



Past Imperative

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The great game begins with an oracular testament predicting that two people from very different worlds will come together and share a magic fate. By the author of *A Handful of Men*. 12,500 first printing.

Past Imperative Details

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Author : Dave Duncan

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From Reader Review Past Imperative for online ebook

Laura says

Dave Duncan recently passed away, which made me very sad. In honor of him, I decided I would reread this series, as I think it is the only one of his older series's that I have not reread, mostly because this one is so memorable (whereas typically I forget a lot of what I read). The magic system, and even the plot, in this series, is one of the most clever I have ever read. Granted as the first book in the series, this book is mostly setup for the rest of the story, so I feel bad for the other reviewers who gave up on it, but I can kind of understand their frustration.

To add to my enjoyment I am reading/listening to a biography on Winston Churchill which takes place in the same time and place as our main character Edward Exeter. Leaves me wondering if Churchill was actually a stranger... ;)

Jim Callahan says

one of the better books I've read this year. the characters are decently done and don't always follow the traditional role of Kid, hottie, and tough guy. I'm enjoying these books quite a bit, and the author is doing a great job of hiding the ending.

Steve Markham says

A good start to what I am hoping is a good series. I enjoyed this book but be warned it is a bit of a slow starter. Set in two worlds during the first world war, that was enough to get me to read it and it is worth it. Have a pen and paper to hand for all the gods.

Simon Mcleish says

Originally published on my blog here in October 1999.

Duncan's novel, first of a trilogy, impressed me deeply despite its rather shaky beginning. He uses two ideas which are rather unusual in the fantasy genre. The first of these is to vary the standard plot in which a normal Earth person is catapulted into a magical world of which he understands nothing by making the events in the two worlds closely connected - the First World War (the Great War) and a contest between the gods of Nextdoor (the Great Game). The events leading up to the war on Earth are encouraged (or discouraged) by agents from Nextdoor, who hope to use (or prevent the use of) magical power generated by the deaths of so many young men to influence the Great Game.

The fact that the magical system devised by Duncan works in this way leads us to his second idea. Through

sacrifice and pain, magical power (which he calls mana) is generated, for the being on whose behalf the suffering is incurred. The gods require mana to continue to exert power, and so the religious system of Nextdoor is unpleasant and tyrannical. Conventional fantasy generally uses sanitised versions of the Nordic pantheon, and religion usually plays little part except possibly to differentiate good and bad (as in all David Eddings' fantasy series). Society is generally fairly secularised, probably it is easier to write about something closer to the author's own background. (One interesting minor point of Stephen Donaldson's *Lord Foul's Bane* is the culture shock when Thomas Covenant discovers that the inhabitants of the Land are not talking conventionally or metaphorically when they speak of Earthpower.) Religion on Nextdoor is a large part of life, is distinctly arbitrary and definitely unpleasant, based mainly on ideas from some of the more repugnant rituals of Earthly religions - self-mutilation, temple prostitution, Thuggee style murder and so on.

I sometimes feel as though I write a large number of these pieces talking about the treatment of religion in fantasy novels. This is not, I hope, because I am obsessive on the subject. Religion is an extremely important force in human history, playing a vital role in people's psychological make-up. For the first time in history, we are living in a society which is to a large extent secular. Religious activity is marginalised if not actively mocked, and even the most devout usually live their lives split in two between their daily routine and religious observations. (There are cultures in which this would have seemed incredibly alien; to the ancient Israelite a distinction between spiritual and secular was hardly imaginable.) With the decline of (principally Christian) mainstream religion, a large void has opened up in the lives of many people, to be filled with all kinds of new things: an interest in the esoteric, a religious devotion to secular objects - money, the workplace, pop music for example. The popularity of fantasy is possibly an aspect of this, with magic and religion put into a context where they become permissible. To take religion seriously in fantasy, then, is frequently an indication that the writer has something to say and that they are not just trying to cash in on the popularity of the genre.

The standard of the writing of *Past Imperative* is not quite up to that of the ideas. The characterisation is reasonable, and includes a major character with a disability, unusual in a fantasy novel. The book begins in a lacklustre way, and the invention of names is distinctly poor and unconvincing (areas of Nextdoor are called things like *Narshvale* and *Sussvale*, not particularly evocative or interesting). The combination of the map and name pronunciation chart was almost enough to make me give up before starting the novel. Almost the only aspect of the treatment of language that I liked was the way that the hero, transferring himself from Earth, knew none of the language, and almost inevitably cast himself in the role of "holy fool" required by the plot.

emily says

Really interesting concept. I enjoyed this first book of the series but disliked the second one so much I didn't finish it, so that tarnishes this one a bit as it doesn't really stand on its own. Maybe I'll power through the second one at some point and see if the 3rd of the trilogy redeems it.

Ron says

“What happens after depends on what happens during.”

What if there is a form of magic in our mundane world? Right before our eyes, but unrecognized. What if,

under certain conditions and in certain places, that magic swells into something truly supernatural? What if ... but that would be telling.

“Everything has a purpose.”

Good opening to an extended series: the Great Game. Good world(s) and character building. The protagonists are identifiable, but neither stereotypes nor perfect. Their foibles make them that much more interesting. A satisfying hook to pull the reader into the story/ies. I suggest skipping the Foreword. While it contains interesting incites, it also contains too many spoilers.

“Magic can never be described as believable, but it must be consistent, and should reasonably meld with the politics and religion of the world.”

Creates a world, bestiary, languages, religion and literature without inflicting massive data dumps on the reader.

“He concluded that anything so lacking in sense must obviously be very holy.”

A satisfying climax and hook into the next novel. Progressive revelation expands the reader’s knowledge and interest.

“[She] swept into the room like Boadicea sacking Londinium.”

Shane says

I've had this book for at least 10 years. It looked like fantasy but not the standard elves and dwarves Tolkien ripoff and that intrigued me. Obviously it didn't intrigue me enough because I never got around to it until I found it on Amazon in audio as part of the all-u-can-read buffet program (can't remember what it's called). I didn't know ANYTHING about the book when I started (because I usually like to be surprised). It was decent but not great for me. It definitely was NOT a Tolkien ripoff but I can't say that it really grabbed me.

It seemed to be too long for the number of things that actually happened. It really is just the first 3rd of a trilogy and its length makes me not want to invest the time to read the other two. There is intrigue with many factions but not many answers as to who the good guys are. There's some action but not a lot. There's lots of talk about gods and one or two actually show up. Wingless "dragons" are used like horses. BUT none of this really peaked my interest. Maybe I'm just old and jaded. I probably would have loved this when I young and I definitely would have finished it but now that I have less time to read I find myself less willing to use that time to read books I'm lukewarm about. So really probably 2.5 stars.

Katherine says

Fantasy/historical, a young Englishman spoiling to fight in World War I instead finds himself the subject of a strange prophecy in another world. Smooth reading but very slow to get started; the book didn't grab me until it was almost over.

Angela says

I would have given up a third of the way through this book if it hadn't have been for the fact that it was recommended by a friend. It was improving slightly by the last quarter of the book, but it's still not one I will ever read again or really recommend.

The two main characters are in entirely different worlds, seemingly totally and pointlessly unrelated to each other. I guess that is part of the intrigue... but there is very little character development that actually encouraged me to like either one of them. It took so long for anything really important to happen that I had a hard time caring - I was just plain bored for the first dozen or so chapters.

Most frustrating of all, however, was how much effort the author spent inculcating the reader to the immoral and sadistic religious practices of worship on "Nextdoor." He was not necessarily inappropriately descriptive, but it was still painfully obvious what he was getting at...and he brought it up over and over again. I have a pet peeve about authors and screenwriters making up awful, evil religions for their characters, so this aspect alone really ruined the book for me.

Jeremy says

This books starts out very promising, and then goes absolutely nowhere for at least the first fifth of the book, which is where I gave up. It's one of those annoying books that skips between two completely unrelated plot-lines. I'm assuming the two main characters will come together at some point. Unfortunately I have very little emotional investment in either one of them.

What really kills me is that other than the slow pace, it's a very well written book. The dialogue is snappy, the secondary characters are well realized, and the world building is original and imaginative. I just wish something would happen already.

Peter Tillman says

B+, parallel world of magic and "gods", well-written but... I like his SF better.

Pipsqueaks says

Man, you guys, why is no one reading Dave Duncan? I've only ever met one guy who knew who he was, and he was a used bookstore clerk in Edmonton.

Ubalstech says

Edward is a typical young British man in Edwardian England. The child of British colonial workers who were murdered in Africa, he has gone to a private (called public) school to be trained to be the next generation to run the empire. So when the drums of war start to pound, Edward feels compelled to sign up to fight for king and country.

The problem is that in another place and another time, Edward is the proficized Liberator. His destiny in the other world is to kill death. And the Gods from that world have no intention of letting him die for England when they could kill him or use him to their own ends.

Dave Duncan is one of the best fantasy authors out there. His novels are engaging and well thought out. The cleverness of the title refers to grammar tenses, something the main character Edward wold have learned at grammar school, which again references the time that Edward comes from. Solid bit of writing. Well worth the effort.

Sean Randall says

"This is August Bank Holiday weekend, Inspector! England is closed."

what an absolutely delightful blend! A superb mix of the English crust with a world of Gods and miracles. The weaving back and forth between worlds zooms up the tension admirably, leaving one in turns desperately frustrated yet so eager to carry on.

"The universe ought to be more logical, and an armed geriatric nun was carrying things altogether too far."

There are echoes of the Seventh Sword series here, particularly in the ways of the Gods and in some of the supporting characters, but these worlds are very much their own and the gateways between them perilously thrilling. The build-up was handled very well, and if the ending did seem to come at something of a rush, it's evident that there's more to enjoy.

Deena says

Definitely not my favorite Duncan book. Nothing really happens for the first three quarters of the book, and I got so fed up with waiting for some action that I just skipped ahead to the end. The characters are kind of meh, and it felt like I was reading two different books for most of the time.
