



Shadebringer: Book One: The Land of Irgendwo

Grayson W. Hooper

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(300pp)

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Shadebringer is an action-packed fantasy novel about conflict and free will.

A young man joins the army, bound for war, but finds himself in another dimension in Grayson W. Hooper's military fantasy *Shadebringer*.

Clyde volunteered to join the United States Army because he had no other options. He was chosen to join the ranks of Non-Commissioned Officers because he took and gave orders well. He was shipped to Vietnam. Sweltering heat, stinging bugs, and the seemingly endless stream of fresh-faced draftees dominated his time in country.

A navigational error ended in horror for Clyde and his men. He wakes in a place without the heat and the bugs, but with moving land masses and skeletal hands erupting from the ground. He's definitely not in Vietnam. Rudderless, he relies on a voice of unseen origins—one he first heard while examining the remains of a Viet Cong soldier. Wandering the barren wastes leads him toward the mountains and a destiny that, though it was prophesied, must be chosen.

The book is steeped in the sense that the US's use of power, and sense of what is right, has become negligent. Clyde has no illusions about the war, and that makes him dangerous. He is pragmatic, understanding command decisions and their fallout with almost uncanny intuition. Yet he also carries within him a gentleness, a soft spot that hints at the conflict he feels at murdering nameless people for a cause he doesn't even believe in. It is a quality that Clyde is able to exhibit throughout the book.

And Clyde is but one example of the richness of the book's characterizations. From soldiers with a signed death warrant to the creatures and inhabitants of the land beyond death, each character has a clear implicit or explicit motivation. And these worlds are seen through Clyde's eyes: his ability to judge a person's character results in a clarity of purpose.

There's a sense of immediacy as Clyde narrates his slogs through Vietnamese jungles, watching allies and enemies perish under heavy fire and traversing stone bridges over fiery hell pits—upfront, palpable experiences. There's also unerring accuracy in the way that the atmospheres of Vietnam and Irgendwo are portrayed.

The mood lifts and drops, balanced on a razor-sharp edge. High-tension moments snap at their natural breaking points. In Vietnam, the gallows humor of the soldiers is always tempered by the knowledge that they will die thousands of miles from home. In Irgendwo, there is still gallows humor due the nature of its inhabitants; the quality of emotion is neither resignation nor hopefulness, but more measured.

The book is unflinching in its depictions of the tragedies of armed conflict, and of the people who take up arms for family and country. Clyde's decisions and frustrations are its anchor, but the book as a whole, enhanced by the fantastical elements, is a well-oiled machine.

With a jolting beginning and an ending that begs for a sequel, *Shadebringer* is an action-packed fantasy novel about

conflict and free will.

DONTANÁ MCPHERSON-JOSEPH (December 17, 2021)

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