



The Iron Dragon's Daughter

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A slave in a dragon factory that manufactures flying fighting machines, Jane changes her destiny when a voice from a dragon promising freedom and revenge prompts her to escape and challenge the foundations of the world.

The Iron Dragon's Daughter Details

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Author : Michael Swanwick

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From Reader Review The Iron Dragon's Daughter for online ebook

Mark Newton says

A Cracking little read, this one, bonkers and brave and brash. Totally slaps anyone who suspects 'gritty' fantasy is a new thing. This book doesn't shy away from adult language and themes (war, racism, sexism), and has a pleasing mish-mash of aesthetics, from the gentle veneer of the fae, to the harsh industrial landscape – all mixed with a spot of college antics and sex. Quite likely a deliberate attempt to upset some section of the genre readership – which you've got to love, right?

Jamethiel_bane says

Faerie cyberpunk. Jane is a changeling, working as slave labour in the dragon factory. Her life is planned out for her, and it's not particularly pleasant path. Then she meets an iron dragon, and decides to rebel.

This is a FANTASTIC book. The world is incredibly detailed and very well thought out. The only trouble is, it's about two books in one. We start off with Jane in childhood, and go through to her adulthood. Jane is wonderful. Smart, stubborn, not always especially moral and very, very angry.

SPOILERS

There is sex in this book. Jane has sex and enjoys it and doesn't get punished for it (other than having guys who she doesn't particularly WANT a lengthy relationship with hanging round. And that happens!). Some will see it as nihilistic and it's certainly very dark. She doesn't treat people well. She actually kills some blameless people to give her the means to escape. It's calculated, as well. It's certainly acknowledged as being morally wrong and Jane does feel guilty, but like most survivors she has the attitude of "I will think about that later".

However, I found a theme of--dark hope, or acknowledgement of the human-ness of anger and defiance. Jane is trapped and stuck and she enjoys herself along the way, but she's always angry about it. And come the penultimate part of the book, in the Spiral Castle where she could very easily acquiesce and say "No, you're right, I'm nothing and I submit." she doesn't. She sticks her chin up and says "NEVER", fully expecting to be annihilated.

If you take the penultimate part of the book as the ending, it's actually a pretty powerful atheist statement. That anthropomorphising the cosmos is useless because it doesn't care about us. This rather bleak message is undermined by the very end.

The ending is something that almost subverts the message of the entire book. The book is about--surviving, muddling through. Doing the best you can in a world which doesn't give you rules and has no purpose. But we see recurring characters in Jane's life. The same souls turn up again and again. The "goddess" in the spiral castle actually explicitly says that they're part of Jane's purpose and she just disregards them.

The final part of the book reinforces that an individual's destiny is largely what they make of it themselves, but that other people and our treatment of them is the most important thing. It's gorgeous writing on from Swanwick, to see things that are foreshadowed and take forever to build up fall into place in the final chapter.

In conclusion, a fantastic book. Highly recommended.

Margaret Taylor says

I'd read some of the other reviews of *The Iron Dragon's Daughter* on Goodreads, so I was forewarned that the author pulls a nasty trick on us around page 80. That still didn't prepare me for how angry this book was going to make me.

I picked up this book because it's noteworthy for deconstructing a lot of stock fantasy tropes. It was published in 1993, when fantasy was deep in the ghetto of Tolkien knockoffs. A few years later, *A Game of Thrones* would start pulling the genre out of Tolkien's shadow, and then Harry Potter would really get fantasy going again. But *The Iron Dragon's Daughter* was a start. For one thing, this book has technology – at a time when most people had not heard of the word “steampunk.”

Jane is a young human who's been kidnapped by the Unseelie Court and forced to live in Fairyland. She works as a child laborer in a robot dragon factory (they work like sentient fighter jets). One day, one of the dragons begins speaking to her. It offers to help her escape if she repairs it. This dragon is quite evil, but they strike an uneasy bargain and they get out.

At this point, you'd expect the story to be about Jane trying to get home while trying to cope with this dragon she can't trust. You would be wrong. Over the course of a page or two, Jane becomes a miserable little crook bent on cheating, stealing, and fornicating* her way to the top of Unseelie society. She manipulates people. She lets her friends die to save herself. All of this would make for a fascinating villain if only there were any heroes in the story. There aren't. All of the other characters are loathesome except for this one dude who keeps dying over and over and over again.

It's not bad writing. In fact, it's quite good (Swanwick has won awards for some of his other works). What we have here is a talented writer who is deliberately trolling his readers. The theme of the book is that life is pointless and meaningless, though it stops to poke some cruel humor at yuppie culture along the way.

I skipped ahead to see if Jane ever winds up in jail, which she so richly deserves. She does not.

Swanwick, you don't have to be like this. You don't have to rip your subject to bloody shreds to write effective satire. Take Terry Pratchett, for example. This guy pokes holes in everything, literally everything. He's done dwarves quaffing mead in taverns to lost heirs to the throne to the post office to image compression algorithms to Robocop. But no matter where the books go, they always circle back to two main messages: 1. You will die eventually. 2. The human spirit (or dwarven or vampire or what have you) is worth something.

And frankly, that's the sort of satire I'd rather read.

* Sex magic. She doesn't care for her partners, but she does use them to acquire power.

Pele says

I read this book years ago, and it's one of those that really stick with you and rattle around in your head.

If you've ever read classic, well respected literature, you know that the author is telling a raw and original story, and cares nothing about the reader's comfort along the way. That, to me, is the sign of a truly well-written book. You experience the human condition through the writing, and a good part of the human condition is NOT comfortable, pretty, or easy to face.

The genius here (and why this book became such a phenomenon in the 90s), is that Swanwick took a genre that is notorious for NOT challenging the reader, for being overly comfortable, and not well respected, and elevated it.

He uses a harsh world with class issues, and an imperfect main character (really, you expect a child slave with revenge issues to be a paragon of morality?), to emotionally exercise the reader in a manner usually expected when you sit down with a copy of Heart of Darkness, or Lord of the Flies. It will elevate you, it will floor you, and it will make you upset with the main character (because she's not perfect).

Most of all, it will stay with you and change how you view a genre.

Matthew Kehrt says

You'd be surprised how amazingly awesome a book that consists largely of depressing elf sex can be.

Terence says

(Sigh)...Another one of those cases where GR's star-rating system doesn't adequately express my reaction to a book. I'd give this one 2.5 to 3 stars (and, since it's the New Year & I'm feeling generous, I'm rounding up) - It's not bad; Swanwick is a decent writer. It's just not my "cup of tea."

The only reason I picked this book up was that it was 50 cents at a library sale. In general, I'm not a huge fan of urban fantasy so I was never drawn to the book when it first came out, despite the rave reviews it got (and gets). Now that I've read it, I'm still not a urban-fantasy fan and I'm not terribly impressed by Mr. Swanwick. Which doesn't mean I didn't enjoy reading the book, just that it isn't that memorable an experience and I probably won't be reading any more Swanwick in the future outside of a trusted source raving about another one of his novels.

Actually, the character of Jane, the novel's hero, is quite well drawn and believable. I've noticed in some reviews here that readers complain that Jane is a thoroughly selfish and unlikable person, which is true enough as far as it goes but considering her "role models," I was surprised at the amount of empathy she *did* exhibit. For example, given the chance to betray some school acquaintances (not even friends, really) to save herself, Jane doesn't and very nearly gets exposed as a human changeling and escapee from the dragon works. In fact, I was very disturbed and not entirely convinced when she turned into a serial killer in order to supply the dragon of the title with the energy it needed to fulfill its purpose. But that situation raises the question of just how much influence the dragon has over Jane's actions. It *is* able to manipulate her subconsciously into breaking their initial pact and allowing it to go off on its own.

As I've indicated, however, I was never interested enough in the setting or the characters to care all that much. It's a readable book with believable characters and situations but I personally wouldn't recommend it.

Kara says

I don't know how to rate this book. It's staid with me years after I read yet - yet I never felt the urge to read it again, or tell anyone else they should read it.

The faerie realm never felt so real - or so modern. There are factories, cops, malls, high schools, colleges, duplexes - all the trappings of urban and suburban life, but populated entirely by the fair folk, who act very similar, except when the occasional Beltane sacrifice or Samhien orgy comes along. And there's magic and spells deftly mixed in with the wires and electricity of the everyday world.

The main character is the lone human and forced to hide the fact. She meets exactly one other human the entire book - who's in a coma. Her partner-in-crime, the dragon, is missing most of the book, leaving mostly on her own to stumble through the story.

>Spoiler<

She wonders most of the book if she has some sort of special purpose, even as she is just hanging out and not really trying to accomplish anything. It's almost satisfying, after seeing her do nothing but whine and angst for so long to be told she is merely a "margin of error."

Althea Ann says

Not so long ago, I was reading a forum discussion talking about how fantasy worlds never seem to progress past a medieval level of technology; and whether or not it's possible to write a technological fantasy world that is clearly not science fiction.

This book does it, with its plethora of faerie creatures - and our protagonist, a changeling - working in factories and dealing with magical/robotic creations.

The book is complex, with strikingly original ideas, and a carefully plotted structure that at first seems pointlessly rambling. As the spiraling theme of the story is revealed, the reader realizes that the plot has also been following that spiral theme.

It's well done; even impressive. The book probably deserved to win at least one of the several awards it was nominated for.

However, I didn't love it, emotionally. Even though it deftly slipped out of the 'it was all just a dream, or mental illness' thing that I had a suspicion it was sliding toward, for a while. I feel like I appreciated this book - it just didn't become one of my favorites.

Sfbooknerd says

An excellent and unusual dark fantasy book. The main character is an anti-hero so be prepared, remember it's a grim, gritty, nihilist fantasy book.

This book is for advanced readers who are familiar with the usual fantasy tropes. People who still prefer the old-style fairytales with heroic heroes may not like it. People who have already read a lot of fantasy and are bored with sparkly vampires and white knights may like this grim tale.

Cia says

I wanted to like this so badly. The premise was great, the opening chapters were great...Then we get bogged down in Jane's sexual encounters. There's one chapter littered with the word "cunt". I was so disappointed. Once again, a potentially amazing book is ruined by the author's preoccupation with slut-shaming his heroine. I realise this book is from the 90s, but this is entirely symptomatic of how male authors treat female protagonists. In order to get ahead? Shag allllll the mystical creatures. I almost wish this wasn't a book for my dissertation, I'm that disappointed by it. I wouldn't recommend it, unless you want to learn how to do a ritual to name your muffin. The only reason this has one star is because the opening chapters set in the factory and the initial plotline of the book are so enjoyable. The rest? Utter pish.

Loracious says

This was one of the first books that I stumbled upon without anyone ever recommending it to me, and expected the normal fantasy-fare.

Imagine my surprise when this story turned out to be an entirely original tale about a girl trying to find her way in a strange, cruel, bold, ferocious world. I was used to reading about elves and dwarves; this world has giant metal dragons and invisible boys and anthropomorphic characters. And, as it were, elves as well.

I re-read this book every year, just for the magic it has, just for that breath of truly magnificent story-telling that really resonated with me. Perhaps it is because I still can't quite figure it all out, and I think that is the beauty of this book. It is as enigmatic as our iron dragon daughter, our Jane.

Recommended for established fantasy/sci-fi fans only.

Megan Doreen says

This was the first adult sci-fi book I ever read. I snuck it home from the Eugene, OR public library when I was 12...since I wouldn't have been allowed to read it. I remember finding it strange, and confusing, and crude...although I didn't understand the crudity fully, I knew it was bad.

I think I always attributed that opinion to the fact that I was too young to read the book at the time. I had since looked it up online and noticed that it won all sorts of awards.

So, almost 20 years later, I got it through interlibrary loan.

Nope...it is still just as confusing and unclear as it ever was. And now that I understand the crudity, it is WAY more troublesome. Especially because most of it is in no way necessary to furthering the plot. It serves no purpose in the literary arc.

I don't really recommend this book to anyone. If you want dragon books, or post apocalyptic fairy novels, or disturbingly dark scifi...I can make you any number of better recommendations. The Snow Queen for example.

Paula says

This book was recommended to me somewhere along the way and also appears as part of one of the 'Fantasy Masterworks' series, so I expected it would be good.

The basic premise of *The Iron Dragon's Daughter* is of a world alongside ours where human children have been stolen to work in the great foundries where dragons are made. Our protagonist, determined to know a different life from the one she is currently leading, makes plans to steal one of the dragons and flee - her plan works well in some ways but not in others, as she is forced to take refuge among the people who enslaved her kind.

The idea of changelings being taken for a particular purpose was an interesting enough one, and the initial setting of the foundry was well-drawn and dark, but after the escape my interest began to wane. Add to that the author's apparent obsession with sex - not in itself a bad thing, but hardly a substitute for plot - and I got about two-thirds of the way through before I decided I really didn't care any more.

There's a sequel to this now, written many years after the original publication of this book: the follow-up is *The Dragons of Babel*, but I can't see myself bothering with it...

Kat Hooper says

ORIGINALLY POSTED AT Fantasy Literature.

Some people don't like to admit that they didn't "get" a book, but I'm secure enough with myself to say that I didn't get this one.

The Iron Dragon's Daughter started off well. Jane is a human changeling who works in a Faerie factory that makes flying iron dragons for weapons. Jane and the other child slave laborers (who are a mix of strange creatures) are entertaining and bring to mind *Lord of the Flies* and that scene in Sid's room from Pixar's *Toy Story*. Michael Swanwick's writing style is fluid and faultless. There are flashes of Valente-esque creativity:

a timeclock with a temper, a meryon (whatever that is) civilization similar to that in *A Bug's Life*, a conniving jar-bound homunculus, gryphons who dive for thrown beer cans. I truly enjoyed these parts of the book and understand why Mr. Swanwick has won so many prestigious awards.

But, after Jane escapes from the dragon factory, the whole thing plummets like a lead dragon and it never returns to its former glory. The writing style is still lovely, but the plot is — I don't think I've ever used this word in a review before — awful. I hated it.

Jane was never a sympathetic heroine, but after her escape she turns into a remorseless foul-mouthed thief, drug-user, slut, and murderer. I didn't like her or any of her acquaintances. The plot had no order, the world had no rules, everything that happened seemed random, chaotic, and senseless.

Knowing that other people have praised this novel and that its sequel (*The Dragons of Babel*) was nominated for a Locus award, I pressed on. About two-thirds of the way through, I figured out that there was a method to the madness, but the chaotic nihilism was so disturbing that even though I realized it contributed to the entire philosophy of the novel, I still hated it. I think perhaps if I'd dropped some acid, the plot would have arranged itself better in my mind, but alas, I had none to hand.

I think Michael Swanwick is a great writer, but *The Iron Dragon's Daughter* was weird, disjointed, obtuse, and inaccessibly bizarre.

Originally published at FanLit.

Meg Jayanth says

One of the books on Mieville's list of 50 Scifi and Fantasy Books for Socialists, he tells you that it "completely destroys the sentimental aspects of genre fiction". And holy hell, please do take that warning seriously. Jane is a child-worker in a factory which is building treacherously aware warmachines made of cold iron. These "dragons" are enslaved to their pilots, wills broken by technology and magic, as Jane is essentially a slave to the factory. Until one of the dragons starts whispering to her of escape.

This is a difficult book, and no mistake. It's endlessly surprising and inventive, deeply shocking, especially if you bring to it the expectations of genre fiction - it reminds me of a much older strain of speculative fiction; charged, full of ideas, unexpected, perhaps slightly more interested in plot and situation and its effects on character than in the characters themselves. But it's not an old-fashioned book. Technology exists alongside the magic of the Faerie (a disturbing vision of colleges of alchemy existing alongside air-conditioned malls, stealth dragons made of cold-iron fitted out with radar-jamming tech), our own mundane world is an acknowledged but separate plane of existence - Jane is a changeling stolen from our world and into the faerie, and her abduction isn't a romanticised transplantation into Faerie courts, but rather part of a healthy trade in child-trafficking and slave labour.

Personally, I thought Jane was an excellent protagonist: resourceful, intelligent, but also deeply flawed. By turns compassionate and ruthless. The book is about her attempts to live her life, perhaps try to return to her mother and her blank-eyed physical body on "our plane", while navigating the political, social and economic world of Faerie that seems systematically determined to corner, manipulate, and lessen her. In this world, there are no last-minute saves, or unexamined heroics. Jane is far from noble, but endlessly human.

If you're willing to give yourself to Swanwick's twisting narrative, *Iron Dragon's Daughter* is a rewarding,

thoughtful, deeply engaging book that will stay with you.

Bradley says

This is a very impressive work of imagination, and while I've read better Swanwick, it's **still** Swanwick, and that means it's head-and-shoulders better than almost anything out there.

This novel gives the illusion that it might be a YA, with a lot of impressive and delightful adventure elements, but it eventually turns into an adult romp full of sex, drugs, and stardom, only to eventually return to its adventure roots. So what makes this piece stand out? Jane is a great character with lots of sides to her, not just exploring what it means to be a woman in a thoroughly Misogynic Elf society, trying to find a piece of herself, her dreams, her sexuality, while all the while struggling against two great gods of the Steampunk/High Fantasy world.

What's the Iron Dragon? An AI in a steampunk airship with cybernetic interfaces. Nicely SF. Are there Dwarves and Elves and Changelings throughout this University-Dominated setting? Why yes, yes, there is. :) Complex society, too. Very nicely Fantasy.

Does the plot and the themes begin as a slow spiral only to end up in the center of all the conflict in a wild explosion of action? Why yes, yes it does.

I really like this novel, and it really shines well in craft and characters, but to be perfectly honest, I didn't know where a lot of it was going until much later and it just seemed like it was drifting in dissolution. A lot of the plot events, including the mob scenes, play out the same feeling, of course, as well as the immense sense of loss, and while the reality of the author's intent was clear, our actual payoff feels far from clear. I get a few good impressions, and the visual imagery is grand, but then I wonder if this was still all about Jane's growth or not.

I assume it is, and not the played-out grand conflict of gods. :)

Bree says

So, you know the feeling you get when you encounter a difficult piece of artwork in a contemporary art museum? Maybe it's a small box left alone on a table. Maybe it's a cake made of plaster. Maybe it's a series of lights shone on a wall. You can pick up on a few clues as to what concept is being explored and what aesthetic is being showcased, but you get the sense that you might just not be intelligent or cultured enough to grasp the big, profound entirety of it all. And then it strikes you: maybe the artist is just fucking with you. You leave the museum in a disoriented state, wondering if you had finally experienced true art and whether you hated it or not. You decide it deserves three stars.

Petr says

This book is one of those rarities that make my brain a little bit numb from emotion storm. There is nothing coherent, just a storm of love, hatred, questions, guesses, objections, suggestions, alterations, admiration, amusement, dissatisfaction... I want more, but I know that there is no more and there must be no more - for all good things must end by their own will or be twisted into the MacDonald's-like things by others. Such books and the worlds they create is more like a glimpse in the dark. They flash before your eyes, they leave you with images, with seeds of desire, and they gone... they don't need our imagination, they are free from us.

Elsbeth says

This book made me stabby.
Feels of rage when I was done.
Bad ending was bad.

Bill says

I picked this up on a recommendation by author China Mieville. It is interesting, and certainly different from anything mainstream, but I can see why the book faded into obscurity since it's publication in the 90's.

During the first 20% of this book, I thought it was going to be one of the best things I ever read. A changeling girl is stuck in a magical, steampunk factory with other fey children toiling away building sentient, mechanical dragons. She must escape by secretly fixing one of said dragons. The author uses unrestrained creativity, interesting characters and lore, and a great plot setup.

However... the rest of the book turns into a grotesque, overly sexual school drama like a perverse Harry Potter. While the heroine does occasionally act upon vague long-term goals, most of the story hereafter just follows her meanderings through life in this fey world, largely spent thieving, doing drugs, and having sex.

The book is, essentially, a chronicle of the girl's journey to adulthood in this strange realm. In that it does a fairly good job. The world is intriguing, if abstract, with a wealth of the unconventional. I just wish the book had continued with the adventurous plot it established in the beginning instead.
