



City of Stairs (The Divine Cities)

By Robert Jackson Bennett

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An atmospheric and intrigue-filled novel of dead gods, buried histories, and a mysterious, protean city--from one of America's most acclaimed young fantasy writers.

The city of Bulikov once wielded the powers of the gods to conquer the world, enslaving and brutalizing millions—until its divine protectors were killed. Now Bulikov has become just another colonial outpost of the world's new geopolitical power, but the surreal landscape of the city itself—first shaped, now shattered, by the thousands of miracles its guardians once worked upon it—stands as a constant, haunting reminder of its former supremacy.

Into this broken city steps Shara Thivani. Officially, the unassuming young woman is just another junior diplomat sent by Bulikov's oppressors. Unofficially, she is one of her country's most accomplished spies, dispatched to catch a murderer. But as Shara pursues the killer, she starts to suspect that the beings who ruled this terrible place may not be as dead as they seem—and that Bulikov's cruel reign may not yet be over.

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Editorial Review

Review

"A memorably surreal urbanscape...readers seeking a truly refreshing fantasy milieu should travel to Bulikov, and welcome its conquest."

--*New York Times Book Review*

"A delightful urban fantasy that travels through a city full of Escher-like staircases and alternate realities...A diverse and entertaining cast of old gods fleshes out the ruins of this mysterious city, and Shara's hit-man secretary delivers nonstop action."

--*Washington Post*

"Entertaining yet thought-provoking...Entrancing characters, exciting descriptions and piercingly clear action keep the story moving swiftly and surely to a satisfying conclusion."

--*Seattle Times*

[An] incredible journey through a wondrously weird and surprising world...I found myself both delighted and fascinated as every layer was slowly unpacked. Just the right mix of awesome."

--Tor.com

"Suddenly, the pages are whipping by, 50 at a clip as mysteries are uncovered, miracles happen and assassins begin scaling the walls. ... Bennett is plainly a writer in love with the world he has built — and with good cause. It's a *great* world, original and unique, with a scent and a texture, a sense of deep, bloody history, and a naturally-blended magic living in the stones."

--NPR.org

"Robert Jackson Bennett deserves a huge audience. This is the book that will earn it for him. A story that draws you in, brilliant world building, and oh my God, Sigrud. You guys are going to love Sigrud."

--Brent Weeks, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Way of Shadows*

"Smart and sardonic, with wry echoes from classic tales mixed up in an inventive, winning narrative.

[Bennett is] a master of the genre."

--*Kirkus*

"An excellent spy story wrapped in a vivid imaginary world."

--*Library Journal* (starred)

A rich, layered, thoughtful story, full of gods and magic and characters that feel unflinchingly *true*...every once in a while I read a book that's so well done, I find myself wanting to punch the author in the face out of pure envy. Congratulations, Mr. Bennett – you just made the face-punching list!

--Jim C. Hines, Hugo Award winning author of *Libriomancer*

"Alien and human at the same time, Bennett's world is engrossing and fascinating. The pacing kept me reading far later than was healthy."

--Mur Lafferty, Campbell Award winning author of *Playing for Keeps*

About the Author

ROBERT JACKSON BENNETT is the author of *American Elsewhere*, *The Troupe*, *The Company Man*, and *Mr. Shivers*. His books have been awarded the Edgar Award, the Shirley Jackson, and the Philip K. Dick Citation of Excellence. He lives in Austin with his wife and son.

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And Olvos said to them: “Why have you done this, my children? Why is the sky wreathed with smoke? Why have you made war in far places, and shed blood in strange lands?”

And they said to Her: “You blessed us as Your people, and we rejoiced, and were happy. But we found those who were not Your people, and they would not become Your people, and they were willful and ignorant of You. They would not open their ears to Your songs, or lay Your words upon their tongues. So we dashed them upon the rocks and threw down their houses and shed their blood and scattered them to the winds, and we were right to do so. For we are Your people. We carry Your blessings. We are Yours, and so we are right. Is this not what You said?”

And Olvos was silent.

--BOOK OF THE RED LOTUS, PART IV, 13.51–13.59

Someone Even Worse

I believe the question, then,” says Vasily Yaroslav, “is one of intent. I am aware that the court might disagree with me--this court has always ruled on the side of effect rather than intent--but you cannot seriously fine an honest, modest businessman such a hefty fee for an unintentional damage, can you? Especially when the damage is, well, one of abstraction?”

A cough echoes in the courtroom, dashing the pregnant pause. Through the window the shadows of drifting clouds race across the walls of Bulikov.

Governor Turyin Mulaghesh suppresses a sigh and checks her watch. If he goes on for six more minutes, she thinks, we’ll have a new record.

“And you have heard testimony from my friends,” says Yaroslav, “my neighbors, my employees, my family, my .??. my bankers. People who know me well, people who have no reason to lie! They have told you again and again that this is all just an unfortunate coincidence!”

Mulaghesh glances to her right along the high court bench. Prosecutor Jindash, his face the very picture of concern, is doodling a picture of his own hand on the official Ministry of Foreign Affairs letterhead. To her left, Chief Diplomat Troonyi is staring with unabashed interest at the well-endowed girl in the first row of the courtroom seats. Next to Troonyi, at the end of the high court bench, is an empty chair normally occupied by the visiting professor Dr. Efreem Pangyui, who has been more and more absent from these proceedings lately. But frankly, Mulaghesh is only too happy for his absence: his presence in the courtroom, let alone in this whole damn country, has caused enough headaches for her.

“The court”--Yaroslav pounds on the table twice--“must see reason!”

I must find someone else, thinks Mulaghesh, to come to these things in my place. But this is wishful

thinking: as the polis governor of Bulikov, the capital city of the Continent, it is her duty to preside over all trials, no matter how frivolous.

“So you all have heard, and you must understand, that I never intended the sign that stood outside of my business to be .??. to be of the nature that it was!”

The crowd in the courtroom mutters as Yaroslav skirts this sensitive subject. Troonyi strokes his beard and leans forward as the girl in the front row crosses her legs. Jindash is coloring in the fingernails on his sketch. Mulaghesh casts an eye over the crowd, cataloging the various ailments and diseases: the boy with the crutches, rickets; the woman with the scabbed face, pox; and she can't tell what's wrong with the man in the corner, though she dearly hopes what he's covered in is mud. Yaroslav and a few others, as mildly successful Continentals, can afford running water, and thus in their examples one can observe the Continental specimen free of filth: pale, heavy-featured, dark-eyed, and in the case of the men, sporting untamed mountains of beards. Mulaghesh and the other Saypuris, by stark contrast, are short, slender, and dark-skinned, with somewhat long noses and narrow chins, and as Troonyi's ridiculous bearskin coat attests, they are much more accustomed to warm Saypuri climates, far across the South Seas.

To a distant extent--very distant--Mulaghesh can understand Troonyi and Jindash's disinterest: the Continent is steadfastly, defiantly, stubbornly backward, to the degree that one sometimes forgets the many unsettling reasons why Saypur bothers occupying such a miserable nation. (Though can we really call ourselves occupiers, thinks Mulaghesh, if we've been here for nearly seventy-five years? When do we graduate to residents?) If Mulaghesh were to offer everyone in the courtroom money right now and say, “Here, here is something to get you the medicine you need, to buy you fresh water,” it's all too likely the Continentals would spit in her hand before accepting a single red cent.

Mulaghesh understands why they resent them so. For though they may look like no more than paupers and beggars, these people were once the most powerful and dangerous human beings alive. Which they remember, of course, Mulaghesh thinks as she watches one man stare at her with naked rage. Hence why they hate us so .??.

Yaroslav summons up his nerve.

Here it comes, thinks Mulaghesh.

“I never intended,” he says clearly, “for my sign to reference any Divinity, any trace of the celestial, nor any god!”

A quiet hum as the courtroom fills with whispers. Mulaghesh and the rest of the Saypuris on the bench remain unimpressed by the dramatic nature of this claim. “How do they not know,” mutters Jindash, “that this happens at every single Worldly Regulations trial?”

“Quiet,” whispers Mulaghesh.

This public breach of the law emboldens Yaroslav. “Yes, I .??. I never intended to show fealty to any Divinity! I know nothing of the Divinities, of what they were or who they were .??.”

Mulaghesh barely stops herself from rolling her eyes. Every Continental knows something about the Divinities: to claim otherwise would be akin to claiming ignorance that rain is wet.

“... and thus I could not have known that the sign I posted outside of my millinery unfortunately, coincidentally, mimicked a Divinity’s sigil!”

A pause. Mulaghesh glances up, realizing Yaroslav has stopped speaking. “Are you finished, Mr. Yaroslav?” she asks.

Yaroslav hesitates. “Yes? Yes. Yes, I believe so, yes.”

“Thank you. You may take your seat.”

Prosecutor Jindash stands, takes the floor, and produces a large photograph of a painted sign that reads: YAROSLAV HATS. Below the letters on the sign is a largish symbol--a straight line ending in a curlicue pointing down that has been altered slightly to suggest the outline of the brim of a hat.

Jindash swivels on his heels to face the crowd. “Would this be your sign, Mr. Yaroslav?” Jindash mispronounces the man’s name. Mulaghesh can’t quite tell if this is intentional: Continental names are so teeming with slavs and -ilyas and -ulyas and whatnot that navigating introductions is nigh impossible for anyone who hasn’t lived here for more than a decade, as Mulaghesh has.

“Y-yes,” says Yaroslav.

“Thank you.” Jindash flourishes the photograph before the bench, the crowd, everyone. “Let the court please see that Mr. Yaroslav has confirmed this sign--yes, this sign--as his own.”

CD Troonyi nods as if having gained deeply perceptive insight. The crowd of Continentals mutters anxiously. Jindash walks to his briefcase with the air of a magician before a trick--How I hate, Mulaghesh thinks, that this theatrical little shit got assigned to Bulikov--and produces a large engraving of a similar symbol: a straight line ending in a curlicue. But in this instance, the symbol has been rendered to look like it is made of dense, twisting vines, even sporting tiny leaves at the curlicue.

The crowd gasps at the reveal of this sign. Some move to make holy gestures, but stop themselves when they realize where they are. Yaroslav himself flinches.

Troonyi snorts. “Know nothing of the Divinities indeed ...?”

“Were the estimable Dr. Efreem Pangyui here”--Jindash gestures to the empty chair beside Troonyi--“I have no doubt that he would quickly identify this as the holy sigil of the Divinity ...? I apologize, the deceased Divinity ...?”

The crowd mutters in outrage; Mulaghesh makes a note to reward Jindash’s arrogance with a transfer to someplace cold and inhospitable, with plenty of rats.

Jindash finishes: “... known as Ahanas. This sigil, specifically, was believed by Continentals to imbue great fecundity, fertility, and vigor. For a milliner it would suggest, however peripherally, that his hats imbued their wearers with these same properties. Though Mr. Yaroslav may protest it, we have heard from Mr. Yaroslav’s financiers that his business experienced a robust uptick after installing this sign outside of his property! In fact, his quarterly revenue increased by twenty-three percent.” Jindash sets down the engraving, and makes a two with the fingers of one hand and a three with the other. “Twenty. Three. Percent.”

“Oh my goodness,” says Troonyi.

Mulaghesh covers her eyes in embarrassment.

“How did you .??. ?” says Yaroslav.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Yaroslav,” says Jindash. “I believe I have the floor? Thank you. I will continue. The Worldly Regulations were passed by the Saypuri Parliament in 1650, outlawing any public acknowledgment of the Divine on the Continent, however peripheral. One may no more mutter the name of a Divinity on the Continent than fall to their knees in the street shrieking prayers. One need only make any acknowledgment--any acknowledgment--of the Divine to be in violation of the Worldly Regulations, and thus incur punishment. The significant financial gain does suggest that Mr. Yaroslav installed the sign with both knowledge and intent--”

“That’s a lie!” cries Yaroslav.

--of its Divine nature. It does not matter that the Divinity the sigil referenced is dead, and the sigil could not have bestowed any properties on anyone or anything. The acknowledgment is made. As such, Mr. Yaroslav’s actions incur the formal punishment of a fine of”--Jindash consults a note--“fifteen thousand drekels.”

The crowd shifts and mutters until it is a low roar.

Yaroslav sputters. “You can’t .??. You can’t possibly .??.”

Jindash retakes his seat at the bench. He gives Mulaghesh a proud smile; Mulaghesh strongly considers smashing it with her fist.

She wishes she could somehow bypass all this pomp and pageantry. Worldly Regulations cases usually only go to court every five months or so: the vast majority of all WR infractions are settled out of court, between Mulaghesh’s office and the defendant. Very, very rarely does anyone feel confident or righteous enough to bring their case to court; and when they do, it’s always a dramatic, ridiculous affair.

Mulaghesh looks out over the packed courthouse; there are people standing at the back, as if this dull municipal trial were grand theater. But they are not here to see the trial, she thinks. She glances down the high court bench to Dr. Efrem Panyui’s empty chair. They’re here to see the man who’s caused me so many problems.???

However, whenever a WR case does go to trial, it’s almost always a conviction. In fact, Mulaghesh believes she has acquitted only three people in her two decades as polis governor. And we convict almost every case, she thinks, because the law requires us to prosecute them for living their way of life.

She clears her throat. “The prosecution has finished its case. You may now make your rebuttal, Mr. Yaroslav.”

“But .??. But this isn’t fair!” says Yaroslav. “Why do you get to bandy about our sigils, our holy signs, but we can’t?”

“The polis governor’s quarters”--Jindash waves a hand at the walls--“are technically Saypuri soil. We are not under the jurisdiction of the Worldly Regulations, which apply only to the Continent.”

“That’s .??. That’s ridiculous! No, it’s not just ridiculous, it’s .??. it’s heretical!” He stands to his feet.

The courtroom is dead silent. Everyone stares at Yaroslav.

Oh, excellent, thinks Mulaghesh. We have another protest.

“You have no right to do these things to us,” says Yaroslav. “You strip our buildings of their holy art, loot and pillage our libraries, arrest people for mentioning a name. .??.”

“We are not here,” says Jindash, “to debate the law, or history.”

“But we are! The Worldly Regulations deny us our history! I .??. I have never been able to see that sign you showed me, the sign of, of .??.”

“Of your Divinity,” says Jindash. “Ahanas.”

Mulaghesh can see two City Fathers of Bulikov--their version of elected councilmen--staring at Jindash with cold rage.

“Yes!” says Yaroslav. “I was never allowed such a thing! And she was our god! Ours!”

The crowd looks back at the court guards, expecting them to charge forward and hack down Yaroslav where he stands.

“This is not exactly a rebuttal, is it?” asks Troonyi.

“And you .??. you let that man”--Yaroslav points a finger at Dr. Efrem Pangyui’s empty seat--“come into our country, and read all of our histories, all of our stories, all of our legends that we ourselves do not know! That we ourselves are not allowed to know!”

Mulaghesh winces. She knew this would come up eventually.

Mulaghesh is sensitive to the fact that, in the full scope of history, Saypur’s global hegemony is minutes old. For many hundreds of years before the Great War, Saypur was the Continent’s colony--established and enforced, naturally, by the Continent’s Divinities--and few have forgotten this in Bulikov: why else would the City Fathers call the current arrangement “the masters serving the servants”? In private only, of course.

So it was a show of enormous negligence and stupidity on the part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to ignore these tensions and allow the esteemed Dr. Pangyui to travel here, to Bulikov, to study all the history of the Continent: history that the Continentals are legally prevented from studying themselves. Mulaghesh warned the Ministry it’d wreak havoc in Bulikov, and as she predicted, Dr. Pangyui’s time in Bulikov has not exemplified the mission of peace and understanding he supposedly arrived under: she has had to deal with protests, threats, and once, assault, when someone threw a stone at Dr. Pangyui but accidentally struck a police officer on the chin.

“That man,” says Yaroslav, still pointing at the empty chair, “is an insult to Bulikov and the entire Continent! That man is .??. is the manifestation of the utter contempt Saypur holds for the Continent!”

“Oh, now,” says Troonyi, “that’s a bit much, isn’t it?”

“He gets to read the things no one else can read!” says Yaroslav. “He gets to read things written by our fathers, our grandfathers!”

“He is allowed to do so,” says Jindash, “by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. His mission here is of an ambassadorial nature. And this is not part of your tria--”

“Just because you won the War doesn’t mean you can do whatever you like!” says Yaroslav. “And just because we lost it doesn’t mean you can strip us of everything we value!”

“You tell them, Vasily!” shouts someone at the back of the room.

Mulaghesh taps her gavel; immediately, the room falls silent.

Users Review

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