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General

The Book of Kings
James Thackara
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This third novel by Thackara has generated quite a bit of clatter in the book business prior to its publication. Not for just its physical size of 1,092 manuscript pages written over twenty-five years, but for its grand scale of setting: the whole of Europe, North and South America and parts of Asia and North Africa are covered in the years shortly before and during World War II. This grand vision makes for an absorbing, daunting and exhausting book.

Through a series of childhood flashbacks, student-life reminiscences and young adult experiences, the story follows four students at the Sorbonne from 1932 through the rise of Nazism and into World War II. Filled with philosophical debates, dreams, romantic pursuits, elegant weddings, formal society dinner gossip, train journeys into the night and opera at the Wagnerfestspiel at Bayreuth, the novel is shadowed with vignettes of Hitler's generals at breakfast during the invasion of France, Himmler associating with Nazi mystics, and sobered with scenes of unstoppable tanks, torn and bloody bodies and the dark, ever-tightening power of the state.

Thackara's beautifully eloquent visions sometimes become mired in details that seem of little importance to the story. Countering this, however, are glorious, theatrical chapters such as "The Sedan" which follows a German tank commander through the villages of France in an unstoppable invasion, and "The Pilot." These tightly written chapters—there are eight of them—novellas in themselves are brilliantly written and easily make up for any hard time experienced in overly-detailed sections of the book.

David Reid