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THE SATURDAY READ

Fighting bugs and the plot

By ANNE BOLES LEVY
Special to The Times

The Year of Our War

A Novel

Steph Swainston

Eos/HarperCollins: 386 pp., \$13.95 paper

BATTLING giant man-eating bugs ought to make a ripping premise for a fantasy novel. Fending off razor-sharp maws or bracing against the sliminess and sheer bulk of their 6-foot carapaces could keep any would-be epic hero busy for a few hundred pages.

What a pity Steph Swainston's debut novel doesn't quite live up to the thrill and crisp writing of its opening chapters, when the reader is plunged into a richly imagined, if creepy, world where there's never an exterminator around when you need one. But the story unravels for want of simple common sense.

Soaring above it all is Jant Comet, an antihero with a drug addiction and an overactive libido who proves a reliable and affable narrator. The offspring of an interspecies rape, he's the only winged human in the fictional Fourlands who is lithe enough to fly. Plus he's a polyglot. Both are handy gifts if you're the emperor's messenger.

Jant's lofty vantage lets him keep an eye on every skirmish on or off the battlefield and among the emperor's inner circle of 50 immortals, each of whom has been chosen for mastery of a particular skill. There's a sailor, an archer, a healer, engineers and others, each tapped as the very best, at least until someone better comes along and they're booted back to mortality.

Jant fears for his job of imperial letter carrier, translator and schmoozer. But the guy can fly 200 miles a day in a world where rapid transit is a team of horses. He keeps track of all the courtiers, his wife and mistress and sundry mortal combatants while manipulating all of them in their own language. The emperor should be bestowing perpetual Employee of the Century plaques instead of making him grovel.

Ah, but the hero has a weakness. He's a junkie, which is the court's worst-kept secret. A narcotic called "cat" jolts Jant into an alternate reality that he's dubbed the Shift. There a dead king also wages war on the insects with startling results for the Fourlands. If only Jant could get someone to believe his habit transports him anyplace besides catatonia.

This setup ought to hook genre fans willing to give elves and wizards a rest but without sacrificing all that nifty sword-play and medieval-style pageantry. Yes, this is a pre-gunpowder society and Swainston's at her best offering a bird's-eye view of hand-to-mandible combat against mindless swarms. A fantasy novel, however, relies on world building; either the reader is fully transported and cares about its salvation or there's no reason to continue. Not everything about the Fourlands' customs, beliefs or technology is fully explained or needs to be, but the author's civilization is often more impenetrable than the gray walls her insects build from saliva and rubble.

Two thousand years of combat should've yielded a few more innovations than barbed arrows. If mind-altering drugs are no problem, how about a decent pesticide? And isn't it odd that the wise eternal emperor hasn't found an entomologist to join his bug-killing coterie? It's left to Jant to discover the insects' attack patterns, communication, mating habits, even origins. How annoyingly convenient.

At one point, Jant muses that the emperor fears becoming obsolete if the bugs are ever fully vanquished. It's a sufficiently subversive idea that could've built steadily into a dramatic final showdown, but Swainston drops it in favor of plot detours through various lovers' quarrels and political infighting that merely burn pages until the climactic battle.

Swainston already has published a sequel in her native Australia, so it's a likely bet that this inventive world is explored further and some of its logistical holes are plugged. A trilogy is planned. And Jant is worth following if only for the skillfully drawn nuances of his character. But the strength of the story must ultimately rest on more than his graceful wings.

Anne Boles Levy is a reviewer whose work has appeared in The Times and who also writes a children's blog at www.bookbuds.net.

PACIFIC THEATRES CHARLIE AND THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY Opens July 15. Advance Tickets Now On Sale.

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Off 405 Freeway Parking Off Camarillo 4 Hrs On-Site Free Validated Parking 818/501-5121 (#037)</p> <p>Sneak Preview: THE ISLAND (PG-13) Digital Sound 8:15 PM</p> <p>FANTASTIC FOUR (PG-13) Digital Sound (10:45 • 11:30 • 12:15 • 1:25 • 2:20 • 3:05) • 4:25 • 5:10 • 5:55 • 7:15 • 8:00 • 8:45 • 10:05 • 10:50 • 11:30</p> <p>DARK WATER (PG-13) Digital Sound (11:00 • 12:00 • 1:45 • 2:45) • 4:35 • 5:30 • 7:20 • 10:10 • 11:15</p> <p>WAR OF THE WORLDS (PG-13) Digital Sound (11:15 • 12:30 • 1:30 • 2:10 • 3:40) • 4:30 • 5:20 • 7:00 • 7:45 • 8:30 • 9:55 • 10:40 • 11:35 Also Showing At Sherman Oaks 5</p> <p>BATMAN BEGINS (PG-13) Digital Sound (10:50 • 1:55) • 5:10 • 8:25 • 9:50 • 11:35 Also Showing At Sherman Oaks 5</p> <p>MR. & MRS. SMITH (PG-13) Digital Sound (11:20 • 2:15) • 5:00 • 7:55 • 9:40 • 10:55</p>	<p>CHATSWORTH</p> <p>WINNETKA STADIUM 21 Winnetka and Prairie 818/501-5121 (#095)</p> <p>Sneak Preview: THE ISLAND (PG-13) Digital Sound 7:30 PM</p> <p>FANTASTIC FOUR (PG-13) Digital Sound On 3 Screens (11:00 • 11:40 • 12:35 • 2:00 • 2:45 • 3:45) • 5:05 • 5:50 • 7:00 • 8:10 • 8:55 • 10:20 • 11:10 • 11:45 Also Showing at Northridge Fashion Center</p> <p>DARK WATER (PG-13) Digital Sound On 2 Screens (11:15 • 12:15 • 2:15 • 3:50) • 5:15 • 7:20 • 8:25 • 10:30 • 11:20 Also Showing at Northridge Fashion Center</p> <p>WAR OF THE WORLDS (PG-13) Digital Sound On 4 Screens (11:30 • 12:30 • 1:00 • 1:50 • 2:40 • 3:40) • 4:20 • 5:10 • 5:45 • 7:05 • 7:40 • 8:30 • 9:20 • 10:20 • 10:50 • 11:25 Also Showing at Northridge Fashion Center</p> <p>BATMAN BEGINS (PG-13) Digital Sound On 2 Screens (12:40 • 4:10 • 7:25 • 8:10 • 10:45 • 11:35 Also Showing at Northridge Fashion Center</p> <p>MR. & MRS. SMITH (PG-13) Digital Sound (12:35) • 4:40 • 7:35 • 10:35 Also Showing at Northridge Fashion Center</p> <p>HERBIE: FULLY LOADED (G) Digital Sound (11:30 • 2:25) • 5:20 • 7:55 • 10:30 Also Showing at Northridge Fashion Center</p> <p>BEWITCHED (PG-13) Digital Sound (12:45 • 3:15) • 5:55 • 8:20 • 10:50 Also Showing at Northridge Fashion Center</p> <p>MADAGASCAR (PG) Digital Sound (12:20 • 2:55) • 5:15 • 10:25 Also Showing at Northridge Fashion Center</p> <p>STAR WARS: EPISODE III REVENGE OF THE SITH (PG-13) Digital Sound (12:05 • 3:30) • 7:10 • 10:40</p> <p>REBOUND (PG) Digital Sound (11:25 • 2:05) • 4:45 • 7:15 • 9:35 Also Showing at Northridge Fashion Center</p> <p>CRASH (R) - ID REQUIRED Digital Sound (12:00 • 3:25) • 7:30 • 10:15</p> <p>CINDERELLA MAN (PG-13) Digital Sound (12:10 • 3:20) • 7:05 • 10:25 Also Showing at Northridge Fashion Center</p> <p>THE LONGEST YARD (PG-13) Digital Sound (12:50 • 3:55) • 7:15 • 10:10</p> <p>THE ADVENTURES OF SHARKBOY AND LAVAGIRL IN 3D (PG) Digital Sound (11:10 • 1:45) • 4:30</p> <p>GEORGE A. ROMERO'S LAND OF THE DEAD (R) - ID REQUIRED Digital Sound (11:55 • 2:30) • 5:25 • 7:50 • 10:55</p>	<p>NORTHRIDGE</p> <p>NORTHRIDGE FASHION CENTER STADIUM 10 Tampa and Plummer 818/501-5121 (#092)</p> <p>FANTASTIC FOUR (PG-13) Digital Sound (10:30 • 1:15) • 4:25 • 7:30 • 10:05 Also Showing at Winnetka</p> <p>DARK WATER (PG-13) Digital Sound (10:45 • 1:40) • 4:40 • 7:40 • 10:45 Also Showing at Winnetka</p> <p>WAR OF THE WORLDS (PG-13) Digital Sound (12:45) • 4:05 • 7:20 • 10:35 Also Showing at Winnetka</p> <p>BATMAN BEGINS (PG-13) Digital Sound (12:10 • 3:40) • 7:00 • 10:10 Also Showing at Winnetka</p> <p>MR. & MRS. SMITH (PG-13) Digital Sound (1:20) • 4:10 • 7:05 • 10:00 Also Showing at Winnetka</p> <p>HERBIE: FULLY LOADED (G) Digital Sound (10:45 • 2:25) • 5:00 • 7:50 • 10:25 Also Showing at Winnetka</p> <p>BEWITCHED (PG-13) Digital Sound (11:40 • 2:25) • 5:00 • 7:50 • 10:25 Also Showing at Winnetka</p> <p>MADAGASCAR (PG) Digital Sound (11:20 • 2:10) • 4:35 • 7:15 • 9:35 Also Showing at Winnetka</p> <p>REBOUND (PG) Digital Sound (12:00 • 2:45) • 5:25 • 8:00 • 10:20 Also Showing at Winnetka</p> <p>CINDERELLA MAN (PG-13) Digital Sound (12:00 • 3:35) • 7:15 • 10:10</p> <p>CINDERELLA MAN (PG-13) Digital Sound (1:00) • 4:15 • 7:35 • 10:40 Also Showing at Winnetka</p>	<p>L.A./BEVERLY HILLS</p> <p>THE GROVE STADIUM 14 3rd & The Grove Drive Just East of The Historic Farmers Market 323/892-8822 (#029) 4 Hours On-Site Validated Parking Only \$2</p> <p>Sneak Preview: THE ISLAND (PG-13) Digital Sound 8:15 PM</p> <p>FANTASTIC FOUR (PG-13) Digital Sound (10:30 • 11:10 • 11:45 • 11:45 • 1:45 • 2:25 • 3:45) • 4:25 • 5:10 • 6:40 • 7:20 • 8:00 • 9:20 • 10:10 • 10:55 Also Showing With Reserved Seating On 2 Screens At ArLight Hollywood</p> <p>WAR OF THE WORLDS (PG-13) Digital Sound (10:35 • 11:10 • 11:45 • 12:35 • 1:15 • 1:30 • 2:30 • 3:15) • 4:10 • 4:45 • 5:20 • 6:15 • 7:00 • 7:45 • 8:30 • 9:05 • 9:50 • 10:40 • 11:25</p> <p>BATMAN BEGINS (PG-13) Digital Sound (10:40 • 11:45 • 1:45 • 3:20) • 5:00 • 7:10 • 8:20 • 10:20 • 11:30</p> <p>MR. & MRS. SMITH (PG-13) Digital Sound (10:45 • 1:30) • 4:35 • 7:25 • 10:25 Also Showing With Reserved Seating At ArLight Hollywood</p> <p>MR. & MRS. SMITH (PG-13) Digital Sound (12:00 • 2:15) • 5:30 • 8:25 • 11:10 Also Showing With Reserved Seating At ArLight Hollywood</p> <p>BEWITCHED (PG-13) Digital Sound (11:30 • 2:00) • 4:30 • 7:05 • 9:40 Also Showing With Reserved Seating At ArLight Hollywood</p> <p>MADAGASCAR (PG) Digital Sound (11:15 • 1:55) • 4:20</p> <p>CRASH (R) - ID REQUIRED Digital Sound (10:55 • 2:15) • 5:30 • 8:25 • 11:10 Also Showing With Reserved Seating At ArLight Hollywood</p> <p>CINDERELLA MAN (PG-13) Digital Sound (12:00 • 3:35) • 7:40 • 11:05 Also Showing With Reserved Seating At ArLight Hollywood</p>	<p>ARCLIGHT HOLLYWOOD</p> <p>Sunset & Vine 323/464-4226 www.arlightcinemas.com 4 Hours Validated Parking - \$1 All Reserved Seating</p> <p>THE CINERAMA DOME FANTASTIC FOUR (PG-13) Digital Sound 11:10 • 2:00 • 5:10 • 8:10 • 11:00</p> <p>FANTASTIC FOUR (PG-13) Digital Sound 11:45 • 1:20 • 4:20 • 7:20 • 9:05 • 10:20</p> <p>THE ISLAND (PG-13) Sneak Preview: Digital Sound 8:00 PM</p> <p>DARK WATER (PG-13) Digital Sound 11:20 • 12:05 • 2:35 • 5:15 • 8:05 • 9:50 • 10:45</p> <p>THE BEAUTIFUL COUNTRY (R) - ID REQUIRED Digital Sound 1:40 • 4:50 • 7:40 • 10:40</p> <p>MR. & MRS. SMITH (PG-13) Digital Sound 1:55 • 4:55 • 7:35 • 10:25</p> <p>BEWITCHED (PG-13) Digital Sound 1:25 • 4:15 • 7:25 • 9:35</p> <p>Digital Projection Presentation STAR WARS: EPISODE III REVENGE OF THE SITH (PG-13) 1:10 • 4:30 • 7:50 • 10:50</p> <p>REBOUND (PG) Digital Sound 2:15 • 4:25 • 7:05</p> <p>ME AND YOU AND EVERYONE WE KNOW (R) - ID REQUIRED Digital Sound 12:15 • 2:25 • 5:05 • 7:45 • 9:55</p>	<p>LAKWOOD</p> <p>LAKWOOD CENTER STADIUM 16 Faculty and Candewood 562/531-9580 (#046)</p> <p>FANTASTIC FOUR (PG-13) Digital Sound On 2 Screens (11:15 • 1:20 • 2:20 • 4:20 • 5:20) • 7:15 • 8:00 • 9:55 • 10:30 Also Showing At Lakewood South</p> <p>DARK WATER (PG-13) Digital Sound On 2 Screens (11:10 • 1:10 • 2:10 • 4:10 • 5:10) • 7:10 • 8:05 • 9:50 • 10:35 Also Showing At Lakewood South</p> <p>WAR OF THE WORLDS (PG-13) Digital Sound On 3 Screens (11:00 • 12:00 • 1:00 • 2:00 • 3:00 • 4:00 • 5:00) • 6:05 • 7:00 • 7:45 • 8:45 • 9:45 • 10:25 Also Showing At Lakewood South</p> <p>BATMAN BEGINS (PG-13) Digital Sound (12:55 • 4:15) • 7:20 • 10:25 Also Showing At Lakewood South</p> <p>MR. & MRS. SMITH (PG-13) Digital Sound (1:30 • 4:35) • 7:25 • 10:20 Also Showing At Lakewood South</p> <p>HERBIE: FULLY LOADED (G) Digital Sound (11:30 • 1:55 • 4:30) • 7:30 • 10:00 Also Showing At Lakewood South</p> <p>BEWITCHED (PG-13) Digital Sound (1:40 • 4:40) • 7:25 • 9:40</p> <p>MADAGASCAR (PG) Digital Sound (11:20 • 1:25 • 3:30 • 5:40) • 7:50 • 9:45</p> <p>STAR WARS: EPISODE III REVENGE OF THE SITH (PG-13) (1:05 • 4:05) • 7:05 • 10:05</p> <p>REBOUND (PG) Digital Sound (11:05 • 1:50 • 4:25) • 7:05 • 9:30 Also Showing At Lakewood South</p> <p>THE HONEYMOONERS (PG-13) (12:45 • 3:10 • 5:30) • 7:40 • 10:00</p> <p>GEORGE A. ROMERO'S LAND OF THE DEAD (R) - ID REQUIRED Digital Sound (12:50 • 3:05 • 5:25) • 8:10 • 10:25</p>	<p>PASADENA</p> <p>PASEO STADIUM 14 Colorado & Los Robles 626-568-8888 (#206) 3 Hours On-Site Validated Parking Only \$2</p> <p>Sneak Preview: THE ISLAND (PG-13) Digital Sound 7:10 PM</p> <p>FANTASTIC FOUR (PG-13) Digital Sound On 2 Screens (11:00 • 12:00 • 1:30 • 2:35) • 4:25 • 6:20 • 7:15 • 8:20 • 10:10 • 11:05</p> <p>DARK WATER (PG-13) Digital Sound (11:30 • 2:20) • 5:10 • 8:00 • 10:45</p> <p>WAR OF THE WORLDS (PG-13) Digital Sound On 3 Screens (11:05 • 12:00 • 1:00 • 1:50 • 2:45) • 4:10 • 4:50 • 5:35 • 7:00 • 7:45 • 8:30 • 9:55 • 10:35 • 11:20</p> <p>BATMAN BEGINS (PG-13) Digital Sound On 2 Screens (1:15) • 4:40 • 8:10 • 10:25 • 11:20</p> <p>MR. & MRS. SMITH (PG-13) Digital Sound (11:00 • 1:40) • 4:30 • 7:30 • 10:30</p> <p>HERBIE: FULLY LOADED (G) Digital Sound (11:15 • 1:45) • 4:15 • 7:05 • 9:45</p> <p>BEWITCHED (PG-13) Digital Sound (11:45 • 2:15) • 4:45 • 7:15 • 9:45</p> <p>MADAGASCAR (PG) Digital Sound (12:20 • 2:40) • 4:55</p> <p>STAR WARS: EPISODE III REVENGE OF THE SITH (PG-13) (12:30 • 3:45) • 7:05 • 10:20</p> <p>REBOUND (PG) Digital Sound (11:10 • 1:20 • 3:35) • 5:50 • 8:15</p> <p>CINDERELLA MAN (PG-13) Digital Sound (12:35 • 3:55) • 7:25 • 10:40</p> <p>GEORGE A. ROMERO'S LAND OF THE DEAD (R) - ID REQUIRED Digital Sound 10:30 PM</p>	<p>WESTSIDE/CULVER CITY</p> <p>CULVER STADIUM 12 Culver and Washington 310/360-9565 (#065) 4 Hours Free Parking With Validation Directly Across Culver on Watseska & On Cardiff</p> <p>DARK WATER (PG-13) On 2 Screens (1:30 • 2:10 • 4:15 • 5:00) • 7:00 • 7:40 • 9:45 • 10:25</p> <p>WAR OF THE WORLDS (PG-13) On 3 Screens (11:45 • 12:10 • 1:40 • 2:25 • 3:00 • 4:25 • 5:05 • 5:45) • 7:10 • 7:45 • 8:30 • 9:50 • 10:35</p> <p>MR. & MRS. SMITH (PG-13) (2:00 • 4:45) • 7:30 • 10:15</p> <p>HERBIE: FULLY LOADED (G) (12:00 • 2:30 • 4:55) • 7:20 • 9:40</p> <p>BEWITCHED (PG-13) (12:50 • 3:10 • 5:30) • 7:55 • 10:10</p> <p>MADAGASCAR (PG) (12:30 • 2:40 • 4:50) • 7:05 • 9:20</p> <p>STAR WARS: EPISODE III REVENGE OF THE SITH (PG-13) (12:55 • 4:10) • 7:15 • 10:20</p>	<p>COMMERCE</p> <p>COMMERCE 14 Goodrich and Whittier 323/726-8022 (#036)</p> <p>FANTASTIC FOUR (PG-13) Spanish Subtitles (12:05 • 3:00) • 5:45 • 8:30 • 10:55</p> <p>FANTASTIC FOUR (PG-13) (1:05) • 4:10 • 7:05 • 10:15</p> <p>DARK WATER (PG-13) Spanish Subtitles (2:35) • 5:35 • 8:05 • 10:45</p> <p>DARK WATER (PG-13) (1:35) • 4:35 • 7:35 • 10:10</p> <p>WAR OF THE WORLDS (PG-13) Spanish Subtitles (1:00) • 4:15 • 7:00 • 9:45</p> <p>WAR OF THE WORLDS (PG-13) Spanish Subtitles (1:00) • 4:15 • 7:00 • 9:45</p> <p>WAR OF THE WORLDS (PG-13) Spanish Subtitles (1:00) • 4:15 • 7:00 • 9:45</p> <p>STAR WARS: EPISODE III REVENGE OF THE SITH (PG-13) (12:45 • 4:00) • 7:05 • 10:10</p> <p>REBOUND (PG) Digital Sound (11:05 • 1:20 • 4:05) • 7:00 • 9:45</p> <p>CINDERELLA MAN (PG-13) Digital Sound (12:30 • 4:00) • 7:10 • 10:20</p> <p>GEORGE A. ROMERO'S LAND OF THE DEAD (R) - ID REQUIRED Digital Sound (12:25 • 2:45 • 5:10) • 7:50 • 10:20</p> <p>RIZE (PG-13) (12:20 • 2:40 • 5:15) • 7:45 • 10:00</p> <p>MANHATTAN VILLAGE Sepulveda at Rossmore 310/607-0007 (#056)</p> <p>FANTASTIC FOUR (PG-13) Digital Sound (1:30 • 4:10) • 7:05 • 9:50 Also Showing At Beach Cities</p> <p>WAR OF THE WORLDS (PG-13) Digital Sound (1:00 • 3:55) • 6:30 • 9:30 Also Showing At Beach Cities</p> <p>BATMAN BEGINS (PG-13) Digital Sound (12:45 • 3:45) • 6:45 • 9:40 Also Showing At Beach Cities</p> <p>BEWITCHED (PG-13) Digital Sound (1:10 • 3:50) • 6:40 • 9:15 Also Showing At Beach Cities</p> <p>CRASH (R) - ID REQUIRED (1:45 • 4:20) • 7:20 • 9:55</p> <p>MAD HOT BALLROOM (PG) (11:15 • 4:00) • 7:20 • 10:00</p>	<p>SAN GABRIEL VALLEY</p> <p>VINELAND DRIVE-IN Vineyard at Valley 626/961-9262 Show Starts At 8:00</p> <p>FANTASTIC FOUR (PG-13) MR. & MRS. SMITH (PG-13)</p> <p>WAR OF THE WORLDS (PG-13) THE LONGEST YARD (PG-13)</p> <p>BATMAN BEGINS (PG-13) BEWITCHED (PG-13)</p> <p>HERBIE: FULLY LOADED (G) THE PERFECT MAN (PG)</p>	<p>LAKWOOD CENTER SOUTH 9 Faculty and Del Amo 562/634-9281 (#047)</p> <p>FANTASTIC FOUR (PG-13) Digital Sound (2:00 • 5:00) • 7:35 • 10:05 Also Showing At Lakewood Stadium</p> <p>DARK WATER (PG-13) Digital Sound (1:30 • 4:30) • 7:25 • 10:10 Also Showing At Lakewood Stadium</p> <p>WAR OF THE WORLDS (PG-13) Digital Sound (1:20 • 4:20) • 7:15 • 10:00 Also Showing At Lakewood Stadium</p> <p>BATMAN BEGINS (PG-13) Digital Sound (1:15 • 4:15) • 7:10 • 9:55 Also Showing At Lakewood Stadium</p> <p>HERBIE: FULLY LOADED (G) Digital Sound (2:15 • 4:45) • 7:05 • 9:25 Also Showing At Lakewood Stadium</p> <p>REBOUND (PG) Digital Sound (2:10 • 4:40) • 7:20 • 9:45 Also Showing At Lakewood Stadium</p> <p>CINDERELLA MAN (PG-13) Digital Sound (1:40 • 5:15) • 8:15</p> <p>THE ADVENTURES OF SHARKBOY AND LAVAGIRL IN 3D (PG) Digital Sound (2:05 • 4:50) • 7:00 • 9:15</p>	<p>HASTINGS Rosemead at Foothill 626/568-8888 (#043)</p> <p>FANTASTIC FOUR (PG-13) Digital Sound (11:30 • 2:15) • 5:00 • 8:00 • 10:30 On Our 60 Foot Screen</p> <p>DARK WATER (PG-13) Digital Sound (11:45 • 2:30) • 5:15 • 8:15 • 10:45</p> <p>WAR OF THE WORLDS (PG-13) Digital Sound (11:15 • 2:05) • 4:45 • 7:30 • 10:15</p> <p>BATMAN BEGINS (PG-13) Digital Sound (1:00) • 4:10 • 7:20 • 10:25</p> <p>MR. & MRS. 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