



Steeplejack

A.J. Hartley

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Seventeen-year-old Anglet Sutonga, makes a living repairing the chimneys, towers, and spires of Bar-Selehm. Dramatically different communities live and work alongside one another. The white Feldish command the nation's higher echelons of society; the native Mahweni are divided between city life and the savannah. And then there's Ang, part of the Lani community who immigrated there generations ago and now mostly live in poverty on Bar-Selehm's edges.

When Ang is supposed to meet her new apprentice, Berrit, she finds him dead. That same night the Beacon, an invaluable historical icon, is stolen. The Beacon's theft commands the headlines, yet no one seems to care about Berrit's murder—except for Josiah Willinghouse, an enigmatic young politician. When he offers Ang a job investigating the death, she plunges headlong into new and unexpected dangers.

Meanwhile, crowds gather in protests over the city's mounting troubles. Rumors surrounding the Beacon's theft grow. More suspicious deaths occur. With no one to help Ang except Josiah's haughty younger sister, a savvy newspaper girl, and a kindhearted herder, Ang must rely on her intellect and strength to resolve the mysterious link between Berrit and the missing Beacon before the city descends into chaos.

Steeplejack Details

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Author : A.J. Hartley

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From Reader Review Steeplejack for online ebook

Emily May says

"What are we going to do?" she asked, very slightly breathless.

"We're going to solve a murder," I said.

How funny it is that I was just complaining a couple days ago that authors never do anything different with the fantasy genre and then this little gem comes along. And gets **wild, creative** and very **different**.

The cover had me thinking this was probably steampunk, or some sci-fi subgenre at least, but Steeplejack is actually a complex, thoughtful fantasy, exploring racial politics in a postcolonial city. Hartley's background as a writer for adults comes through in the novel, making it denser (not in a bad way) than the typical YA novel, and more mature.

The first person narrative, compelling mystery, and action scenes propel the plot along through **twists and turns**, but it's far more than just a fast-paced surface story. The world is vivid, exciting and rich in detail. The story is rife with economic and political entanglements. The racial and class tensions lie at the centre of this mystery, forcing us to draw parallels between Bar-Selehm and our own history.

Anglet is the protagonist and narrator. Relatable, downtrodden but fierce, it's hard not to like her instantly. If anything, though, I would have liked her to be a little more flawed. The author allows her to make mistakes and bad decisions, but her motivations are sometimes a little too selfless to believe, especially as a starving steeplejack in such a harsh time and place. But there are more books to come so we shall see what lies in store for her.

I especially liked the family aspect - just one more thing to add to this multilayered novel - and the way Anglet's complex relationship with her sisters is portrayed. You can feel the history between them long before we get snippets of it, and I liked that Anglet took care of her sister's baby for her (though, as a new mother myself, I can't help being skeptical about how they manage to schedule this newborn's feedings - she's two days old and Anglet is able to go about the city and bring her back to her mother when she needs feeding?! Lol, yeah. Riiiiight.)

In this world, we see a **diverse cast of characters** reminiscent of two other recent sci-fi/fantasy reads: Railhead and False Hearts. It's really refreshing to see more diversity in these predominantly white genres. In Steeplejack, tensions abound between the native black Mahweni, the white colonists, and the brown Lani, who the white Feldish settlers brought over as slaves.

Anglet is Lani and the story opens with the murder of a fellow Lani steeplejack. On the same day, a luxorite stone that powers the city Beacon is stolen. Though the police are dismissive of the boy's death, Anglet is convinced the two are linked. Her need to know the truth leads her to some dark places and she soon finds herself pulled closer and closer to a dangerous conspiracy.

Steeplejack's true strength is that it has so many great selling points. It's a **fast-paced action adventure**; it's a **smart twisty mystery**; it's a thought-provoking tale of **racial politics**; it's a touching **family drama**. Oh, and it isn't a romance. At all.

I'm glad we have more to look forward to.

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Christina (A Reader of Fictions) says

Before it showed up on my doorstep, Steeplejack was only mildly on my radar. I'd featured it in Cover Snark, and I thought the cover was gorgeous, but, other than that, I'd not given it much thought. Thankfully, Steeplejack did appear, because I would have taken a long time to get around to reading it otherwise, and it's such an adventure.

One thing I've bemoaned, even with the advent of more and more diverse books in recent years is that diverse genre fiction still lags behind. Steeplejack has a heavily diverse cast and takes place in a fantasy Africa. The plot deals heavily with racial tensions in a colonized land. On top of that, this is a fantasy novel where women totally dominate, though that's not the nature of the society in general.

Anglet Sutonga, works as a steeplejack, long past the ages when most girls have quit and moved on to other employment. Anglet is one of the best steeplejacks in the city, skilled at her work and excellent at climbing. Her career comes to an abrupt screeching halt when her apprentice is murdered, her boss tries to rape her, and she stabs said boss.

The weakest part of Steeplejack, I think, is actually the premise whereby Anglet now gets hired on by a random (sorry, Willinghouse, ilu) government official to work as a private detective. No offense to my girl Ang because she's a total boss bitch, but Willinghouse hiring her made very little sense to me. She has zero qualifications aside from having figured out one detail. She makes a lot of mistakes initially because she has no clue what she's even doing. They also do not agree on any sort of clear terms about payment or anything, which is weird. That said, I didn't mind rolling with the premise because it's still so awesome.

The plot's excellent fun, though predictable in places. The characters are all very promising and likable, though many could use a bit more fleshing out. There are a couple of potential romances blossoming, which obvs I am down for (Team Willinghouse). Basically, I think Steeplejack's a great start to the Alternative Detective series, and I can't wait to see how Ang and the rest grow.

In case that wasn't enough to sell you on it, Steeplejack has a baby and many moppets but I still really liked it. So yeah, it's pretty damn good.

Drew says

"It really was that simple. You figured out what you needed to do to stay alive, and you did it."

3 1/2 stars. This was a **slow moving, well written mystery with a freaking fantastic protagonist**. The fantasy world was richly developed, filled with "steeplejacks" or rooftop climbers who repaired chimneys and spires, different races of people, and a clever, intricate mystery.

Anglet is our awesome main character who is the best steeplejack in Bar-Selehm. The story opens with Ang going to meet her new apprentice, but she finds him dead instead. The authorities say he fell from the rooftops, but Ang doesn't believe it. Her curiosity gets her hired as a private detective to find a stolen historical icon, the Beacon.

Ang was quick and smart on her feet. It was **impossible not to immediately fall in love with her**. Juggling her job, trying to solve a mystery, and looking after her sister's new baby has put her in a tight spot.

Along with the intriguing mystery, **racial tensions were explored**. The Lani or "brown" race, which Ang was a part of, lived in the dirtier and poorer community, the Mahweni "black" race was discriminated against, and the Feldish "white" race was rich and powerful. It was a sad reflection of our world, but this truthful observation just added more depth to the story.

The ending was strong, the plot twist surprising, and I loved learning how everything came together. The mystery kept me guessing and baffled me, just as a good mystery should.

One thing I will add is I would have liked the pacing to be quicker. I understand the author needed time to develop the fantasy world and characters, but the story was a bit too much on the slow side for me.

Really though, how cool is it that the **fantasy, dystopian, and thriller genres** were all combined in one story? I just love it when authors blend multiple genres and Hartley did it so well it felt like this world could actually exist.

For fans of Jackaby, These Shallow Graves, The Diviners, and strong female narrators.

Shelley says

Source Publisher

Genre Young Adult, Steampunk, Fantasy

Rating 4.0

Thoughts

Steeplejack is the first installment in new to me author A.J. Hartley's Alternative Detective trilogy. 17-year old Anglet "Ang" Sutonga lives in a place called Bar-Selehm. One could say that the setting of the story is an alternative version of South Africa, especially with the most diverse cast that I can truly remember reading about. Ang is one of only a few individuals, and the only female, who works the high places of Bar-Selehm. Her work includes cleaning and repairing everything from chimney's to spirals to towers.

Brilliant! Loved the characters, loved the setting, and the twisted mystery that was a bit unexpected to me. Looking forward to the next installment!

Full Review Posted @ Gizmos Reviews 06/17/2016

<http://gizmosreviews.blogspot.com/201...>

Expected publication: June 14th 2016 by Tor Teen

Roger Whitson says

WARNING: This review contains mild spoilers. Also, full disclosure, Diana Pho graciously provided me with an advanced copy of the book.

The most compelling moments in A.J. Hartley's steampunk novel *Steeplejack* occur when Anglet Sutonga recalls the deaths of people lost in the city's forgotten corners. Characters are murdered with great frequency in the novel — their bodies stashed inside buildings targeted for demolition, suffocated inside labyrinthine chimney stacks, or ripped to shreds by yellow-finned sharks patrolling the many bays and waterways in the city. Ang muses when thinking about the sharks that “[t]o enter the water at Tanuga Point was to go through the great meat grinder of the world, and what emerged was as close to nothing as made no difference.” Anglet's struggle to make those forgotten people matter, despite shadowy forces killing to forget them, forms the core of a gripping steampunk adventure set in a fantasy world mirroring the colonial history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century South Africa.

This struggle over memory and meaning also characterizes *Steeplejack*'s broader dialogue with the steampunk genre. Steampunk celebrates alternate history: lives, worlds, and technologies that could have been had history turned out differently. As a scholar who studies the relationship between literature and the digital humanities, it is a powerful idea to apply to fields that traditionally see themselves as merely archiving and documenting the past. However many perspectives literary scholars might find in archives, we're still burdened by a historical imagination that is often linear, and (to use a critique from Walter Benjamin that's still appropriate) homogeneous and empty. Steampunk changes that. Different groups of people are not simply asking for representation in a past curated by scholars, they are actively rewriting the past. Yet, despite steampunk's more robust temporal imagination, many authors and fans have simply reinscribed the same prejudices into their stories. For instance, William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's *The Difference Engine* was brilliant in showing how John Keats might have become a kinetrope operator had the analytical engine actually been invented in the nineteenth century. Yet, we still encounter a story that features primarily white characters and does very little to think about race or gender. It's not for nothing that China Mieville has famously associated steampunk with racism and neo-imperialism.

Steeplejack joins other recent novels that are starting to reverse this trend and rewrite the nineteenth century from multicultural and intersectional perspectives. These include Ken Liu's *The Grace of Kings*, Joseph Bruchac's *Killer of Enemies*, Elizabeth Bear's *Karen Memory*, and several anthologies — Sarah Hans's *Steampunk World*; Balogun Ojetade, Milton Davis, and Marcellus Shane's *Steamfunk*; and Jaymee Goh and Joyce Chng's *The Sea is Ours: Tales of Steampunk Southeast Asia*. As in *Karen Memory*, Hartley's *Steeplejack* sees technology as secondary to the human stories being told in the novel. Ang scales towers with iron spikes, wooden dowels, and lump hammers. The entire first chapter is a tour-de-force description of the physicality involved in scaling a towering building using nothing but hand tools, your muscles, and your wits. At the same time, this physical vulnerability parallels the ways Ang is made vulnerable in the novel from a conspiracy of prejudice and money. Rich men use her to keep themselves away from danger. Poor men try to rape her. Rich women dress her as their servants. Politicians who should protect her from criminals, instead threaten and attempt to murder her. It is this world of murder, misogyny, racism, and greed that Ang is called upon to defend, despite itself, and this fact makes *Steeplejack* all the more thrilling.

Hartley's novel is exemplary in not only giving us a compelling female protagonist of color, but also in showing us the mechanisms of power she disrupts simply by existing. When Ang is interrogated by one of

the villains of the novel, for instance, she demonstrates just how different she is from the disingenuous neoliberal visions of equality many so-called anti-racists espouse to gain political power. The villain says: “You cannot simply take people’s land, property, freedom from them and then, a couple of hundred years later, when you have built up your industries and your schools and your armies, pronounce them equals. And even when you pretend it is true, you do not change the hearts of men, and a great deal of small horrors have to be ignored, hidden, if the myth of equality is to be sustained.” It’s a powerful speech. One that resonates with many of the themes of the novel. Yet, we learn that this character has indeed been the source of many of the small horrors he describes. He’s stolen from his people and been the reason many of them have died. And all of these crimes were committed in the name of a greater “common good.” Evil is made banal by becoming beurocratic in Hartley’s novel, and racism persists through all of the small concessions committed in the name of equality. By contrast, because she doesn’t have the same ambitions as the villain with his grand speeches, Ang is able to simply save one forgotten person at a time.

Hartley’s conjunction of the blatant industrial racism of the nineteenth century and the more subtle bureaucratic racism of the twentieth- and twenty-first illustrates just one of the ways Steeplejack provides new avenues for the steampunk genre. Steampunk has the potential to enable more people to participate in alternatives to the past we currently imagine. We need more stories like Steeplejack to show how relevant Victorian history is to everyone, not just the white cis- and heterosexual men who have traditionally been seen as the protagonists of history.

Lindsay says

Anglet is a third daughter from a family of the Lani people, poor immigrants who live in shanties at the edge of the industrial city of Bar-Selehm. A third daughter to the Lani is a curse, but Ang spends her life defying that label. She's a seventeen-year old steeplejack, older than they usually get, and a woman besides. When the boy who was supposed to be her new apprentice is found dead, she can't help but feel responsible because the boy has literally no-one else that cares about what happened to him. So she tries to find out, at first tentatively, but then she gets a job offer from a mysterious young politician to do a paid investigation.

This is against the backdrop of Bar-Selehm, a city that's very much a fantasy analogue of South Africa, with the Feldish, a white colonist population with most of the power and money, and the indigenous black people, the Mahweni, undergoing some extreme cultural shifts between city-living Mahweni and "unassimilated" tribesmen. The Lani are a third people, also dark-skinned, and a minority descended from indentured servants of the Feldish. Although the city is increasingly egalitarian, racial tensions abound. The racial tensions are critical to the book with the theft of an important artifact being the key to escalating problems, and it appears that the death of Ang's boy is linked to that theft.

The world-building here is excellent and an interesting alternative to actual South African history. Ang's character flows through all of this with the invincibility of youth, but at the same time she has a vulnerability because she worries that she really does have no place in the world and that she really is a curse on her friends and family. That latter issue gives her an incredible drive to protect them, both in terms of her immediate family and anyone she claims as her own. And that lends the latter parts of the book even more poignancy.

The mystery is also well done, or at least as well done as a non-mystery reader finds it. There are times where it's not entirely clear to me why Ang has chosen a line of investigation only to later find that line of investigation was critical. That feels a little like the character being led by the plot rather than the other way

around. But that's a minor nitpick. Ang is brilliant, and that comes across well in the text, although her brilliance gets her into several situations of peril where perhaps she hadn't thought everything through. She *is* seventeen after all.

This seems like it's going to be an ongoing series, and I would be quite interested in following more, particularly with following the secondary characters like the newspaper girl, the tribal boy who might be Ang's love interest in latter books and also the politician's sister who made for a fun character in this one.

Highly recommended.

Paige says

As a librarian, there is nothing I love more than a great library moment in a book, especially if the librarian might be the cause for some of that moment. Enter librarian, Miss Fischer. Although most readers probably don't remember her less than 2-page role, I found it hilarious and worthy even to start this review off with. Main protagonist, Anglet, is in need of the public library to help solve her murder mystery, most importantly she would love to check-out the public land records. Librarian great line #1: "Fourth floor, cartography. What some of our less erudite visitors call 'the map room.'" After Anglet thanks Miss Fischer for her help, the great Librarian line #2: "It is the nature of my job, Miss Sutonga, if not my personality." Oh boy, some days I am sure all librarians feel a little like that, unless you are beyond an amazing super-librarian, of which, I am sure, there are many.

But on to the actual review of the majority "Steeplejack." Anglet, as previously mentioned, is a private investigator searching the streets of Bar-Selehm for the person who killed her would be Steeplejack apprentice Berrit. As her investigation begins, Lani-born Anglet, finds out that Berrit's death is at the heart of a much bigger political controversy than she could have even imagined. Will she be able to solve the mystery in time to prevent the next race-war in Bar-Selehm, or will those with power, money, and the right skin color win out over her truth.

After what I felt like was a slow start, this story quickly picked up and became most of what I hoped for in a Steampunk themed mystery story that takes place in another world, with slight echoes of the South African plains. Angel, or Ang, is a perfectly likable character who has grit and determination, as she takes on worlds that she never even imagined entering, trying to avenge the death of a poor steeplejack, who otherwise would have been forgotten in a world that cares more about the rich, than any poor boy who died in a gutter.

One of my favorite aspects of this young adult piece is the great female friendships that Ang forms out of necessity in her P.I. role. One with newspaper seller, street vendor, Sarah, who also happens to be sharp and have a photographic memory, able to recall all details from any newspaper she has ever read. The two girls, despite being from different race backgrounds, become companions and even friends supporting and trusting one another. Another great female relationship Ang creates is through class lines, with dressed-up, beautiful Dahria, who's wealthy family is supporting the investigation that Ang is working on. Through this friendship Dahria reconnects with her inner strength, remembering what is important to her, and Ang learns about how to use class standings to your advantage as both women fight to protect one another as they work towards unveiling the truth. One great scene includes Dahria's gift of a revolver to Ang. "You point and pull the trigger. Pull the hammer back after each shot, like this, and hold it tight. It will kick. There's little more to it. That's the great and terrible thing about guns. You don't need a lot of skill with them to be lethal...Be careful." Hartley's interesting choice for a moment of foreshadowing: will the gift of the gun, perhaps not

provide the safety she was hoping for?

One other great side note in this book: NO love interest! for those of us who just wanted to read a book with good female characters who make friends who are both male and female, but don't actually end up with anyone really and there is no kissing etc., but just friends and people discovering themselves and how people can be important without being intense sex objects all the time made me so happy. I cannot remember the last time I read a YA book where romance was not the main or at least a sub-plot of the story line and it was so refreshing. Thank you A.J., thank you!

Ksenia says

I found a new heroine for us to love!!! Ang is fierce, determined, loyal, curious, smart, and stubborn. This is great historical fantasy. The setting is an alternate South Africa, fraught with racial and political tensions, with an amazing diverse cast, and really rich characters. And an awesome mystery!!! Good mysteries are hard to find, at least for me, but this delivered in so many ways. In a way, it reminded me of *The Alienist*, because the mystery is so entrenched in people's lives and this one murder of a little boy has ramifications for everyone in the city, and outside. Excited to be working on this one! I read it in a day! Looking forward to more of Ang's adventures!

Robyn says

This was a slow-starter for me, but once it got moving, it was wonderful. Set in a lightly fictionalised 19th-century/early 20th century South Africa, it features a wonderful heroine, and an engaging mystery.

Ben Babcock says

Oh my god give me more of these books right damn now.

I don't normally do this, but can we just stop for a moment and look at this utterly gorgeous cover by Mike Heath? I was going to read *Steeplejack* from the description alone, but I'd be lying if I said it wasn't the cover that caught my eye while I was browsing the New Books shelf. **Everything about this cover is amazing.** The entire shot is from an off-kilter perspective, neither horizontal nor vertical, forcing us to look at everything from a weird angle. The font is gorgeous, perfect for the book's milieu and atmosphere without feeling stereotypically steampunk. Plus, the letters are perfectly aligned with the direction of the tower in an awesome perspective effect that creates a compelling sense of motion. Like, it looks like a still from the movie of the book: open on Ang climbing a tower as the credits zoom past her. I am not a visual person; not only do I not tend to judge books by the cover, but I also tend to ignore cover art entirely, despite the amount of work and passion that cover artists put into it (sorry). But I cannot ignore this cover. It's great. I just want to stare at it forever.

Fortunately, A.J. Hartley has written a book worthy of such a cover. Like so many of the titles I've raved about this past summer, *Steeplejack* took me a while to warm to—but when I did, boy did I ever. Ultimately, it is the humanity and vulnerability of the protagonist, Anglet Sutonga, that got me. She is capable but far

from competent at everything she tries in this novel, and the people arranged against her vary from evil and racist merely to opportunistic and bitter. And through Ang, Hartley broaches issue of class and race in a way that could have been preachy but somehow isn't.

At its heart, *Steeplejack* is an investigation into the death (murder?) of an unremarkable young boy, Berrit. Ang didn't know Berrit—he was supposed to become her apprentice, but he turns up dead instead. Indeed, it becomes a running “joke” (unfunny one) that everyone is so surprised Ang keeps poking into Berrit's death, because “she didn't know him”. This leads to Ang's Crowning Moment of Awesome:

Why does everyone keep saying that?... Why does whether I knew him or not matter? He was a child, a boy you murdered. I have to avenge him *because* I didn't know him. Because he will never have what other boys his age look forward to. He was snuffed out, all his possibilities ended by your knife, and I am not supposed to care because I didn't *know* him?

This is a powerful moment, Ang confronting Berrit's killer and finally getting to explain why she feels so driven to bring the killer to justice. This is the culmination of days of Ang continually being subjected to more and more stress from every direction. Something has gotta give—and indeed, many things do—but she always remains true to her core desire for justice.

It takes a long time to get to that moment, and I forgive anyone who doesn't see what I see in *Steeplejack*. Ang is an incredibly poor detective. She doesn't follow leads properly, is terrible at playing a part and blending in to other parts of societies, and she always bites off more than she can chew. As a result, her investigation is frequently snarled and tangled up in side-quests. This is a little frustrating, as a reader, even though I appreciate that Hartley does not give us a Mary Sue character around whom the entire world turns. The fact that Ang, while being a kickass climber and courageous person, generally bumbles her detecting and has trouble taking care of a newborn child, shows the richness and roundness of her character.

Indeed, *Steeplejack* ultimately won me over for two reasons. First, Ang is such an interesting character. Second, Hartley's depiction of race politics is more subtle than I expected.

I've already discussed Ang's desire for justice and how terrible a detective she is. I appreciate that we get to see so many different sides of her character. On the one hand, she perseveres incredibly at solving Berrit's murder. On the other hand, she eventually admits she made a mistake trying to raise Rahvey's child (and I agree with her on this). The result is very interesting, for Hartley does something rare here, particularly in YA: we get to see a protagonist who both never gives up *and* quits at something. Kelly Jensen recently wrote about the importance of giving up, and I agree with her. Seeing Ang come to the realization that she is not ready to act as a mother, that she cannot both pursue Berrit's murder investigation and halfheartedly care for a needy infant, is one of the most powerful parts of this book.

Race is the second powerful motif here. The book's cover copy mentions the way three races cohabit in Bar-Selehm. And Ang gets into the consequences of being Lani fairly early on in the book. This being a YA novel, I was a little concerned that the book would beat us over the head with its ideas. I was concerned that the portrayals of the Mahweni would be a little too stereotypical. Fortunately, Hartley does a good job depicting the diversity *within* races as well as between them. We meet plenty of Lani, and they none of them see eye to eye. Similarly, the sharp divide between the rural Mahweni and urban creates a source of conflict as well. Despite this being a fairly short book, Hartley does an admirable job adding depth to all three races and their involvement in the city.

The same can be said about how Hartley portrays women. There is a diverse cast of female characters here. In addition to Ang, we have: Rahvey and Vestris, Ang's sisters, each different from Ang and the other in a great many ways; Daria, sister to an important politician; Florihn, a Lani midwife with whom Ang finds herself at odds; and Sarah/Sureyna, a newspaper hawker whom Ang helps actually become a reporter. Each of these women has her own little story, her own goals and motives. They don't always agree or want the same things. They talk to each other about stuff other than men (yes, this book passes the Bechdel test with flying colours). I particularly love Daria; Hartley introduces her seemingly as a background character, a well-bred lady there to sniff at Ang and look down at her. But then he gives her so much more life, such a great personality, and her relationship with Ang changes for the better as the two come to know each other.

My one disappointment when it comes to such relationships would be with the one between Ang and Vestris. This is only because Hartley makes so much of it while Vestris is off the page. I somewhat understand what he's doing here, because the point is that Ang has romanticized her memories of Vestris as the glamorous, ne'er-do-wrong older sister, and reality is so very different. Nevertheless, because we don't actually know Vestris very well until she finally shows up, the revelation regarding her true goals lacks the sucker-punch impact it was likely intended to have.

I'll end by commenting that *Steeplejack*, in my opinion, is many things, but it is not steampunk (and I have a fairly broad definition of steampunk). This book does not feature impressive clockwork or steam-driven apparatus. As one blurb puts it, it's kind of an alternative Victorian South Africa, which is an accurate description of the technology level. Aside from the weird mineral luxorite, there isn't much in the way of magic or anything different from our world aside from different animals and geography. This is not a criticism or praise, mind you, just information for those who come to this hoping for steampunk (or are steering clear because they want to avoid steampunk!).

Steeplejack fits the drama of its exhilarating cover art: it is exciting and intense, and I really enjoyed it. I cannot wait to read whatever is coming next in this series.

My reviews of the *Steeplejack* series:

Firebrand →

Badseedgirl says

Read April 2017

Last week I was feeling pretty burned out by the YA the storylines were getting so stale and predictable, but then I read [Steeplejack](#) and some of my faith in the YA genre has been restored. Here is a YA novel I would be proud to say I read. The young female protagonist is a strong character in her own right. She makes mistakes, but does not lean on her male cohort, in fact this book has a astonishing lack of leading males. There are male characters but they tend to be secondary characters.

It is hard to categorize this book. It is not steampunk, and is not gaslight, but it sort of feels like both. It is set in an alternative land that feels very much like apartheid South Africa. There are water buffalo and grasslands, gazelle type animals. More importantly it is set up socially much like South Africa. A white minority who control the economy and the government over a black ethnic majority. The reality this was a

darn good mystery set in an alternative urban fantasy environment.

I highly recommend this book for readers of YA who are tired of the same old, same old and are looking for a fresh new take on the genre.

Sara says

4.5 out of 5

I have a friend who works for Tor / Forge Books, and she'd mentioned this book last year after it had sold to the publisher. As soon as she said "South African inspired steampunk YA," I was on board. Now, after reading STEEPLEJACK, my first thought is this: Why isn't this book getting more attention?!?! Because it deserves it!

THE GEMS...:

- **THE WORLD-BUILDING.** The city of Bar-Selehm and its surrounding rural areas are indeed inspired by South Africa, with a steampunk flavor to the city itself. The carriages, trains, and businesses are powered by steam technology, but that's as steampunk as it gets. That's OK, because the rest of the world-building makes this setting feel real. The three main races (white Feldish, dark-skinned Mahweni, and brown-skinned Lani) have different cultures, social status (the Lani are the poorest and most neglected of the three), and worldviews. The country's history is rich and believable, too, from how the Feldish "colonized" Bar-Selehm and brought the Lani over as servants, to their still-tenuous relationship with the native Mahweni. Oh, and there are HYENAS. And HIPPOS. And elephants and giraffes in the wild. :D
- **The protagonist.** Anglet Sotunga (a.k.a. Ang) is the titular steeplejack. She repairs towers and chimneys for a living, so she's an excellent climber and darn fearless about heights. That bravery, along with her intelligence and keen observation skills, helps her become a good detective later on. In addition, Ang is a humanitarian, most likely because she's one of the impoverished Lani. Thus, getting her perspective on Bar-Selehm's interracial conflicts opens the reader's eyes, mind, and heart.
- **The murder and heist investigations.** It quickly becomes clear that the two main crimes are connected, and Ang is forced to visit uncomfortable places (physically and emotionally) to get to the bottom of things. The result is a layered, action-packed mystery with heart-pounding chases and climbs, constant suspense, and a shocking twist at the end that I didn't see coming.
- **A thoughtful exploration of racial and social inequality.** A natural product of the first three points. Berritt's murder, the Beacon's disappearance, and the ruckus that Ang unintentionally causes with her PI work shows tensions between Bar-Selehm's peoples coming to a head. It's neither forced nor exaggerated. And given what's currently going on in our own world, it makes STEEPLEJACK a relevant story.
- **Great supporting characters.** I especially adored Tanish, a young steeplejack apprentice and Ang's closest friend. He's loyal to her, yet torn between her and other allegiances. I also liked Sarah the fledgling newspaper reporter, the Mahweni herder Mnenga, and Josiah Willinghouse's snooty yet surprisingly funny sister.
- **It's not your typical YA.** No cliched tropes whatsoever. And, apart from Ang choosing not to pursue her feelings for one of the supporting characters, there's no romance. This all made STEEPLEJACK a refreshing change of pace genre-wise.

... AND THE THORNS:

- **The writing was disengaging at times, but not often.** Ang is a practical, matter-of-fact character. This shows in her narrative voice, which sometimes makes the exposition feel dry. I didn't notice this so much

during dialogue, "action" sequences, or scenes where I was truly emotionally invested, though.

- **A few jarring scene transitions.** There were a couple times when there was a weird "jump" between scenes. It seemed like Ang was going one place at the end of Scene A, then went someplace totally different in Scene B without much explanation. Maybe I'm being picky, but those few moments were disorienting.

IN SHORT:

Talk about a WOW of a book. STEEPLEJACK is a welcome breath of fresh air in YA speculative fiction that's compulsively "unputdownable" because of its setting, mystery elements, and embrace of multiculturalism. It's a bit different from other edge-of-your-seat thrillers in the genre - but that's irrelevant. So, do yourself a favor, and check out STEEPLEJACK. I haven't read anything like it before, and its sequel is on my radar for next year!

Niki Hawkes - The Obsessive Bookseller says

[Dual Review - Both 4/5 stars]

Steeplejack and Firebrand [[click here for a US & Canada GIVEAWAY of both titles](#)] were two of the most unique books I've ever read – the type of stories that continue to resonate long after you finish them!

The books were successful on several accounts. The “whodunit” detective mystery was engaging, made all the more compelling by Anglet’s (the main character) personal stake in solving the crime. Her involvement felt more organic than not, and the passages dedicated to developing her convictions and motives were my favorites of the book. She also had a heartfelt side story going on, which offered a satisfying amount of character depth. Anglet is definitely the best part of this series.

The second best part is the inclusion of diversity of characters and an author who wasn’t afraid to write about unfair class systems and discrimination. He offered a variety of dynamics between races not usually seen in YA, for which I applaud. Anglet is a non-white main character, and in a market clamoring for more diversity in books, she was a breath of fresh air. My only issue is that the cover art makes her race a little ambiguous – I would’ve liked to see her more strongly represented.

The books take place in what feels like a 1920s era city, complete with tall buildings (obviously, based on the need for steeplejacks), a neat alternate light/energy source, and plenty of dirty-dealings and underground crime. Interestingly enough, this urban setting is fringed by hippo-occupied rivers, lion-prowling brush lands, and native tribes people. Needless to say it made for a unique atmosphere. I wasn’t totally convinced of its feasibility, given pollution issues and humanity’s tendency to dominate and destroy any threats around major hubs. Then I discovered A.J. Hartley spent some time in South Africa doing research for this series... and now imagine the story reflects this weird dichotomy fairly accurately. It’s still hard for me to wrap my brain around, but I can’t deny that the threat of charging hippos and lurking crocodiles added a lot of spice to the story. Sometimes it’s the most unlikely of real-life situations that are the most unbelievable in fiction. Side note: A.J. Hartley has to be one of the most interesting authors I’ve come across (you can see what I’m talking about on his website).

Both novels were equally compelling. While Firebrand didn’t have quite as much growth for the main character, it made up for it by having her become much more immersed in her new “career.” At one point near the beginning I thought it was flirting with hokey, then the author surprised me with an awesome twist,

and I was hooked!

Overall, this series (so far) has been incredibly entertaining, memorable, and thought-provoking. I was especially glad to see a YA/Mystery hybrid that felt like a true merge of those genres (where the mystery felt sophisticated enough to appeal to readers of that market). Overall, there wasn't a single thing I didn't like about Steeplejack or Firebrand – both exceeded my expectations with flying colors. I'm eagerly awaiting another Alternate Detective novel.

I want to thank the publicists at TOR/Forge and A.J. Hartley for a chance to read and review an early copy of Firebrand – I enjoyed it thoroughly!

Other books you might like:

Crocodile on the Sandbank - Elizabeth Peters

The Naturals - Jennifer Lynn Barnes

The Waking Fire - Anthony Ryan

Snapshot - Brandon Sanderson

The Aeronaut's Windlass - Jim Butcher

Via The Obsessive Bookseller at www.NikiHawkes.com

Anya says

Wow, so good! Action packed with startlingly poignant imagery snuck in when you least expect it. A kick butt heroine with brown skin from a historically disadvantaged population and a setting clearly reminiscent of South Africa with just a bit of fantastical combines with wonderful secondary characters and hard choices. I'm ecstatic that this book now exists and can't wait for the sequel.

Jessie (Ageless Pages Reviews) says

Some really really great things, and then some things that were... less so.

RTC.

Helen says

This was a pleasant surprise; I started it on impulse and it was nothing like any expectations that I may have had.

Ang is a steeplejack, she works for a shady gang repairing steeples, cleaning chimneys and other, more illegal, activities. Ang is unusual in that not only is she a girl but she's older than most of her 'colleagues', so far surviving the daily danger of working at such heights. The job is dangerous but as Ang says climbing up an extra fifty feet becomes irrelevant after a certain height as any slip will kill you. A boy that Ang is to mentor is found dead at the same time that a crystal, whose light illuminates the city, disappears. A mystery!

There our tale truly begins. Ang has to delve deeply through racism, richism, class divisions and all manner of family strife. I may've invented a word there. At times Ang's fearlessness leads her into the most treacherous of situations and then you recall her youthful naivete. As well as Ang, we meet other interesting characters: a societal lady; a badly-scarred politician and a fresh reporter with a photographic memory. I'd happily read more about these.

Overall, this is a fabulous read and a different one to my more recent books. A fantasy mystery :)

Mogsy (MMOGC) says

4 of 5 stars at The BiblioSanctum <https://bibliosanctum.com/2016/12/25/...>

A.J. Hartley sure knows how to open a book with style. A public national and historical treasure of Bar-Selehm called the Beacon is stolen, and our protagonist, seventeen-year-old Anglet Sutonga, finds one of her fellow steeplejacks murdered hours before she finds herself becoming the guardian of her sister's newborn infant—all in the same night.

Ang knows she's in way over her head. And to make matters worse, she soon loses her job and becomes a target for her former boss. Which is why when politician Josiah Willinghouse gets in touch with her and offers a business proposal, Ang is inclined to hear him out.

Turns out, what Willinghouse is looking for is something Ang would like to know for herself as well. As news of the stolen Beacon continues to dominate the headlines, everyone seems to have forgotten about Berrit, the steeplejack who was murdered, and who happened to have been Ang's new apprentice she was supposed to train. Knowing that she owes it to the boy to find out what really happened, Ang agrees to help Willinghouse investigate the death, using her many skills and contacts to shake out the truth.

One of the greatest things about Steeplejack is the world-building, and we're talking about the full package. The setting is Bar-Selehm, a fictional city inspired by the history of South Africa, peppered with a fantasy flavor including some steampunk elements. I could have stayed forever in this story's world. The society is mostly made up of a white colonist population and an indigenous black population, while Ang's people, the Lani, are a third cultural group who live on the margins. The Lani have their own long history and keep many of their traditional customs, one of them pertaining to the number of daughters in a family. It is said that a first one is a blessing, the second a trial, and third is a curse.

Ang, being a third daughter, has had to live with some of that stigma her whole life. That said, she has not allowed this to dampen her independent spirit or strength of character. Being seen as a "curse" has also influenced her perspective on many matters, especially when it comes to family. Her experiences are what led to her sympathies and compassion for her sister's fourth daughter, who would have been discarded and doomed to a harsh life in an orphanage had Ang not stepped in to take care of her—though that fateful decision will later on result in many heart-wrenching and emotional moments. Our protagonist is also proud to be a steeplejack, the name given to the nimble young workers who brave the heights to repair the city's many chimneys, towers, and spires. At seventeen, she's already one of the older ones, and a female to boot. In a city that rife with racial tensions, Ang's background also factors into her unique role of steeplejack-turned-private investigator once she agrees to take on Willinghouse's assignment.

Which brings us to the book's overarching plot. There are two big questions here: 1) who killed Berrit, and

2) who stole the Beacon? It will probably come to no surprise that these two threads are connected, though Hartley saves all the shockers and best bombshells for the wild, twisted journey to get down to the bottom of this mystery. I also loved how Ang's investigation involved a cast of vibrant supporting characters, especially with Josiah Willinghouse's snobby yet outrageously entertaining younger sister Dahria stealing the show.

All told, Steeplejack is an entertaining and fast-paced action-oriented story with a compelling mystery, which made it very quick read overall. The world-building was what impressed me the most though, along with a cast of engaging characters. Anglet Sutonga is an admirable though flawed protagonist who will nonetheless win over the hearts of readers no matter where they fall on the Young Adult to Adult spectrum, and same goes for the story which can be enjoyed by wide audience. This isn't your typical YA, and that's why I had such a great time with it. I understand sequel is on the horizon already, and I will most certainly be reading Firebrand for more of Ang's adventures in Bar-Selehm.

Jane Stewart says

I was not captivated or eager to keep reading, but it kept my interest.

I enjoyed reading about Ang a 17-year-old female who was an expert climber and strong. She climbed brick buildings using finger holes and toe holes. She climbed inside chimneys pushing with her feet and back. She traveled a lot over rooftops. She lived with a gang of youths who worked for a bad-guy. It was set in a fictional world with horse drawn carriages and guns. A rich guy hired Ang to investigate a robbery and murder of a kid in her gang. This gave Ang a little money for the first time.

The ending was complete and the mystery solved.

It was told in first person Ang which was ok for a private detective story, but I didn't like it. I would have preferred third person.

DATA:

Narrative mode: 1st person Ang. Story length: 336 pages. Kindle count length: 4917. Swearing language: none. Sexual content: none. Setting: fictional time and place similar to early 1800s Europe. Copyright: 2016. Genre: young adult adventure.

Aimee Meester says

So this was actually kind of amazing? Weird in the most beautiful possible way.

Ashley says

Perhaps the most original book I've read all summer. Do you like steampunk? Do you like originality? Then read this. This book is badass, super feminist (surprising for a book written by a dude) and just plain awesome. The setting is magnificent - it's like a Alt-Steam-punk version of late 19th Century Colonial Sub-Saharan Africa (the mixture of the English/Dutch/Indian/African-inspired cultures is fantastic). Bottom line:

this book awesome. I need more. I see it's the first of a series, meaning I shall be parting with more of my money soon enough. Oh well. Write faster, Hartley.
