

**Exiled: Book One: The Never Chronicles****J.R. Wagner****Jason Lodeski, Illustrator**

Live Oak Book Company (June 2012)

Softcover \$13.95 (302pp)

978-1-936909-40-7

James Stuart is in deep trouble. Though only a teenager, he shows great promise of becoming a powerful sorcerer, perhaps even the prophesied “Anointed One,” but it seems the entire wizardly community is aligned against him. Unfairly accused of the murder of his beloved mentor, James finds himself convicted and sentenced to banishment into The Never, a frightening realm from which no one has ever returned. Extreme pain and blackness engulf him as the sentence is carried out. When James slowly recovers from oblivion, he finds himself powerless and alone among fearsome creatures and even skin-shredding plants, and only the sudden appearance of a beautiful young woman offers him a slim hope that he may somehow survive this new and deadly world.

In the tradition of most fantasy stories geared to the young adult reader, author J.R. Wagner has crafted a “fish out of water” adventure saga involving a young man who is coming of age. In this, his first novel, he uses the all-too-familiar plot device of the protagonist being regarded as the foretold savior of his community, which has become trite in this genre. However, he explores a new twist on theme, namely the psychological impact the role of foretold hero has on James. “It is never easy to live under the shadow of greatness. Especially when you’re expected to fulfill the expectations everyone has laid out for you since you were a child.” The chapters also flit back-and-forth between flashbacks to the pasts of James and other characters and his current travails in The Never, as the author is obviously setting the stage for further books in the series, but the numerous flashbacks are cumbersome and perhaps too convoluted for the book’s target audience. Still, the author is superb in handling the many action scenes in the book and has created some compelling characters. The final chapter leaves the reader wanting more, for James is still trapped in the Never, and his destiny remains unfulfilled.

Wagner is an outdoor enthusiast and is very physically active, and his athletic experiences as well as his kinesiology degree imbue The Never, its denizens, and the many action scenes with incredible verisimilitude. By creating this rich epic of the mysteries of magic juxtaposed with the foibles of man, there is little doubt that his readers will eagerly await James’s tenacious fight to return home in future volumes of The Never Chronicles.

ALAN COUTURE (June 21, 2012)

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