



Yoke of Stars

R. B. Lemberg

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A much-anticipated addition to the mystical, queer-normative world of the Birdverse, R. B. Lemberg's *Yoke of Stars* is a moving tale about the transformative power of stories.

Stone Orphan, an apprentice assassin, awaits their first assignment from the School of Assassins; once they complete their first kill, they will receive their cloth of bone. Instead of an assignment, however, Stone Orphan is paired with a charming linguist, Ulín. Initially frustrated, Stone Orphan is eroded by Ulín's empathetic curiosity; the two resolve to exchange stories and decide who, among three men, should be their target.

The book begins with a primer on the mythology of the Birdverse. The characters explain the nuances of their individual cultures with enough detail to allow the book to stand alone. The lyrical language is jarring in its beauty, with the book focusing on language itself as beautiful. Stone Orphan's language is without verbs and discourages "I," reflecting their culture's collectivism; this clashes with Ulín's individualistic upbringing. The tension of translation becomes a living, breathing entity: language serves as both a barricade and a bridge, and a "story moves back and forth in translation, and it is remade every time." And bilingualism, a necessary companion to translation, is explored in a singular manner. While trying to explain their language to Ulín, Stone Orphan considers, "I had to twist my whole being into a new shape to learn to speak like the nameway do," and later describes being bilingual as "a strangeness that makes you aware, but does not let you simply be." Elsewhere, Ulín thoughtfully describes translation as "a departure."

Yoke of Stars is an unforgettable queer fantasy novel about the power—good and bad—that our words hold.

DANIELLE BALLANTYNE (July / August 2024)

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