

## The Engineer's Apprentice: The Engineer's Saga Book 1

**J. R. Martin**

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*The Engineer's Apprentice is an exciting steampunk novel that blends science with magic to compelling effect.*

In J. R. Martin's steampunk novel *The Engineer's Apprentice*, an engineering protégé joins a skilled master for a thrilling adventure.

In Dallas, Texas, during the era of the American frontier and the prevalence of steam power, Annie, a talented metalworker and aspiring engineer, seeks out an apprenticeship with Issa, a skilled and revered master in the field. Impressed by Annie's talents, Issa invites her to train under him. She also assists in his efforts to find a way to power steam with rune magic instead of uranium, the mining of which has proven to be harmful to humans.

As Annie and Issa embark on their mission, their efforts are almost thwarted by a mysterious man with the ability to walk through walls. He attempts to rob Issa's home. Unsure of the man's identity or what he was after, Annie and Issa set off to find him. The pair soon discover that some people disapprove of their work, and others will resort to deceit and violence to obtain their technology for nefarious means.

Themes of magic and science pervade the narrative: the book explores the ethics of artificial intelligence, distorting physics, and defying death. Still, the book's alternative version of the American West is an atmospheric, authentic rendition of the United States during the 1800s. The parlance of the time is also employed: Annie, a woman of Asian heritage, is referred to as Siamese; Issa is called a negro, and the people indigenous to the frontier are termed native.

At the same time, Annie and Issa's relationship challenges contemporaneous ideas of race and gender roles, including because Annie works with her hands and is a capable fighter. They are an intriguing pair, and they defy the racist and sexist attitudes of the general populace. Further, thoughtful attention is paid to their growing affection, with moments of romantic and sexual tension featured alongside small details of their loving moments together. This helps to move the plot forward and build suspense; indeed, the story's excitement is continual. Though the central conflict is introduced early on, unexpected occurrences throughout the book help to hold attention as it moves toward its exciting conclusion. However, there are also instances of verbosity that slow the pace.

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GAIL HOFFER-LOIBL (June 21, 2023)

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