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N. K. JEMISIN'S DREAM WORLDS

The sci-fi writer's inventive, intricate novels have defied convention and sold millions of copies.

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Jemisin is black, in her mind stories, and wears her hair in braids. In her author photo, she gazes sternly at the camera, as if ready for literary combat. In person, she is much warmer, but she likes the picture. Typically, at the center of her fiction, there is a character with coiled strength. Jemisin, who has a degree in psychology, is interested in power and in systems of subjugation. In her books, the oppressed often possess an enormous capacity for agency—a supernatural ability, even, that their oppressors lack—but they exist in a society that has been engineered to hold them down. Eventually, the world is reordered, often with a cataclysm.

The notes that Jemisin jotted down after her dream went into a folder on her computer where she stores “snippets, ideas, random thoughts.” Some are drawn from her reading of nonfiction: Jared Diamond’s “Collapse,” Charles Mann’s “1491,” Alan Weisman’s “The World Without Us.” Eventually, she told me, “this fragment pairs up with that fragment, and they form a Voltron, and become a story.” (Voltron is an anime “super robot” that emerges when other machines combine—an artifact of eighties television that Jemisin enjoyed as a girl.)

Another file in the folder was from 2009, when Jemisin attended a NASA-funded workshop, called Launchpad, where participants discussed what Earth might be like if it lost its moon. Some speculated that our planet’s axis would tilt wildly, triggering haphazard ice ages, and that its core might lose its stability, causing earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. The fragments in Jemisin’s folder began to pair up. She imagined a planet that had lost its moon and become seismically hyperactive. Such a place, she reasoned, could sustain life, but just barely; mass extinctions would be common. If the woman in her dream inhabited that planet, she wondered, then what would her civilization look like?

J R. R. Tolkien once argued that the creation of an imaginary world was the highest form of artistic expression, but that it was also easily undervalued. If it is done well, much of the labor remains off the page. Before Tolkien wrote “The Lord of the Rings,” he invented a mythology, a history, and even languages for Middle-earth; he explained to a friend, “I wisely started with a map, and made the story fit (generally with meticulous care for distances). The other way about lands one in confusions and impossibilities.” It annoyed him that people “stupidly and even maliciously confound Fantasy with Dreaming, in which there is no Art.” He wrote about elves. He wanted to be taken seriously, too.

Jemisin has no interest in pseudo-medieval Europe, but Tolkien would have recognized her rigor. To

get a firsthand feel for volcanoes, she flew to Hawaii to smell sulfur and ash. To learn how people

prepared for environmental stress, she researched end-of-days survivalists, though she stopped short of going into the wilderness to meet them. (“I wasn’t stupid,” she told me.)

As the idea of an ever-shattering planet developed in her imagination, Jemisin drew a map of a Pangaea-like supercontinent, which she wryly called the Stillness. She reasoned that its wealth would be concentrated in an urban center near the equator, at a geological spot that seemed stable, based on fault lines that she had sketched out. She decided arbitrarily that the woman in her dream lived in the volatile hinterlands—and then began to treat that decision like a discovered fact. “I’m, like, O.K., why isn’t she working to stabilize this powerful, wealthy part of society?” Jemisin told me. “Well, she must have at one point been part of that life, but somehow got away.” Gradually, the contours of a story emerged. “You let intuition do whatever it is going to do,” she said. “I had a sentence in mind: ‘Let’s start with the end of the world.’ That can mean the literal end of the world, it can mean the end of a civilization, or it can mean grief. That was the point where I decided that her son had died.” The grief she understood. Jemisin’s mother had become ill, and would not survive the decade.

After immersing herself in the Stillness for four years, Jemisin finished “The Fifth Season.” The story defied easy literary categorization. It was sweeping but intimate, multilayered but simply told. It could be read as an environmental parable, or as a study of repression, or as a meditation on race, or as a mother’s post-apocalyptic quest. Jemisin wove in magical elements, but she systematized them so thoroughly that they felt like scientific principles—laws of an alternative nature. She evoked advanced technology, but made it so esoteric that it seemed like magic. (Most of her imagined machines were made of crystal. At some point, the inhabitants of the Stillness eschewed metallurgy; the word “rust” even became an expletive.)

She took stylistic chances, too. “The Fifth Season” at first appears to weave together the stories of three people, but late in the book Jemisin reveals that she has merely shattered her protagonist’s story into three narratives, a formal echo of her broken world. The protagonist is an “orogene”—a term that Jemisin derived from scientific nomenclature for a mountain-forming process—who can channel energies that quell or create earthquakes, with varying degrees of control. For the dominant civilization, which enslaves the orogenes—for use as weaponry or as geological instruments—they are

a reviled but necessary underclass. The protagonist's primary narrative busters with rage and trauma. Jemisin wrote it in the second person, the voice belonging to a narrator who is not revealed until a later book. "I tried her voice in different forms," she told me. "I couldn't get too close to her—she was angry with me in the dream, she's not going to talk to me. That doesn't make sense, I know."

In a different writer's hands, the use of the second person might have registered as a gimmick, but Jemisin made the device integral to the plot, and deployed it with personality—a voice with quirks and, occasionally, a sense of immediacy. ("Look, the ash clouds are spreading already.") "The Fifth Season" attracted wide acclaim for its inventiveness, world-building, and intricate assembly. In 2016, it won a Hugo Award for Best Novel—a first for a black writer. The following year, a sequel, "The Obelisk Gate," won again. In 2018, the final book in what became the "Broken Earth" trilogy, "The Stone Sky," won, too. No author in the history of the genre had achieved that recognition. The three books sold more than two million copies worldwide. The *Times* called them "extraordinary." John Scalzi, the former president of the Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers of America, heralded Jemisin as "arguably the most important speculative writer of her generation."

Jemisin lives in a duplex apartment in Brooklyn, with an office that looks out onto a garden, which she cares for meticulously. For years, she was an urban literary nomad, working wherever she could park herself with a laptop. "I don't go to coffee shops anymore," she told me in her office, late last year. "The best-seller life has made it possible to have this." She sat at a long desk against the wall; at one end was a cluster of awards. The room also contained a plush Darth Vader and a doll of Commander Uhura, from "Star Trek." Beside a chair was a chrome lamp resembling a flying saucer; Jemisin flipped a switch, and a band of tiny red lights on the saucer glowed. She had bought it on a trip upstate. "I saw that lamp, I *needed* that lamp," she said. "It's corny as hell, and it doesn't light up shit. It's just for the mood, but sometimes when I am writing I want to be in that mood and summon the energies."

Jemisin immediately followed the "Broken Earth" trilogy with two other books. In 2018, she released "How Long 'til Black Future Month?," a collection of short stories. She also completed her next novel, "The City We Became," the first installment of another trilogy, which is due out this March. Submitting the novel to her editor, a few hours before midnight on New Year's Eve, she felt depleted; for more than a decade, she had been writing nearly a book a year. She resolved to take 2019 off, but

she couldn't stay idle. She sketched out the new trilogy's second installment, while also navigating calls from Hollywood, speaking engagements, side gigs. Marvel Comics invited her to guest-write a series—an offer she declined, because she had already agreed with DC Comics to create a “Green Lantern” spinoff. As we sat in her office, the first issue of her comic was slated for release in a few weeks. “This is an unusual year for me,” she said. “Usually, I have only one thing to concentrate on.”

Above her desk she had hung family photos: glimpses of a truncated generational story. “Like most black Americans descended from slaves, it basically stops,” she told me. She once wrote about this loss—not merely the erasure of a backstory but also the absence of all that a person builds upon it; as she put it, the “strange emptiness to life without myths.” She had considered pursuing genealogy, “the search for the traces of myself in moldering old sale documents and scanned images on microfiche.” But ultimately she decided that she had no interest in what the records might say. “They’ll tell me where I came from, but not what I really want to know: where I’m going. To figure that out, I make shit up.”

Jemisin pointed to a photo of her father, Noah, as a young man—thin, confident, smiling—and spoke about his grandmother, a woman people called Muh Dear: “She basically made her living doing fortunes—magic, for lack of a better term.” In a story that Jemisin included in “How Long ’til Black Future Month?,” she envisioned Muh Dear as a shaman named Emmaline, facing down a malevolent fairy, the White Lady, who wants to take away her daughter. (“The White Lady was nearly all surface; that was the nature of her kind. That was how this meeting would go, then: an appearance of grace and gentility, covering the substance of battle.”) As the two spar, the White Lady draws Emmaline into a roiling dreamscape, in which it is possible to glimpse America’s future: the upheavals of the civil-rights movement; the progress and the tensions that followed. Amid the whorl of imagery, Emmaline offers to sacrifice herself in place of her child if her family is protected. The fairy accepts the gesture: “The White Lady closed the dream around Emmaline, and whisked her away.”

For Muh Dear’s real grandchildren, growing up in mid-century Alabama, there was no shortage of dangers. Jemisin’s father was born in Birmingham, where the commissioner of public safety allowed the Ku Klux Klan to attack the Freedom Riders when their Greyhound buses arrived, in 1961. As Jemisin once recalled, her father spent part of his youth “dodging dogs and fire hoses, turned on him and other Civil Rights protestors.”

Jemisin's parents met as students at Alabama State University, and married shortly after graduating. Noah wanted to devote his life to painting, so he applied to a graduate program at the University of Iowa, and the two moved to Iowa City. Jemisin's mother, Janice, pursued a degree in psychology, specializing in psychometrics; she later administered I.Q. tests.

When Jemisin was born, in Iowa, her parents named her Nora Keita. After her first birthday, the family moved to Brooklyn, where Noah strove to establish himself. For income, he taught art, and Janice taught grade-school science. (He now has a painting in the Met, an abstract called "Black Valhalla.") "We were in a beautiful little brownstone," Jemisin recalled. "We had the ground floor and the floor above. There was a gorgeous old mahogany bannister. There were grapevines in the back yard, and a squirrel named Greedy who would come seeking pecans that my grandmother would send me from her tree in Alabama."

When Jemisin was five, her parents divorced, and her mother moved to Mobile. Jemisin went with her, and hated it: the regimentation of Southern society, the quasi-suburban alienation, the racism. While she was in the fourth grade, the Klan burned a cross on the Mobile courthouse lawn, then murdered a black teen-ager named Michael Donald as he walked home from the store. They hanged his body from a tree in a mixed-race neighborhood: a lynching, in the nineteen-eighties. "Not too far from my grandmother's place, actually," Jemisin told me. In a speech in 2013, she recalled its impact on her family: "I remember my grandmother sitting in her den with a shotgun across her knees while I cracked pecans at her feet. I was maybe nine years old, had no idea what was going on. She told me the gun was just an old replica—she'd brought it out to clean it. I said, 'O.K., Grandma,' and asked whether she'd make me a pie when I was done."

Jemisin mastered an outsider's art of adaptation. Shifting between Alabama and New York, where she spent summers with her father, she adjusted to the jarring differences across the Mason-Dixon Line, both social and personal—living in one home shaped by an artist and another by a standardized-test giver. Childhood, she told me, was "a schizoid experience." In Mobile, she shifted across racial divisions, too, attending a predominantly white school that had been forced to desegregate. "I had to get up at o-dark-thirty to ride the bus for an hour," she recalled. To exchange comic books with her white friends, she met them clandestinely behind a building.

Science fiction appealed to her at a young age. Little about her real life was cohesive, but imagined

worlds could be complete, self-contained, and bound by logic. “I saw ‘Star Wars’ when it came out, because I was a creepy, obsessed space child,” she told me. Later, she mined her local library for science-fiction novels; she covered the books in paper so that she could read them in class. Jemisin also began to write, constantly. Her cousin, W. Kamau Bell, who is now a comedian with a show on CNN, told me, “I wanted to be a comic-book artist, so we would spend our days in the front of my grandmother’s house, laying in the sun, writing, drawing, and talking. We bonded over the fact that we felt like aliens in Mobile.”

Jemisin’s mother did not understand her daughter’s interest in otherworldly fantasies, or her non-stop writing. But her father did. In Brooklyn, she stayed up late with him to watch “Star Trek” and “The Twilight Zone.” Noah Jemisin encouraged his daughter to explore the city, and also to create. “Dad and I would pass time, whole afternoons, not speaking to each other,” she told me. “He would be working on a painting in his studio. I would be sitting on the couch, writing.” In the evenings, they went on walks. “He was my first real editor,” she said. “One of my favorite memories is us walking across the Williamsburg Bridge. This was before it got renovated. It had fucking *holes* in it. You had to be careful or you would lose a foot! I would talk over story ideas and plotlines. He would listen to all of that.”

One of her first childhood stories was a fable about a fantastical prehuman era in which animals built an advanced civilization, but then destroyed it—along with their ability to speak—in a war. She told me, “I actually published that, by putting two pieces of cardboard around it, wrapping them in paper, and binding it with yarn.”

On its surface, all science fiction is about change—technological, scientific, social—that brings human beings into contact with the unknown or forces a reassessment of the familiar. Nonetheless, the genre remains inextricably tied to the everyday—the biases and limitations of the writer’s time. Jules Verne may have imagined the Nautilus as a futuristic steampunk submarine, but his book expresses a nineteenth-century vision, in which the natural world existed to be dominated by men.

“How Long ’til Black Future Month?” takes its name from an essay that Jemisin wrote in 2013. It begins with two memories of watching “The Jetsons”: first as a girl, excitedly taking it all in, and then as an adult. “I notice something: there’s nobody even slightly brown in the Jetsons’ world,” she wrote.

“This is supposed to be the real world’s future, right? Albeit in silly, humorous form. Thing is, not-white people make up most of the world’s population, now as well as back in the Sixties when the show was created. So what happened to all those people, in the minds of this show’s creators? Are they down beneath the clouds, where the Jetsons never go? Was there an apocalypse, or maybe a pogrom? Was there a memo?”

“The Jetsons” was far from the worst example of racial exclusion. Until 2015, despite years of protest, the World Fantasy Award was a bust of H. P. Lovecraft, a white supremacist who believed that blacks were subhuman and who openly supported Hitler. Even Tolkien’s masterwork, “The Lord of the Rings,” was complicated by race. He had written his orcs to be revolting, devolved, violent agents of evil. In a letter, he explained his thinking: “They are (or were) squat, broad, flat-nosed, sallow-skinned, with wide mouths and slant eyes: in fact degraded and repulsive versions of the (to Europeans) least lovely Mongol-types.”

In Mobile’s public library, Jemisin read voraciously, but she almost never encountered characters who credibly represented someone like her. Black writers have been engaged in speculative fiction since at least the nineteenth century, but when Jemisin first immersed herself in the genre their work was either difficult to locate or difficult to recognize. In early pulp science fiction, it was common for writers to sell their stories using pseudonyms, making their true identities almost impossible to discern. Those few novelists who were openly recognized as black—in the early eighties, there were only four of any prominence—were often encouraged to avoid race in their work.

In 1967, a few months after the notable African-American writer Samuel Delany won a Nebula Award, he wrote to *Analog* magazine, seeking to serialize a daring, experimental space opera he had written, called “Nova.” *Analog* passed. As an editor explained, Delany’s protagonist was half Senegalese, and white sci-fi readers would be unable to relate. “It was all handled as though I’d happened to have dressed my main character in a purple brocade dinner jacket,” Delany later recalled, in an essay on racism in science fiction. To be a black author in the genre, he noted, meant navigating paradoxical demands: editors expected his work to carry no trace of his identity, but, no matter what he put on the page, they would inevitably view it as “African-American science fiction.”

“Nova,” later published as a book, proved to be highly influential—a progenitor of the cyberpunk movement. Delany recalled that he was frequently invited to speak on panels with Octavia Butler, the

only other black author who had achieved his kind of visibility, even though their work was very different. She, too, had to navigate the paradox. “When I began writing science fiction, when I began reading, heck, I wasn’t in any of this stuff I read,” she told the *Times* before her death, in 2006. “I wrote myself in.”

This simple goal was surprisingly hard to communicate. Just before winning a Nebula for her tenth novel, Butler sat for an interview with Charlie Rose, who asked, “Are you trying to create a new black mythology?”

“No,” she said. “I am telling stories that interest me.” She spoke a little about what that meant, but Rose persisted: “What, then, is central to what you want to say about race?”

She replied, with a dismissive sting, “Do I want to say something central about race aside from ‘Hey, we’re here?’” She recalled a panel she had been on, in 1979, with another writer. “He thought that it wasn’t really necessary to have black characters in science fiction because you could always make any racial statement you needed to make by way of extraterrestrials,” she told Rose. “If he was trying to start trouble he certainly succeeded.” Butler later wrote a withering response to the writer’s comment, in *Transmission* magazine: “Science fiction reaches into the future, the past, the human mind. It reaches out to other worlds and into other dimensions. Is it really so limited, then, that it cannot reach into the lives of ordinary everyday humans who happen not to be white?”

The essay was powerful, its impact negligible. My own copy of Butler’s novel “Dawn”—a brilliant, eerie, thought-provoking book—is a paperback from 1988. The cover depicts a woman resembling Sigourney Weaver in “Alien,” even though the text clearly (but lightly) indicates that the protagonist is not white. It contains no author photo, no bio. Jemisin’s childhood encounter with “Dawn” was the same edition. Reading it, she had no idea that Butler was black.

Hudson Yards was crawling with superheroes and villains and oddballs: people dressed like Storm Troopers, like Batman, like Godzilla, like Care Bears. It was the weekend of New York Comic Con, the Mecca of nerd culture that, every year, seems to grow bigger, more commercial, more theatrical in its costume pageantry. One attendee wore a white dress supporting feathered Pegasus wings the size of a small hang glider.

I met Jemisin outside the Javits Center. She was wearing a leather jacket, a black blouse, and jeans,

with her hair pulled back. She is often invited to speak about her books at Comic Con, but, as a novelist, she is generally spared the titanic promotional machinery that surrounds the main attractions: the stars hyping Hollywood films, the pavilions hyping triple-A video games, the m.c.s hyping comic-book celebrities. Jemisin, who describes herself as “a supercharged introvert,” is just fine with that.

This year, though, there was no avoiding one of the largest hype machines. Her “Green Lantern” spinoff, “Far Sector,” was scheduled for release just after the convention. “All right,” she said. “I’ve got to get to the DC publicity area. Where the hell is that?” We passed through metal detectors and into a huge atrium. Surveying the hordes, she said, “I am imagining there is a black hole under Javits sucking all the energy out of the people here.” To get through the day, she promised herself an evening of recovery: first relaxing with a Lush bath bomb, then slaughtering some digital foes in *Mass Effect 3*.

“Far Sector” is set at the edge of the known universe, in a multispecies city-state built on a Dyson sphere—a speculative megastructure, named after Freeman Dyson, who once postulated that hyper-advanced alien civilizations would seek to harness the energy of stars by encasing them in technological shells. The story centers on Sojourner Mullein, an N.Y.P.D. cop turned Lantern, who looks as if she has been cloned from the Afrofuturist pop star Janelle Monáe. Although it is a comic book, the writing carries Jemisin’s wry tone, interest in power, and unapologetic use of allegory. The series opens with Mullein surveying a murder scene, while considering an aphorism from “Things Fall Apart,” Chinua Achebe’s novel of colonialism: “A man who makes trouble for others is also making it for himself.” It lingers in her mind, but Mullein dismisses it, noting, “I’m the one causing the trouble. Just by existing.”

When Jemisin was in her twenties, she believed that a career in writing fantasy was closed to her, because of who she was. Instead, she pursued a graduate degree in psychology, and later took a job as a career counsellor at a college in Springfield, Massachusetts. “God help me,” she told me. “Isolated. Also cold as fuck! Nobody told me that, like, lake-effect snows happen in western Massachusetts.” To keep herself sane, she kept writing, often anonymous online fan fiction. (She still writes fan fiction, using secret identities that she guards aggressively.) A few years later, she landed a position at Northeastern University, in Boston, but felt no less lost there. In 2002, when she turned thirty, she

had a moment of crisis. I was, like, Oh, God, I am in debt up to my eyeballs, I hate this town, I don't like my boyfriend," she said. "I have got to reorder this. What do I need to do to be happy? O.K., get out of debt, get out of Boston, get into writing—maybe make some money from it, maybe that can help."

Jemisin considered applying to the Clarion writers' workshop, which specializes in science fiction and fantasy; luminaries in the genre teach there. But the workshop lasted six weeks—longer than she could take off from work. Instead, she attended a one-week workshop on Martha's Vineyard. One instructor urged her to write some short stories. Jemisin at first chafed at the idea, but then relented, recognizing that the form's constraints could sharpen her sense of pacing and character. She subscribed to genre magazines to study some examples, then tried her hand.

"How Long 'til Black Future Month?" includes one of her earliest published stories, "Cloud Dragon Skies" (2005), in which an ecological disaster has caused most of humanity to abandon Earth for a ring-shaped space colony, built from crushed asteroids, beyond Mars. "Old foolishness lay at the root of it," notes the narrator, a young woman named Nahautu, one of the few who stay. The planet has rebounded, except for the atmosphere. The toxic chemicals it has absorbed combine to form a new kind of life:

One morning we awoke and the sky was a pale, blushing rose. We began to see intention in the slow, ceaseless movements of the clouds. Instead of floating, they swam spirals in the sky. They gathered in knots, trailing wisps like feet and tails. We felt them watching us.

In just a few pages, Jemisin sketched a scenario filled with ambiguities and philosophical questions. (How is nature defined? What represents progress?) The people on Earth decide to treat the animate clouds as natural—believing that, in a redemptive future, humanity must adapt to its ecosystem, not shape it. But scientists from the space colony try to neutralize the effect, and the sky reacts violently, tearing up the planet. Fleeing Earth in a coffinlike pod, Nahautu travels to the colony, an engineered world that is both better and lesser than the poisoned Earth. She is not fully at home in either place. In her new life, she becomes a storyteller.

DC Comics had a greenroom overlooking the Javits exhibition floor; after Jemisin spoke on a panel at the Comic Con main stage, a publicist ushered her there. Relaxed, she was in a

joking mood. “My Twitter is full of bitch,” she warned the publicist. Online, Jemisin is an active, quick-witted commentator, lacing her posts—about politics or about the writing life—with zingers and tart observations. In 2015, the *Times* invited her to write a column about science fiction, called “Otherworldly”; she did so for two years, proving to be a perceptive and at times unsparing critic. In 2017, she described Andy Weir’s “The Martian,” a surprise hit that inspired a blockbuster film, as “Robinson Crusoe in space,” and his next novel, “Artemis,” as “a 300-page film pitch that, like its predecessor, will probably be more appealing after it goes to Hollywood.” That year, TNT announced that it was going to develop Jemisin’s “The Fifth Season” into a series—an ambitious or perhaps foolhardy bid, given the book’s narrative complexity and experimental style.

The DC publicist asked Jemisin, “Do you prefer to be called Nora or N.K.?” She laughed and said, “Nora is fine. Mom called me N.K. when I was in trouble as a child, so every time someone says it, I’m, like, ‘What? I didn’t do it!’ ”

Jemisin began to abbreviate her name at the start of her writing career, fearing that an association with sci-fi would interfere with her professional work. While she was at Northeastern, she imposed a strict deadline: to produce a novel within a year. Because she had a full-time job, most of the writing had to happen at night, but, she told me, “after work, my brain just couldn’t make that shift.” Mostly, she found herself mapping out ideas while doing the dishes or playing video games. She wrote every evening before bed, even if she knew most of it would not survive a self-edit the next day.

The novel that resulted was set in a kingdom inspired by ancient Egypt, with a belief system that drew on Eastern and Western religious ideas, as well as the Hippocratic notion of bodily humors. One of Jemisin’s invented humors is a form of healing magic tied to dreams. A priestly caste, called Gatherers, harvests it from people whom a goddess judges to be corrupt; the extractive process is deadly, but the system keeps the society in balance. At the book’s opening, a skilled Gatherer botches an extraction. In trying to figure out why, he learns that an assassin has been using the process to murder. “I was trying to appeal to traditional fantasy readers,” Jemisin said. “It is a bog-standard fantasy quest story.”

The book landed her an agent, Lucienne Diver, but no contract. Diver told me, “We got a lot of people saying, ‘She’s amazing, but I don’t know how to fit her into the market.’ ” She thought that the setting, the story’s complexity, the alchemy of Jemisin’s various source materials—the very attributes

that made her stand out—also made the book hard to position for a first-time author. Devi Pillai, then an editor at Orbit, told me that she had loved the book but thought that it had no clear sales hook. She told Diver, “If she has anything else, I want to be the first to see it.”

Jemisin was convinced that the rejections, however politely stated, were code for the same editorial bigotry that Delany had faced in the sixties. (In 2012, after Jemisin had established herself, the book was published, as “The Killing Moon,” and nominated for a Nebula.) “I came very close to quitting,” she told me. “I had a long dark tea-time of the soul, and basically somewhere in there I realized, People are just *that* racist. If the only problem is that the book is full of black people—O.K., I got you. I am going to write something full of white people, but it is going to be all about how evil those white people are. ‘The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms’ was that book. It was me getting mad at science-fiction publishing.”

Whatever Jemisin’s anger with the industry, she produced a shrewd, philosophically playful page-turner that both reflected and transcended her feelings. She decided to write it in the first person—unusual for epic fantasy, which often leans on the third person to accommodate expositional detours about the imagined world. The story was no less original: it was about a warrior baroness summoned to an insular palace balanced on a pedestal, like an Eero Saarinen tabletop. The baroness is drawn into court intrigues and must solve a family mystery; eventually, she upends the society’s power structure, and along the way has interstellar sex with a god. (Jemisin told me that the book could have been marketed as a romance.)

Diver shopped the manuscript, and it inspired an immediate bidding war. Devi Pillai told me, “I was, like, ‘Mine!’ ” By then, Jemisin was working unhappily at a for-profit college in New York. “I was at some stupid-assed retreat, and I kept ducking out to take calls from my agent,” she told me. Pillai won the auction, with a six-figure bid that included a commitment for two more books. “I started screaming,” Jemisin told me. “People at the retreat were, like, ‘Should we call somebody?’ ”

For the first time, Jemisin could devote herself fully to writing. When Orbit began promoting the book—comparing it to the work of Neil Gaiman and George R. R. Martin—she created a Web site for herself. “Do big kids squee?” she wrote. “’Cos I think a squee is appropriate right about now. I can’t see how a little squee would hurt. Are we all agreed? ’Kay? Then here goes. ::SQUEE::”

n December, I caught up with Jemisin on the steps of City Hall, where she had come to research the second installment of her new trilogy. Rather than build a fantastical world for it, she decided to use New York, a city that has always seemed a little unreal. As she told me, “Sometimes, when I am walking, the air feels a particular way, or the light comes in at a particular angle, and the moment makes me feel like the city is alive and breathing.”

For the new trilogy, she had chosen to make these feelings literal, positing that any city, upon reaching the necessary urban development, could achieve sentience. New York is about to transition when it is invaded by interdimensional aliens seeking to destroy it. The story is part “Ghostbusters,” part “The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai Across the 8th Dimension.” Jemisin told me that the project was a chance to relax, “an emotional palate cleanser,” but it was also a coded critique of the sci-fi and fantasy genre. The aliens take on Lovecraftian form (“The tendril mass looms, ethereal and pale”) and are fought off by a multi-ethnic, multi-gendered posse of underdogs—people Lovecraft would have hated.

More than a decade earlier, Octavia Butler had asserted, “Hey, we’re here.” But, Jemisin told me, “we have to *keep* saying it.” Recent history, she said, had made this evident. In 2009, after a white novelist posted a formula for “writing the other,” many people of color in the genre erupted in frustration, triggering a contentious series of online debates, known collectively as RaceFail, that unfolded for more than a year. At a conference, Nalo Hopkinson, a Jamaican-Canadian writer, delivered a speech titled “A Reluctant Ambassador from the Planet of Midnight,” in which she tried to explain the explosion of anger to her white colleagues—making clear that Butler’s sense of invisibility was still sorely felt. Jemisin told me, “One blog was, like, ‘If you’re a person of color who is into science fiction, speak up. We’re doing a head count of how many of us exist.’ And it was a huge number. I had thought we were unicorns. In fact, the post was titled ‘The Wild Unicorn Herd Check-in.’”

Amid a reactionary backlash, Jemisin became a target. In 2013, she gave an impassioned speech about race in the genre, noting that a white supremacist had just run for president of the Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers of America. Though he lost, he had secured ten per cent of the vote, prompting her to criticize the “great unmeasured mass of enablers” who had been silent. The former candidate, in a speech called “The Great Unmeasured Mass of Enablers,” in a speech called “The Great Unmeasured Mass of Enablers,”

turn, called her an ignorant nair-savage in a racist screed. Jemisin told me, “I nat touched off a whole big foofaraw.” Threats of violence poured in. She scrubbed her online presence and began to vary her commute.

Jemisin’s successes were caught up in the foofaraw, too. As the cultural divide sharpened, two blocs of conservative writers began interfering with the Hugos, using a loophole to shape the list of nominees; until it was closed, two years later, people protested by selecting “No award” on ballots. “The Fifth Season” won its award just after the loophole was closed. Accepting her third Hugo, Jemisin stood at the lectern, with the rocket-shaped award beside her, and declared, “This is the year in which I get to smile at all of those naysayers, every single mediocre, insecure wannabe who fixes their mouth to suggest that I do not belong on this stage, that people like me could not possibly have earned such an honor, and that when *they* win it’s ‘meritocracy,’ but when *we* win it’s ‘identity politics.’” Holding up the award, she added, “I get to smile at those people, and lift a massive, shining rocket-shaped finger in their direction.”

In Jemisin’s forthcoming New York novel, “The City We Became,” she borrows from some of her experiences: the aliens induce alt-right trolls to assist them, and the protagonists gird against cyber-harassment. “Places like New York are inherently free-form,” Jemisin told me. “If a bunch of fascists try to take over, New York could die.” She said that she was curious to explore “the ways in which the city, and the energy of a place like this, would resist that.”

In the City Council chambers, where she hoped to place a scene in her next book, Jemisin sat in a balcony and observed the rituals and the moods of Gotham politics. There was a tribute to Pakistan’s founding father, and a bill to force real-estate developers to set aside apartments for the homeless. She was especially keen on the way members conferred in side chats—a narrative opportunity. “I see that they are using a modified version of Robert’s Rules of Order,” she noted.

After three hours, her stamina waned. “This is putting me to sleep,” she whispered, and we stepped out into the cold, under a darkening sky. The night before, a snow squall had enveloped the city and then quickly receded, as if on supernatural command. To the north was the Williamsburg Bridge, which in Jemisin’s new book is destroyed by an alien creature, “like some haunting, bioluminescent deep-sea organism.”

The promotional material for “The City We Became” describes it as her most accessible book. “What seems to be happening, and I don’t know if I want to resist this, is an effort to push me into the

mainstream,” Jemisin said. “I am wrestling with, Do I want to let people call me the next Atwood, or whatever? They always want you to be the next such-and-such. But I am still going to write what I am going to write.” Crossing Broadway, she mentioned an idea that was unrelentingly sci-fi: people who mutate into spacecraft. “Like werewolves, but spaceships,” she said, giggling. “I know, it’s corny. *I admit that it’s corny!* But it is an idea that persists in my head, and I keep wanting to explore it.” ♦

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Jemisin, who has a degree in psychology, is interested in systems of subjugation. Photograph by Rochelle

Brock for The New Yorker

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Several years ago, N. K. Jemisin, the fantasy and science-fiction author, had a dream that shook her. In her sleep, she found herself standing in a surreal tableau with a massif floating in the distance. “It was a chunk of rock shaped like a volcanic cone—a cone-shaped smoking mountain,” she recalled. Standing before the formation was a black woman in her mid-forties, with dreadlocks, who appeared to be holding the volcano aloft with her mind. She was glaring down at Jemisin and radiating anger. Jemisin did not know how she had triggered the woman’s fury, but she believed that, if she did not ameliorate it quickly, the woman would hurl the smoldering massif at her.

Jemisin awoke in a sweat and jotted down what she had seen. “I need to know how that person became who she is—a woman so angry that she was willing to move mountains,” she told me. “She was angry in a slow burn, with the kind of anger that is righteous, enough to change a planet. That’s a person who has been through so much shit that she has been pushed into becoming a leader. That’s an M.L.K. I needed to build a world that would explain her.”

Jemisin’s writing process often begins with dreams: imagery vivid enough to hang on into wakefulness. She does not so much mine them for insight as treat them as portals to hidden worlds. Her tendency is to interrogate what she sees with if/then questions, until her field of vision widens enough for her to glimpse a landscape that can hold a narrative. The inspiration for her debut novel, “The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms” (2010), was a dream vision of two gods. One had dark-as-night hair that contained a starry cosmos of infinite depth; the other, in a child’s body, manipulated planets like toys. From these images, Jemisin spun out a four-hundred-page story about an empire that enslaves its deities. The book established her as a prominent new voice.

Jemisin is black in her mid-forties and wears her hair in dreadlocks. In her author photo, she gazes