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The Year of Our War
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What are your major influences while writing *The Year of Our War*? Similarly, favorite authors? Least favorite authors?

My major influences were William Burroughs, Angela Carter and M. John Harrison. My favorite author is Mervyn Peake — I discovered the Gormenghast trilogy years after I came up with the idea for the Castle and I was astounded by the way Peake's characters come alive through their vicissitude to make a completely character-driven narrative.

I also read Gene Wolfe, Fritz Leiber, S. Delany, Vonnegut, Huxley, adventure stories like Robert Louis Stevenson, and lots of poetry. Since finishing **The Year of Our War** four years ago, I've discovered other authors I like, such as Christopher Priest and China Miéville.

I wouldn't read any big epic fantasy like Raymond Feist or David Eddings. I think those books over-explain the same old stories that everyone already knows and I don't like going over the same ground. According to C.S. Lewis the invented world must have some relevance to the real world.

Increasingly, 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. I think that science itself is a new fertile field for myth builders. I'll say more about that later.

I love the wonderful tradition of weird eccentric wordplay and nonsense poetry in English literature: Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear and more recently Douglas Adams and Jeff Noon's Vurt. It's an uplifting and playful tradition that makes the language elastic, for the sake of entertainment, and allows itself to dream the ridiculous.

I also read a lot of natural history which is my main interest especially birds as you can tell from the Awian names.

Has your background in archaeology played any part in your writing?

I wanted to write about what I saw when I was at university — how the students and professors themselves were affected by such a competitive environment. There was a lot of overt competition most of which was needless and led to bad science. I wish that academia was a meritocracy, but it isn't; it's politics as much as anything else. The competitiveness crept into every sphere of their lives, not just their studies. I couldn't even have a relaxing swim without other people in the pool trying to swim faster. What's the point of that? It's just ridiculous.

So I wrote about the Castle as a critique of academia, a true meritocracy because the Emperor creates a level playing field. It's really a metaphor for any career or position of power in an institution that is difficult to get and tough to keep once you've got it. Anyone who's trained for a sport or been through a demanding job interview will understand.

In the Castle, the best person of each profession is made immortal, as long as their profession can be of some help in the continuing war. There are fifty immortals and they live in the Castle most of the time. The area around the Castle looks like a gothic Olympic village.

An immortal can be challenged for his or her position and if he loses, he is displaced and the challenger becomes immortal. The Castle provides the template for a liberal meritocracy which the rest of the Fourlands strives to imitate.

Archaeology taught me to look at an entire culture as a whole and see what it's capable of. For example Rhydanne have a late stone age culture, they can't smelt ore but they can beat copper and silver. Some of their material culture looks Andean, whereas Awian culture has changed over time from Romanesque through neo-Classical and it currently looks a bit art nouveau.

Archaeology also gave me the idea for the processes of human evolution that make the peoples of the Fourlands look like they do — the Rhydanne have all kinds of adaptations for living at extremely high altitudes but hundreds of thousands of years ago they came from the same origins as humans, whereas Awians have always been different: they have wings and some other adaptations for flight, although they can't fly now.

I once studied in a museum that had a colony of leafcutter ants. We couldn't make them stay in the perspex cabinet — they would escape every day and go marching down the galleries in long lines. Within months they had conquered the whole building. They would march into our coffee room and steal biscuits from the cupboard — we would see our sandwiches disappearing down the corridor back into their nest. I had an endless fascination for them. The Insects in the Fourlands aren't 'evil'; they're animals. They are doing what animals do.

You've created a fascinating antihero in Jant Comet. What are the best and worst parts about writing an unconventional hero?

Jant isn't a hero or anti-hero. All the people I'm writing about are just normal people in extraordinary situations. A person can perform heroic actions in certain circumstances but that doesn't make him invariably a hero in all situations. A moment later he might do

something unruly or weak. Many soldiers are prompted by fear to act in a way we see as heroic: fear of death, of letting their friends down, fear of living with themselves afterwards. Military research shows that a character who is an individualist with initiative is just as likely to become a hero as he is to come to a sticky end, and there is no way to predict which of the two outcomes will happen.

The concept of the hero is a childish one, just as children expect adults to always act the same way; predictably and beneficially. They don't see the doubts, vacillations and mistakes that adults make. The hero idea is aspirational, a product of our desire to believe that one person — ourselves — can make a difference.

Heroism is, moreover, a symptom of political inefficiency — if one man is needed to save the world what's everybody else doing? The Castle is a team. The Fourlands certainly needs heroes but the Castle works together efficiently to combat the Insects. Heroism is 'built in' to the political system of the Fourlands, and over millennia the individuals who fulfill the role, say, of Messenger, are not as important as the position of Messenger itself.

Jant is a very complicated character because of his background, which will be gradually revealed throughout the books. Jant is fast, smart and good at thinking on his feet. On the other hand he's self-absorbed and useless at planning ahead so although he does what he thinks is best, he rushes into things and makes mistakes. In **The Year of Our War**, Jant acts more as Lightning's sidekick, or he provides support to the other immortals, rather than being the one and only central character. The fact that he's the narrator masks this. If you want a central character, it's Lightning. Lightning thinks he's a romantic and wants to be carried away by passion but sadly he's been so long out of this state that the world occupies too much of his affections. His affairs seem too reasonable and artificial to be genuine; in fact, he's only in love with love itself, and a few time-refined memories. Jant is the subject, not the hero, because he makes progress through the events, some of which he has actually caused, rather than triumphing over them. He weaves through, altering and facilitating things but the world is not centered on him. Jant wouldn't admit this to himself, of course. Nobody likes to think of themselves in a supporting role, especially Jant, who is the world's biggest attention-seeker.

The worst thing about writing Jant is when the reader imposes his or her own morality or genre reading onto him. And the best thing is — he's really sexy!

What's your favorite part of writing about the Castle and its myriad inhabitants?

Making the world-building as solid and thorough as possible. The technologies, structure of the fyrd, languages and so on have been worked out meticulously although not everything has been explained yet. I do a tremendous amount of research for the background, the characters' names and the immortals' skills. I even sketch the characters.

I can run the stories in my head like a film. I have a visual imagination and I've known the places and most of the characters for years so I can see them just like watching a film or a play. Sometimes I get so carried away with 'watching' the landscapes and buildings and listening to the characters that I forget to write anything down.

Can you explain the level of technology in the Castle world? They have both swords and t-shirts?

The Castle world is not a medieval world. It has evolved from an early medieval world up to the present date — the year 2015 in its calendar — along its own unique trajectory. There is nothing to say that all cultures must develop along the same path as ours. The idea that there is a single path to where we are now is our cultural arrogance.

The Fourlands' level of technology depends on the influences present, especially the presence of immortals and the war against the Insects. The existence of the Castle and the immortals has a retarding effect on some inventions — for example the way the army is organized hasn't changed for a thousand years, which is why it's still called the fyrd. The existence of the Castle has an accelerating effect on other inventions — for example immortals can plan in the long term so trees are bred and grown to make wood for longbows of a finer quality than in our world. But they are still longbows because Lightning the Archer would prove the superiority of bows over any incipient new invention like guns. Wrought swords are made of a high quality steel but they're still swords, because the Fourlanders are always thinking along the same lines. They study swordplay for a chance to become the immortal Swordsman. The immortals can be quick to catch on to inventions with direct applications to their specialty, for their own ends — they have to stay the best. Measurements are accurate because they must be able to judge challenges.

So most of the Fourlands' advances are possible with extreme refinements to fairly simple technologies. I call this Industrial Evolution. Very impressive results are achieved by gradual improvements, without revolutions. Some advances are social, for example the craftsmen in Hacilith have to work to a factory clock, but they're still making shields. I have researched technological advances in our world to be sure they can have things like aqueducts, clocks, blood transfusions. In Hacilith, denim mills run on waterpower to weave cotton from Shivel.

The Fourlanders achieve a lot with a huge workforce, for example mapping the continent. This isn't absurd: in 13th century China two and a half million men were employed to build a canal that stretched over a thousand miles. 18th century British ships surveyed the oceans with little more than bits of string. The Fourlands' government is more solid than ours — there's less corruption because of the Emperor, and a greater unity in the face of a common threat. They have a developed bureaucracy and communications, in some ways it's more like Imperial China than feudal Europe.

To have an industrial revolution, they would have to have a single discovery enabling them to mobilize the rest of their technology (e.g. gunpowder): 'Oh, now we know what to do with all this steel!' The single-minded application of a new principle (e.g. steam power) everywhere would have a similar effect.

Unlike other fantasy worlds, the Castle world has always been changing. It has followed its own historical trajectory for two thousand years since god left and the changes began to happen. The rates of inventions are different than in our history, so Fourlands people wear what seems to us to be a mixture of modern clothes and those from all periods. T-shirts could have existed at any point in our history. A man doesn't have to wear a tunic and tights to wield a sword. Some immortals wear outdated clothes simply because they've fallen behind the fashion. Fourlanders sail ships that are a combination of caravels and 18th century warships, depending on the designs that they've found most useful for coastal trade and patrolling.

Genya Dara — is it rape or isn't it?

It is and it isn't. You can't judge another species' culture by our standards, you have to see it in their terms. The Rhydanne courtship ritual is that the man chases the woman, who leads him, but Jant treats Genya more roughly than he should. The failings of his upbringing mean that he relies on instinct — he is not fully socialized into the Rhydanne culture as he was kept apart from it.

Rhydanne women are usually faster than men. A Rhydanne woman lets the man she likes catch her.

It's similar to the medieval idea of 'venery' that likens courtship and sex to hunting, where hounds chase deer. The point I am making here is that if a woman says 'no' she always means 'no' but sometimes she doesn't know enough to say 'no'. There will always be men willing to take advantage of innocent inexperienced women. Genya runs so fast that nobody except Jant has been able to catch her, but she decides to let him chase her. She doesn't expect to be caught. Young women gradually let themselves have more experience. It is the process of growing up, becoming a woman, learning more about yourself and society. Yes, it's dangerous, but danger is a necessary part of the process. Lots of fairytales like Red Riding Hood and Bluebeard are coded instructions for how to deal with the pitfalls of the process that girls have to go through if they're going to become women.

Rhydanne women usually don't want to be caught, because their childbirth is so traumatic. They have narrow hips to make them fast runners and although Rhydanne babies are born tiny and prematurely and grow up extraordinarily fast, lots of women die in childbirth (as happened to Jant's mother). That is why it's so important to Rhydanne to be married and not produce illegitimate children — the husband can look after the child, or look after the mother until she recovers.

The Rhydanne have evolved to run fast because of their courtship ritual: it's sexual selection for the fastest runners.

Genya survives to marry an Awian whom Jant promotes to Governor of Lowespass. He certainly wants to keep an eye on the couple in case they have any winged children. Genya has been in Lowespass for 22 years when we meet her at the start of **The Year of Our War**.

Any hints or teasers about the continuing storyline that you'd like to share?

The Year of Our War and the next book **No Present Like Time** only scratch the surface of my world. After this I want to describe the differences between the countries. In NPLT a voyage of discovery is launched and a new immortal, a nonpareil swordsman joins the Circle. Explorations and rapid change often follow wars because countries need resources and adventurous soldiers have returned from the Front.

Why do the wings join to the small of the back rather than the shoulders?

Wings on the shoulders wouldn't work, they'd be pulled out by the body weight. Instead, muscle attachments onto the hips give a secure joint. The small of the back is also the centre of gravity allowing Jant to lie horizontally in the air just as you lie flat when swimming. Otherwise he'd stall and it's a long way to fall. I have flown a hang glider and the glider attachment is in the small/middle of the back. We just expect wings to sprout from the shoulders because they were always pictured there on angels, who appear to fly upright!

Awians' wings are folded to lie against their bodies. So Awians can sit down in chairs and go through doors, which wouldn't be possible if their wings bunched above or behind the shoulders. And if you had wings on your shoulders, how would you reach them to preen them?