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Soul and the city

New York literally comes alive to fight aliens in a vivid sci-fi novel with ethnicity at its heart, says **Jason Arunn Murugesu**



Book

The City We Became

N.K. Jemisin

Orbit

RIGHT now, the world feels like it is on the brink. The news is punishing, and cabin fever for those in lockdown is starting to set in. Will we all be OK? How long will it last? What will be left?

The City We Became provides a desperately needed escape. It is the first part of a new trilogy by N.K. Jemisin, who has won science fiction's much-coveted Hugo Award three times.

The novel is a love letter to New York, written about people of colour living in the city. It is about ethnicity, but it just happens to be about otherworldly beings too.

When an alien invader that is hell-bent on destroying New York arrives on the scene, the city's five boroughs are brought to life to combat the threat. Manhattan becomes Manny, who has a vague and mysterious past, while the father of Staten Island's avatar, the sole white protagonist, is a racist cop. Brooklyn is represented by a cool former hip-hop pioneer, the Bronx has hard-edged arts centre director Broca and Queens is transformed into a super-intelligent south Asian postgraduate student.

Jemisin's New York feels true and lived in. To read the book is to be swept away in a world that looks much like our own. Jemisin has lived in the city on and off for most of her life, settling there 13 years ago, and a lot of research has gone into making its details accurate.

"I would note down the smells, the sounds, the feelings, the

thoughts, the details. How cold is it? What is the name of the ferry to Staten Island?" Jemisin tells me. For many people, it will be hard to read her descriptions without longing for the normality of urban life, while our governments tell us to stay indoors.

While *The City We Became* is written by someone who clearly adores New York, Jemisin is clear-eyed in her criticisms of life

"The City We Became is literally and metaphorically about the fight for the soul of New York"

in the West. "It's like going from the honeymoon phase to the comfort you get from a long-term relationship – you don't bother closing the bathroom door any more," she says.

In one scene, two characters who have just met and who are both people of colour take it for granted that a white woman would be anxious about their

presence. It is only when this is made overt that they realise that she is an alien and their foe.

"Fiction writers are only trying to tell good stories," says Jemisin. "But we are sending messages in our fiction. It is always political. Politics is stories." *The City We Became* is literally and metaphorically about the fight for the soul of New York, but it is also concerned with the souls of cities everywhere. "Cities change, that's unavoidable. But when it becomes no longer liveable for regular people and you start to lose the little unique bits that made these cities so interesting, that's a threat," she says.

In the book, none of the anthropomorphised boroughs realise who or what they are initially. They hear the voices of thousands of people in their heads and struggle to come to terms with the stakes at play.

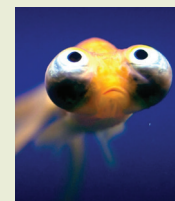
Jemisin's wider point seems to be that a city lives in each of us, and each of us makes a city. We all have a responsibility to contribute to our surroundings. This book is just one way of Jemisin doing her part. ■



CHRISTOPHER ANDERSON/MAGNUM PHOTOS

The alien-afflicted avatars of New York fight back in *The City We Became*

Don't miss



Watch

Absurd Planet, arriving on Netflix from 22 April, is a science series that delves into the lives of our planet's most intriguing animals. Narration is provided by Mother Nature herself, as well as a cast of quirky creatures.



Read

The Chemical Age (University of Chicago Press) by ecotoxicologist Frank A. von Hippel reveals that while the chemical industry has averted famines and vanquished diseases, it has also driven countless species towards extinction.



Dance

Digital Body is an online project by scientifically inclined choreographer Alexander Whitley. Visit his website and make your own work from motion-capture data of choreography he has recorded in response to the covid-19 pandemic.