



# Speculative Fiction Book Review

Book Title	<b>The Lost War</b>
Author	<b>Justin Lee Anderson</b>
Date	<b>November 2020</b>
Stars	★★★★★

The opening chapter leads you suspect something is not right with the world as Aranok and his team are despatched on a rescue mission and warned against entering certain parts of King Janaeus' realm. From that point nothing can be guaranteed and I found myself doubting every character Aranok encounters, including his team. They're comprised of people who hardly know each other, except for his relationship with his fiery lover, Allandria. Everyone else is a suspect as they encounter treachery, murder and vicious attacks. Eidyn is a dangerous place, filled with human enemies certainly but populated by a wide range of monsters, demons and everything in between.

It means the pace is relentless. The action is fast and frantic, survival is always in doubt. For such a high level of adventure you need two things: a wide range of threats for one. As already explained, so check. Second, you need engaging but vulnerable characters.

This is where the story scores in a big way. All of Aranok's team are warriors in one form or another. Two of them possess magic. So not all that vulnerable then. Untrue! In their own ways, these are complex, human characters who have faults which leave them vulnerable. Primarily, Aranok. Such a wonderful protagonist. As a *draoidh* (I pronounced it 'druid', I think it is the Gaelic spelling?) this guy has been persecuted for his magical ability. He considers the deaths of others, including his best friend, to be his fault, usually when that wasn't the case. He's a guy that carries a lot of guilt around with him. This complexity is true of the brave and highly skilled Knight of the Thorn, Samily who believes her abilities are a gift from God. Her strict religious upbringing has left her emotionally repressed, the story shows her development as a woman, not just a warrior.

Magic plays a big part of the story (always a hit for me!) but it does so in clever ways that help to define the character using it. I believe it should always do this. I get annoyed when magic is dispensed only as a means to a narrative end. It exhausts the user for a start, leaving them weakened, even during a battle. The nature of the magic, whether it is elemental, linked to physics or mental/physical laws, helps define the person too.

Which brings me on to an element which made the world building stand out. Anyone who is different is to be seen as a threat, something to fear. When things go wrong, such people become society's scapegoats. We've seen it happen throughout history as well as in our current political culture where populist politicians blame minorities rather than acknowledge we are all people first and foremost. In this story, magic users, the *draoidhs*, are the ones made to suffer. The effect is, as Aranok explains to his niece, that people turn either good or bad as a consequence of that treatment. Aranok is a truly great man,



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someone who defends, even willingly sacrifices himself, for other people. But he didn't need to be that man, his past is littered with persecution and hardship that could have sent him in a very different direction.

There are several instances in the story where this ethical conundrum is explored and linked to religion. It's a feature which further strengthens the narrative, gives it a deeper layer of significance and character motivation. To what extent does God intervene in our actions? Does he influence our decisions or is that a purely human thing? There are no answers, nor should there be. This is a story with such depth of thought that it enhances the narrative, gives it a maturity which lifts it higher than a typical low fantasy adventure yarn. This is intelligent writing.

Talking of which, the writing flows. It carries you along on its current, even though the narrative jumps from different points of view, with ease. It doesn't dominate but sits in the background, like your favourite music, offering a comfortable soundtrack to the events that unfold.

I read Carpet Diem, by the same author, earlier this year. It was so clever and amusing that prompted me to put this story on my TBR list. It is so different it astonishes me that it's written by the same guy. I mean, who allows someone to possess so much talent? I'm sure Justin Lee Anderson has somehow acquired some of mine!

The Lost War is also a finalist in SPFB06. I'm not at all surprised. I would, at this point, state that it should win. I won't. Last year, as a judge in the competition, my opinion was wildly out of line with others. So I'll avoid passing on any bad luck.

I will say that The Lost War is an intelligent, character-driven low fantasy story which hooks the reader from its opening and allows them to wriggle and squirm their way through the unexpected turns of the story. Like all good anglers, once caught, the reader is placed in a keepnet. One where the final twist in this tale means you're not where you thought you were. End of fishing analogy!

In conclusion, I loved this story. Loved it!! I cannot wait for the second.