




# BOOK REVIEW

Book Title	<b>City of Lies</b>
Author	<b>Sam Hawke</b>
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Stars	

City of Lies is Sam Hawke's debut novel and it is perfect.

It's an accolade I'm ready to defend. Here's how. I believe in any fantasy novel there must be three elements which must impact upon the reader:

1. Enthralling, compelling and credible world building
2. Exquisitely drawn characters that provoke emotional reactions
3. Explosive narrative drive that propels the reader towards the story's climax.

City of Lies has all three in abundance.

Silasta is the titular city, a complex, socially hierarchical society led by Families and Guilds, a place where honour is embedded in its social fabric. Status is everything and consequently so is politics. The reader is thrown into the deep end of this world, obscure titles and references wash around us without helpful exposition, we're expected to assimilate these things as we go along. For the first few chapters it can appear daunting but soon you find yourself thoroughly immersed in this world and it feels natural. You get used to the titles, to alien family relationships, to the affectations, to the food and drink, to the poisons.

Because this story is, in its most distilled form, a whodunnit on a massive scale. Poison is a treacherous, subtle and conniving method of despatch. So, when the two most powerful men in the city die from a poison no one recognises, it is up to their offspring to fathom not just the means but the motives.

Jovan must solve this mystery with the help of his sister Kalina. They are unlikely protagonists because of their weaknesses. Kalina suffers from poor health, a chest condition leaves her weak, easily exhausted and has limited her contributions to her family and her city. It's left her frustrated and powerless. They are members of one of the powerful Families, their uncle or Tashi, is the advisor to the city's Chancellor, both of whom are murdered. It means Jovan is left with the heritage of protecting his friend, Tain, the young man who becomes the new Chancellor. Yet Jovan has a weakness too. Though it's never defined, his mental condition is a form of autism. He suffers from a need to control and is obsessive to the point where it requires calming strategies. Emotionally he struggles to empathise and to relate to other people. Factors that fit perfectly into his role as a savant who understands poisons and drugs and all things chemical.



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The story is populated by a wealth of characters that represent the diversity of this world, many of whom are the suspects in this murder mystery. We loathe some for their self-serving and hypocritical attitudes while we cheer on others, such as Hadrea, the feisty young woman who is to play such a crucial part in the story's outcomes.

I've defined this story as a whodunnit but don't let that mislead you. Good stories, I maintain, need an explosive narrative drive, and this one detonates on a regular basis. The city is threatened, and no one knows what to do about it. Our protagonists are entirely unaware of the factors that lead others to want to destroy the place and the people in it. It's an ignorance borne of complacency, the sort that arises out of a society which neglects those who serve it. Jovan and Kalina, with their respective weaknesses, strive to overcome this ignorance whilst combatting the ever-present threats from their enemies beyond the sadly-neglected city walls. It's a race against time and with no apparent solution.

So, a story which fulfils my three criteria brilliantly, not just because of its originality but because they merge so that each factor complements the other two.

What makes the story perfect is a fourth factor. I believe fantasy should be a mirror on our own world. *City of Lies* explores issues of equality, for example. It shows us how the city, described by an antagonist as 'soft and rotten to the core', has survived on its inequality, privilege and complacent ignorance. We see in its two protagonists, characters who overcome their respective weaknesses to become more than anyone might otherwise imagine. We see the denigration and assault on other cultures who are not understood. It's a celebration of diversity. We also see what happens when the environment is overlooked and taken for granted.

We're not lectured on these topics; their presence is as subtle as poison. All the same, messages are there to be seen by those who read this story with an awareness of its overarching themes.

It is a work of sophistication and subtlety, but it is also an exciting, full-throttle ride from beginning to end. It is charged with emotion that left me with a lump in my throat at the end. I will be waiting for the next instalment of this story with real impatience. This is a novel which presents Sam Hawke as a talented new name on the fantasy bookshelves, one capable of bringing fresh insight into the genre.