

Outcast: Book One of the Worlds Apart Saga

D. J. Stoneham

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Outcast is a rewarding fantasy novel in which a writer seeks inspiration by listening to the ramblings of a confined man.

In D. J. Stoneham's fantasy novel *Outcast*, an aspiring author becomes enthralled with the ravings of a patient in a mental institution, who swears he's lived in another world.

Luke's life is crumbling around him. His wife left him, his son despises him, and he's on the verge of losing his job. Then, while visiting his mother, who has been transferred to a psychiatric hospital, Luke overhears a patient rambling about the fantastical world he left behind, and that he needs to get back to. The patient's intriguing story ensnares Luke's imagination. He decides to steal the patient's story and write a bestseller based on it.

To bolster his material, Luke befriends the patient, Sye. He listens to Sye's entire life story, relishing his details about a world filled with horned people, beast-human hybrids, magic, and hungry gods. Sye had a normal enough childhood in this setting, though he was steeped in unusual religious beliefs and a social structure that divided people according to their jobs and statures. Later, Sye left the safety of the castle he grew up in, undertaking a harrowing odyssey into the desolate wastelands that made up most of his world.

Luke records and transcribes this story, embellishing it with his own thoughts about Sye, the fantasy realm, and his own turbulent tale. Both he and Sye are well developed and flawed. Luke's early plan to steal Sye's story and claim it as his own unravels as he connects to Sye; he switches to self-reflection and evolves. And Sye's depiction transforms, too: first introduced as a raving mental patient, he comes to seem a broken man who survived fantastical challenges. It's never quite clear how much of either of the men's stories is true, but the question holds interest.

Both worlds are fleshed out in an enthralling, stylized manner, with details as of the archaic language that is used in Sye's realm, which is contrasted with the informality of Earth's speech. Luke's pop culture references lead to humor, as Sye is unfamiliar with their source material. Meanwhile, Sye's cultural touchstones and rituals are well explained and evenly shared, from the claustrophobia within the medieval-feeling castle walls to the expansive and magical world beyond them.

The novel runs long as Sye recounts much of his life story, though stopping short of his arrival on Earth and confinement to the hospital. Luke's story is also unfinished at the end of this intriguing introductory volume. Still, *Outcast* is a dense but rewarding fantasy novel in which a writer seeks inspiration by listening to the ramblings of a committed man.

JOHN M. MURRAY (September 2, 2021)

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