way this all suddenly spirals into the story is not sufficiently established to really sell it as a sudden historical event. Why is The Shift not a cultural element in any way, if it's something every addict can access? Why is the interaction between the two worlds so novel? And while The Shift is full of some pretty cool and brutal stuff (mmm the Vermiform, can't get enough of these leech ppl), it's hard to really enjoy when all the creatures are bad pun Pokemon-rejects. Some are better than others, of course, but the overall sense that it's more Alice in Wonderland than Bas-lag or Lothric takes the edge off a bit.

All that said, I can imagine it getting really cool with a more polished hand, and it sounds like the rest of the series might offer that, so I can imagine coming back to those at some point. The off-kilter narration and quirky plot do add up to something unusual, though, and I do think it ended up more likable than disappointing or confusing.

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### **Joey Woolfardis says**

The premise seemed quite good, and I'm sure that's what pulled me toward it in the first place, but the execution terrible. I couldn't really keep up with the plot and found all the characters to be two-dimensional and quite difficult to get to know. They were just names on a page. I also didn't like the odd, blasè way the protagonist's drug addiction was handled. He took drugs, spaced out for about five minutes and then was absolutely fine and could have conversations straight after? The drug abuse was probably the most interesting aspect of it: especially since it was in first person narrative, but the author clearly has no idea what drugs actually do to you.

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### **Francesco Lanza says**

Questo è un bellissimo primo libro d'una saga ormai ben sviluppata, il cui genere potremmo definire tranquillamente "weird fantasy": in un'epoca in cui il fantasy classico ma appestato da elementi grimdark che sono nati stantii, Steph Swainston ci presenta un mondo originale, ma che non si sforza affatto d'esserlo a tutti i costi. Se apprezzate Brandon Sanderson e la sua creazione di mondi con regole balzane, credo che la Swainston l'abbia fatto prima e meglio, e al contrario di Sanderson scrive personaggi stuzzicanti, in cui è facile immedesimarsi, e non Naruto mormoni un po' troppo bidimensionali. E al contrario di China Mieville, non sembra trasudare una personalità fastidiosa, che a me ammorba dopo qualche decina di pagine.

Le mie valutazioni sono del tutto soggettive, e non voglio suonare intransigente con gli autori che meglio si confrontano con questa scrittrice, ma se siete alla ricerca di una via d'uscita dall'Epic Fantasy, siete appassionati di personaggi che hanno poteri incredibili, ma non sono dei "prescelti", se vi ha stufato avere a

che fare con un mondo di perenne medioevo farlocco anglosassone di pantaloni di pelle, stufato di montone e idromele, provate a rifugiarvi nei regni mentali di Steph Swainston. Saremo in buona compagnia.

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## **Simon Mcleish says**

Originally published on my blog [here](#) in May 2005.

The Year of Our War, Steph Swainston's debut, does everything a genre novel should: it brings new life to familiar ideas, and has something unusual about it. The unusual aspect is not the plot, which is typical of the genre: the empire under attack from faceless hordes (known as Insects, which on occasion gives the story the air of a fifties B-movie) and can only be saved by the heroic acts of a small number of people. There are some interesting features in the background: the band of potential saviours are immortals, the Eszai, granted eternal life by the emperor because they are the best at some task useful in the fighting - the fastest messenger, the most skilful sailor, and so on - and they have little in common save their immortality and are mostly limited in anything outside their specialisms. While this is not the kind of idea often encountered in a serious fantasy novel, the Eszai are clearly a band of flawed superheroes who could well have come from an Alan Moore comic strip.

The part of The Year of Our War which is basically unique is the central character. Jant is one of the Eszai, plucked from the gangs of a large city because of his unique ability: he can fly. He has a really major flaw, however: he is a drug addict. The drug, known as cat, is an addictive psychodelic, which has effects something between crack and LSD. Being part of a fantasy world means that something can be made of the visions perceived while under the influence; they shift the consciousness into another world. One of the biggest achievements Swainston pulls off (in, as must be remembered, her debut) is to make the two imaginary settings of the novel quite different in style, and with different degrees of verisimilitude: the drug world seems more arbitrary and artificial.

There are parts of the novel which could be better. The title is poor; its punning nature suggests something much lighter than the novel inside the covers. Lifting character building above plotting is not a problem (and makes a change from complicated versions of the hero's journey populated by cardboard cutouts - the clichés of the genre). However, the novel's structure betrays some inexperience; given the lengthy buildup, the denouement is too short and too facile. Even so, this is an enjoyable, well written fantasy novel with an adult grittiness missing from most of the genre.

Drug addiction and the experiences induced by drug taking have long been part of science fiction. The history of this generally seems to lead back to influences from crossover readership in the sixties between the genre and the cult writing of people like William S. Burroughs and Hunter S. Thompson. SF provided some of the important books in hippy culture, such as *Stranger in a Strange Land*. Novels as diverse as Aldous Huxley's *Island*, Stanislaus Lem's *The Futurological Congress* and Robert Sheckley's *The Alchemical Marriage* of Alistair Crompton all fed into or followed from psychodelic ideas about mind expansion through drug taking. But the darker side of drugs really became part of the SF mainstream only from the advent of cyberpunk in the eighties, though the psychodelia in Philip K. Dick is already less optimistic, and there are hints that drugs might be used for control in dystopian fiction back to *Brave New World* (which shows how much Huxley's mind changed on the subject over the years). Despite this long SF tradition, there is far less history of serious treatment of drugs in the sister genre of fantasy. It is hard to think of anything before the turn of the millennium which is more serious than the trivial references in (say) the *Spellsinger* and *Belgariad* series. (David Eddings created an entire race of addicts in the *Belgariad*, but the Nyissans are generally

minor characters and the consequences of their drug taking are never treated in human terms - it is at best a convenient plot device.) It is really only recent writers like China Miéville who have begun to introduce the sordid to their fantasy worlds: that is one reason why he is an important writer, even though I don't like his work personally.

While it would be possible to put together an academic thesis on the history of drug references in SF and fantasy (and I suspect that someone already has), the interesting question is why it should be so different between the two genres, so similar in terms of their fanbase and use of the fantastic. (Afficionados generally seem to feel that the difference is in terms of the treatment of science - in pure science fiction, it should be possible to justify everything in some kind of scientific terms, though with some traditional themes of the genre, such as time travel, this is more difficult than others.) Both SF and fantasy have a strong tradition of satire and parody, a lightness not so common in other genres; thus, Terry Pratchett is the best known author of fantasy writing for adults today. In science fiction, this tendency has begun to diminish over recent years, as the oft derided amateurish writing style detractors detect in the genre begin to be replaced by more professional and polished work: the association of author and fan is becoming weaker. My suspicion is that this has come about through the huge success of genre films, since Star Wars; the equivalent film for fantasy is The Lord of the Rings trilogy, and that is too recent for it to have had much of an effect on novels as yet. This has left most fantasy (and certainly the popular end) either light and humourous or epic and clichéd. (The biggest exception to this until recently is Stephen R. Donaldson.) Steph Swainston's debut novel is part of the process of bringing more adult ideas into the fantasy genre, and, whether or not it turns out to be as successful as it deserves, The Year of Our War should be welcomed.

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## **Pavlo Tverdokhlib says**

The Fourlands are locked in a bitter struggle with Insects- a generic Zerg-like entity that came from nowhere and is devouring the land, killing its inhabitants- Humans and the winged Awians alike- and turning the occupied territory into Paperlands, based on the appearance of the dwellings they build everywhere they go.

To counter them, the Immortal Emperor uses his Circle of the Immortals- individuals granted immortality for being the best examples of the different Aspects of war to assist the mortal Kings and Governors of the different areas of the Fourlands. "Comet" Jant Shira, the Messenger is a half-breed from the winged but flightless Awians and the mountain-dwelling, cat-like Rhydanne. Due to inheriting traits from both races, he is the only being capable of flight. He is also a drug addict.

When the latest offensive from the brilliant King of Awia goes awry, resulting in his death and a massive counter-offensive by the Insects as the kings' ineffectual brother takes the throne and ineptly sabotages years of fighting, the Circle and the Fourlands as a whole stands on the brink of chaos, as grudges between Immortals get interposed over mortal politics.

In the midst of all this, Jant is faced with a disturbing knowledge- when he overdoses, he travels to a different world, the Shift-and he suspects that the repercussions of his actions there may be the reasons for the chaos in the Fourlands.

"The Year of Our War" is a novel that's a bit all over the place, but it gets by on the strength of its unique setting. In addition, Swainston manages to keep strong pacing all the way to the ending, which I felt was somewhat abrupt. There's no real resolution, as it seems he chose to make a pause in the story an end-point.



Nevertheless, the book is interesting. Swainston weaves in centuries of history into the background, often through the recollections of the long-lived Immortals, without ever really feeling like info-dumps, and it's generally fun to try to piece a history together. There's a fair degree of intrigue, although the overall plot is pretty simple.

Overall, the book makes for a quick, decently enjoyable read, though I hope future volumes make more use of the unventive, New Weird elements of the Shift.

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### **Althea Ann says**

This book came highly recommended to me by a friend, AND it had a blurb from China Mieville on the front cover. So I fully expected to love it.

But - I just couldn't get into it.

I suspect that the aspects of the book that many readers interpreted as 'highly original' and 'weird' I just saw as poorly delineated usual fantasy.

It took a long time to be told who the characters are, where they are, what's going on, what their motivations are... and I didn't really see a point, narrative-wise, to be so cagey about everything. As a reader, it just made me feel distanced from the story.

Basically, Jant is a half-breed immortal, one of an elite military cadre, and the only individual who can fly, in a world that is desperately battling a plague of giant insects. (That is, when they're not engaging in petty intrigue and bickering.) He's also a drug addict, which everyone around him regards as a failing - but it may be that the place his consciousness goes when he seems to be in a drug hallucination is an actual alternate world - and this may hold the key to defeating the bugs.

I thought that the world and the story had a lot of potential, but it felt like a first novel to me. (I also really disliked the drug-hallucination world, and its dependence on bad puns to distinguish it from the 'regular' world.) And apparently, the author has now given up on writing, with some bitter, grumpy public announcements of such... so I don't think I'll continue with the series. (It is a 4-book series, and this one ends at a cliffhanger point.)

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### **Daniel says**

#### BEFORE READING "THE YEAR OF OUR WAR"

All this talk of "Game of Thrones" is making me feel a little jealous. No, I don't want to read them yet, they're too fat and Martin doesn't look like he's going to finish anytime soon and there's so many other things to read. Tempted? Yes. I want swords and battles and magic and weirdness. Fine let's look at some fantastic literature on the interwebs...

Miriam has this book on her Goodreads shelf. I have this book, too. That's right, I wanted to read this many months ago; I bought it; and then I put it on the Groaning Shelf of Books That I Will Read Someday. Why not? I'll read this today.

### UPON STARTING "THE YEAR OF OUR WAR"

What the hell is going on in this story? Who are these immortals? Does that guy have wings, too? But only this one can fly. And he's a drug addict. And he wears jeans and mascara and a shirt that advertises a marathon he ran years ago.

A big insect wall. Big man-eating insects! These battle scenes are amazing. But what the hell is going on?

### UPON REACHING PAGE 60 OF "THE YEAR OF OUR WAR"

Wait, this is brilliant. I can feel the slide. I am going to adore this book and I am going to devour it whole. But those first 60 pages are kind of foggy now...

### UPON RE-READING THE FIRST 60 PAGES OF "THE YEAR OF OUR WAR" AND CONTINUING

Yes. Awesome. I get it. This is freaking genius. I can't stop reading this. Wow. Wow wow wow.

### UPON FINISHING "THE YEAR OF OUR WAR" AT 2:30 AM

Holy shit that was great I can't believe that I've missed this for the last year I should have picked it up right away I'm so glad that I finally read it tomorrow I'm going to get up and order the second book it's already tomorrow in less than six hours I'm going to get up and order the second book I have got to see where Swainston is going to take this story so good so very fucking good.

### IN CONCLUSION

"The Year of Our War" is audacious, weird, thoughtful, well-written, and, gosh darnit, fun. I love fantasy fiction for its swords and monsters and big conflicts between good and evil, and I am wary of reading any fantasy fiction at all for its recurrent bloat, immature sexual hijinks, stilted dialog, cardboard characters, and tired tales of conflicts between good and evil. Swainston avoids all of the bad, and infuses the genre with so much good material that is hers alone. I like the characters, I like the story, and I really like how Swainston brings it all together with a vital energy that once again makes reading a fantasy book urgent and enjoyable.

Thank you, Miriam, for pointing me towards this one.

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### **Shaphron says**

This is one of my all-time favourite books - the characters are interesting and develop throughout the book and then the series - my Husband is of the opinion that the trilogy is in fact about Lightning and not Comet at all, and any book which has such good character progression in someone who is not (at least nominally) the main character shows fantastic care from the author.

Along with the character development, the world itself, as well as the concept of a select immortal few (no

spoiler here, that's the main drive of the book from page 1) has sparked more than it's fair share of conversations, thus demonstrating that it's both thought-provoking and interesting. Subjects ranged from what (if anything) the Insects could represent, how immortality could stagnate a whole population, even if only a couple of members of the were actually immortal, to who and/or what the Emperor could be, and whether the drugged-out hallucinations of Comet were in fact real.

I found this book to be a page turner - I had to keep reading to find out what happened next. It's definately a must-read for anyone who is tired of the same old fantasy cliché's and wants a look at a different type of fantasy world. The one thing I will add is that the book is more character-driven than plot driven (I hasten to add that there is plot, it just takes secondary importance to the characters in the narration) - this appeals to me immensely, but may annoy you if you want action on every page (or even every chapter). The big battle at the end is not given as much space as some would like, because it is a relatively small part of the character's lives, whereas the build up to it and the interactions between the characters is given more importance.

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## **Larry Crawford says**

Fantasy novels say nothing to me about the real world or about my life; real people don't act like the characters in those epics. Tolkien said that fantasy ideas were 'endlessly combined' — he knew that fantasy means boundless imagination and reinvention, not clinging to staid ideas.

-- Steph Swainston, HarperCollins interview, undated

Like discovering alien-made artificial worlds in space with such entries like Ringworld, Orbitville, and Titan, fighting arthropodic aliens has certainly become a sub-genre of fantasist literature. The cinematic Alien and Predator franchises notwithstanding, some of the most noted science fiction novels involve Big Bug Bashing. Ender's Game, The Forever War, and Harrison's A Storm of Wings come immediately to mind. Souped-up insects make wonderful enemies. Few people would not run screaming from a Gregor-sized cockroach, but add a few million fellow travelers and there is true loathing and unmitigated terror.

And now, add The Year of our War to the Bad Bug yarns.

The Insects of this novel possess no hive-like intelligence, nor do they have leaders or many distinguishable features. They swarm and infest the plot like locusts, turning village after village into saliva-glued cocoons of abandonment. The enemy has no face to hate like Saddam Hussein , Adolf Hitler , or Ghengis Kahn. They are the AIDS virus, nuclear winter, or the Black Plague of the Middle Ages sporting antennae and mandibles. Since Western heritage instinctively pushes to seek individuals out of any group, insect gatherings and behavior have always been especially repulsive. In this sense, then, the Insects can symbolize the submersion of individual freedom, will and rights to the group, further threatening the spirit with becoming chattel to Religion, the State, or the Corporation.

Desperately fighting this infestation are humanoids and humans, Gods and ghosts. They navigate by Polaris, so the world called The Fourlands exists on Earth, although whether it's the past, future, or parallel is up for

debate. These are Medieval times, with Kings and castles without gunpowder, yet the inhabitants wear t-shirts with slogans, faded jeans, and talk using present-day colloquialisms. God exists but he is more akin to Cronos of the Titans than any Christian, Jewish, or Muslim God. Unfortunately, he is on vacation, according to popular consensus or myth, and has positioned San as his Emperor to oversee His “playground” (Eos, trade paper edition, ISBN 0060753870, c.2004, p.321) with a Circle of fifty bestowed with immortality. It's all very Greek, with the fifty quasi-gods carrying out San's decisions with a minimum of interference to the general population. They are chosen for eternal life, which can be rescinded at the whim of the Emperor, to fulfill archetypal positions like Sailor, Archer, Strongman, etc.

The first-person protagonist is the Messenger named Jant Shira, nicknamed Comet. He is an elusive narrator at best, and probably an unreliable one as well, since he is addicted to a shooter drug like heroin or crystal meth, that, in his world is nicknamed “cat”. Because he is immortal, he can essentially OD and enter a dimensional world he calls “The Shift”. Nobody else believes in it, except for the demised King Dunlin, and only because Comet doused him with the narcotic on his deathbed and permanently crossed him over. It makes for a fascinating ontological argument. God's Being is undeniable, since proof lies in His gift of immortality on Earth to a chosen few. An afterlife is never mentioned except by those experiencing it by deadly overdose. The Shift's cityscape of Epsilon is as irrefutably real as Being is in the Fourlands: the resolution of the plot's global conflict with the Insects depends on it. So, with a verified afterlife, not only are God's Chosen immortal, so are drug addicts and Insects! And, the dopers and bugs don't have to fret over some celestial Santa Claus taking back the presents. But then, nothing's mentioned about life among the dimensions as going on forever, either. Worst-case scenario is that you age, but, as long as you have a stash, you can merely shift to another dimensional world like Osseous, land of “the Horse People” (p.257), ad infinitum.

The peculiarities of Swainston's creation readily shift into all sorts of mind-bending idiosyncrasies, but the primary rumination is the difficulty of identifying deeper addictions within the conscientiousness of free will and moral judgments to the pragmatic actions of individuals, the society, and the world. Immortality is the Grail here, and what the characters are willing to do to obtain it illuminates their mettle and adds a deeper gloss to the novel's action. Some will kill their spouses while others will face suicidal situations for acceptance into god's eternal Circle. By the luck of the draw and a driving, self-serving vanity, the junkie narrator tenuously holds onto his Dance Forever! card, and the reader's sympathies for his acned personality, by posturing as the quintessential Outsider. But his vapid pronouncement, “anything goes but this—you don't lie, don't cheat, and don't grass on your mates” (p.223), seems like adolescent brio when facing the larger addictions of control and power tied immutably to endless longevity.

This parallel Earthworld is startling and brilliant, and the author chops lines with enough facts, clues, people and things to keep the reading compulsive. But it's like looking out a French glass door where one pane is crystal clear and the next one cloudy or hazy, as the window to this world shifts between solidity and porosity. I never understood with any coherence the differences between the races of humans, Awians, and Rhydanne. And Epilson, that otherland “where blue monsters worship entrails” (p.277), sways between woozy and just plain silly with animals like whorses, giraffiti, and terribulls.

Author Swainston has written a sequel entitled *No Present Like Time*, with another installment following at the first of 2007. Hopefully, Comet's joined Narcotics Anonymous and things will be a lot more perspicuous.

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**Jack says**

The Year of Our War is a second world fantasy series set in a medieval like country, that is ruled over by an emperor who grants immortality to 50 of the worlds best. These immortals rule their lands and lead the fight against the invading insects. The novel follows Jant, the immortal court messenger, and drug addict.

To start with, this was a book that took me a bit to get into, but maybe half way through I suddenly started really enjoying it and rushed through. The writing is fun, the characters are interesting, and it was just different. And I do so love different. That said, it was a bit hard to follow in some places; I think if a little bit more detail was put in, with a bit more exposition, it would have cleared a few things up. That said, this wasn't a huge deal as I'm used to, and in general enjoy, novels that just throw you in and expect you to make do. But it would have benefited I think.

Character-wise, it verges on having a cast of thousands, in that you're aware of there being multitudes of potential immortals to meet, however you only ever read about a few. With each immortal you do meet you want to know more about them, who they are, what they have done. Why they're all right bastards. The enemy, the insects (Although at times, it seems they care more about fighting their allies more), were this unknowable force lurking in the background creating havoc. You see them at the start, and then they become this motivating force, pushing parts of the plot along. As far as plot devices go, they were kind of a frustrating choice. Not in that they were bad villains, but they kept getting sidelined by immortal drama. Every time Jant tried to organise other immortals to take action, they'd just go do their own thing. I'm like, "but what about the damn bugs???"

Who knew making people immortal would make them selfish little shits? I'm talking to you, Lighting. God he was an aggravating character. But then again, we're given so little to work with, history wise with these people. We've got what we know from Jant, who firmly fits into the unreliable narrator faction. And then... No, thinking about it, I think I'll stand by it. Prick.

Right, where was I? Good writing, interesting plot, frustrating characters. Oh, and then there's The Shift, Jant's drug induced portal world. It's trippy, and I don't really understand how it works, or why things played out as they did there, but it was an interesting addition. I'd like to learn more about it in later books, but for now it just felt like some sort of Miyazaki odd world. Not out of place, just bizarre in its own right.

I'd recommend this to people looking for something different, those who like Mieville and Vandemere, but are after something a bit more human, a bit easier to connect with. I'd recommend it to people who are after a bit of drama and a bit of political intrigue (only a bit, mind you). So yeah, that's my review. Got a bit longer than usual this time.

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