

We Are Them: The War Years

L. K. Samuels

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The War Years is a speculative thriller in which a broken man hopes to live up to his family's reputation and do something of value.

In L. K. Samuels's future-set science fiction novel *The War Years*, a disabled fry cook stands up to the oppressive government.

The US has been debilitated by an everlasting war in Harry's time. Its government is oppressive, and its people are unmotivated beyond their fear of the war reaching US soil. Exempt from military service because of his wooden leg, Harry is proud to eke out a living in a run-down city in Northern California, managing to keep his family restaurant running. He is horrified to discover that he's contracted the White Hand Disease, which is rumored to lead to madness and death within hours. Harry attempts to keep the infection quiet, but he soon catches the eye of the deputy mayor, putting him in danger. His brother's possible return from war leads to further complications: Harry begins to recall suppressed signs that the war isn't all that it seems to be. He joins forces with an unusual crew of assassins and malcontents to incite a rebellion and uncover the truth.

Harry is the grandson of a legendary war hero—a connection established in a previous series entry. Here, his world and its events are framed by his unreliable perspective. The same malaise that undermines his memories affects most of the US's population; people are made susceptible to propaganda. As a result, the true nature of his environment is hazy before Harry himself begins to understand the situation better. This haziness extends to secondary characterizations: Harry's depictions of others, and even of himself, are cast into doubt.

Still, the book's world building is fascinating and unsettling. There are modern features and references to historical events and cultural mainstays, but nothing from present day, hinting at an alternate reality situation. Elements of mythology, lore, and history are used as touchstones. And in the book's harrowing action sequences, bodies explode and people's injuries are described in intense terms. The story builds in a slow, measured manner until Harry leaves home and begins to discover the truth about his past—and the country's. The cliffhanger ending lays the groundwork for further series entries.

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JOHN M. MURRAY (November 30, 2022)

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