



Mage Against the Machine

Shaun Barger

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Harry Potter meets *The Terminator* in this action-packed adventure about a young man who discovers that everything he believed about his world is a lie.

The year is 2120. The humans are dead. The mages have retreated from the world after a madman blew up civilization with weaponized magical technology. Safe within domes that protect them from the nuclear wasteland on the other side, the mages have spent the last century putting their lives back together.

Nikolai is obsessed with artifacts from twentieth-century human life: mage-crafted replica Chuck Taylors on his feet, Schwarzenegger posters on his walls, Beatlemania still alive and well in his head. But he's also tasked with a higher calling—to maintain the Veils that protect mage-kind from the hazards of the wastes beyond. As a cadet in the Mage King's army, Nik has finally found what he always wanted—a purpose. But when confronted by one of his former instructors gone rogue, Nik tumbles into a dark secret. The humans weren't nuked into oblivion—they're still alive. Not only that, outside the domes a war rages between the last enclaves of free humans and vast machine intelligences.

Outside the dome, unprepared and on the run, Nik finds Jem. Jem is a Runner for the Human Resistance. A ballerina-turned-soldier by the circumstances of war, Jem is more than just a human—her cybernetic enhancement mods make her faster, smarter, and are the only things that give her a fighting chance against the artificial beings bent on humanity's eradication.

Now Nik faces an impossible decision: side with the mages and let humanity die out? Or stand with Jem and the humans—and risk endangering everything he knows and loves?

Mage Against the Machine Details

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From Reader Review Mage Against the Machine for online ebook

Louis Charton says

Excellent read. Action, suspense, and Magic; what more could you want? Great descriptions, it keeps the mind reeling with magical possibilities. And you don't have to be a magic geek to love this book. I'm new to the fantasy genre, never read Harry Potter (I know, I know...), and was hooked from the start.

Daniel Rowinski says

Intriguing premise with, mostly, direct and natural action. I found it fun and intriguing with the right hint of emotion, even if that emotion is most often angst and guilt. Even at its length (nearly 500 pages, quite long for a debut), I found it very easy to read.

There are some sticky points, especially at the end where you aren't quite sure what is going on. There is a penultimate scene where one of the two protagonists is fighting a "Moonwatch" and the mage/wizard character does something seemingly extraordinary, but the whole scene is rushed and incomplete. It seemed like it wanted to be a "Gohan unleashes his true power" moment, but it doesn't quite land like it could. There are other examples of rushed scenes like that through the novel, which can be a bit distracting, but the conceptual clarity and worldbuilding is good enough to overcome some of the more fraught moments of sticky prose.

Overall, yes, I would recommend it. Barger shows talent to spin a yarn that should give this legs for a series (at least one more book) if the publisher wants to go down that road.

Bria says

Mage Against the Machine has a fantastic title. And that may be the best thing I can say about this book.

If you know me, you know that I don't particularly enjoy writing bad reviews of anything. I do my best to find at least something that I liked about every book or show. When a review copy of Mage Against the Machine showed up on my doorstep, I was definitely intrigued. The premise is fascinating to say the least and there's a lot that could potentially have been done with it. It's the execution that's lacking because there is just far too much going on. Also the protagonist makes me want to smack him over the head.

The other big problem with the book comes from its female characters. Unfortunately, it is painfully obvious they were written by a man. It's great that Jemma is a queer character and is in a relationship with another woman but the relationship just... happens. There's no emotional depth to it. And it doesn't get better the more we get to know Jemma.

Like I said, there were some really interesting concepts but this book was just... not for me. At all. And I'm very glad to finally be done reading it.

Mogsy (MMOGC) says

3 of 5 stars at The BiblioSanctum <https://bibliosanctum.com/2018/12/06/...>

“Harry Potter meets The Terminator”—what could go wrong? Well, as we all know, even good ideas can fail if the execution is not that great. And this was my overall impression with *Mage Against the Machine*, which had the advantage of a solid concept behind its premise. The only problem was that the story took way too long to gain momentum and generate interest.

To its credit though, the book doesn’t waste time throwing the reader into the thick of things. The story opens in 2120, and our world has become a very different place. Humans are gone, dead, destroyed by a nuclear holocaust years ago—or that’s what Nikolai Strauss has been led to believe. A young wizard living in a sealed and magical dome, Nik has been completely oblivious to the realities happening on the other side of the Veils that conceal and protect mage-kind from the dangers of the wasteland. He’s entirely wrapped up in his own aspirations to become a full-fledged soldier in the Mage King’s army. Living in the shadow of his mother’s disreputable history, he feels he has to do more to prove himself, but when the massive chip on his shoulder gets him in trouble and causes him to go on the run, he is confronted with the truth which changes his outlook on everything.

Outside the dome, Nik meets Jem, a cybernetically enhanced ballerina-turned-soldier for the human resistance. As it turns out, humanity has not died out. Survivors like Jem have been living under the tyrannical rule of artificial intelligences called Synths, fighting for their lives and freedom. Now Nik has a decision to make. With the resistance barely hanging on, should he return to the safety of magic behind the Veils, or help Jem with her last-ditch—and long-shot—efforts to try to save the human race from extinction?

At times, it was really hard to determine what kind of book *Mage Against the Machine* wanted to be. The tone of the narrative did not feel too YA, though the juvenile behaviors and attitudes of the characters—Nikolai especially—sometimes made me think otherwise. It was extremely difficult to sympathize with Nik, for whom “belligerent and sulky” seemed to be a default setting. Since the publisher seems keen on the Harry Potter comparison, I’m going to draw parallels between Nik and Harry from *Order of the Phoenix*, in which the latter was a hot-headed, boiling cauldron of hormones severely in need of some anger management classes. This was essentially Nik, who was bitter and resentful to the point of irrationality, whose rage often got the better of him and was the cause of his own misfortunes and misery. This made it nearly impossible to feel sorry for him, let alone root for him.

Jem fared a little better, though for the first half of the book, her chapters were shockingly uneventful and tedious, considering she was the one living in the wasteland terrorized by murderous machines. In essence, this unbalanced pacing was the book’s main undoing; nothing of genuine importance happens until past the halfway mark, when our two characters finally encounter each other. After that, the story picks up—becoming quite enjoyable, in fact—though by this point, a lot of the damage has already been done and I could not justify giving this book more than a middling rating.

I will, however, give the author props for a few things I felt were done really well. Like I said, the second half of this book really shines, infusing the plot with genre-mashing goodness and the kind of thrilling action that keeps you turning the pages. It almost makes up for the lackluster beginning. I also liked the dynamic between Nik and Jem. No romance arc here, thankfully. Their relationship is actually a complicated one, full of nuances and conflict. They’re both looking out for the interests of their own people which causes no small amount of friction in their burgeoning friendship, leading to some tense moments later on when we get closer

to the end of the novel.

Mage Against the Machine being a debut, I knew there was a real chance of running into a few hitches, especially with pacing. But boy, the first half could have really used another round of structural edits to shorten it by paring down some of the unnecessary drama. For me, the real story didn't begin until Nikolai and Jem's worlds finally collided, and I felt that this crucial turning point should have occurred much sooner than it did in this 500+ page novel. This flaw aside though, I do have to applaud Shaun Barger for attempting something truly original; the post-apocalyptic genre needs more ideas like this to keep things fun and fresh. It'll be interesting to see what else he'll bring to the table in the future with more time and experience.

Phillip Joseph says

I'm a sucker for torture. Maybe that's what attracted me to this book with its grim yet fantastical cover and premise. Maybe that's why I'm so bored with the typical fare in the Sci-fi and Fantasy genres. This book is a welcome breath of fresh air.

Praise:

Firstly, the thematic and tonal consistency of this book is astounding. Everything, from the overarching plot to the characterization of each individual in it, informs themes buried in age-old questions: Can untested goodness actually be considered good? Is escapism dangerous? Is there a limit to what one should sacrifice for love?

Secondly, damn. Finally, a main character with flaws other than being 'too nice' or 'too meek' or some other faux fatal flaw that really only serves to bolster the protagonist's sympathetic standing in the eyes of the reader. Nik is fucked up. He's not right every time - most of the time, even. But he makes human choices. Choices that are uncomfortable, choices that make sense, choices that speak to the trauma his character has endured. Finally, past issues actually manifest in a fictitious person and aren't dismissed as immediately as they're introduced so that the author can keep readers comfortable or just use that trauma to make their character seem even more righteous when they pick the obvious hero's path.

Also, the setting is vivid and immersive. The mostly separate worlds of advanced technology and arcane magic collide as the author fleshes out two societies, both equally dystopian. The book has massive scope but isn't strained by it. You can tell someone took their time with this.

Not Quite Praise:

This book isn't for everyone. Sometimes it just HURTS. If you're looking to stay comfortable from start to finish then this book isn't recommended. Honestly, I'm a little unused to actions in books having actual consequence that isn't negated by convenient writing.

As refreshing as the plot is, though, after you get into the rhythm of the narrative you can quite easily see where things are headed.

If you like this book, I'd recommend reading the Skullduggery series. Honestly, not as solidly written as this one, but they're easy reads, loads of fun, and, even though they don't seem it at first, /profoundly/ PAINFULL.

Mike says

3.75 out of 5 stars

In 2120, humans can no longer reproduce, artificially intelligent overlords have a stranglehold on humanity, and small communities of mages are hidden throughout the world. Nikolai, a newly minted mage Edge Guard, protects the border between his world and ours, while Jem, a cybernetically enhanced human, smuggles contraband away from the watchful eyes of Earth's AI overseers.

What's so alluring about this book is that its characters are basically living in two different genres. Nikolai is attempting to come-of-age in a Harry Potter-ish mage community, while Jem is just trying to survive and overthrow evil AIs in a Terminator/Fallout/Children of Men-ish post-apocalyptic world. Jumping between their perspectives kept me engaged and kept things fresh throughout this lengthy tome while I waited for their storylines to converge. It did seem that Nikolai's story was more fleshed out than Jemma's, but I enjoyed them both for what they were.

And although I winced at a few overexplain-y info dumps, bristled at some cringe-y romance, and was slightly disappointed by a concluding act that somehow feels both rushed and overlong, I found *Mage Against the Machine* to be a fun genre-mashup that was an utterly enjoyable ride.

My thanks to Edelweiss and the publisher for an advanced reader copy in exchange for an honest review.
<https://spikegelato.com/2018/09/28/re...>

Rana says

OMGOMGOMGOMGOMGOMGOMG. Fucking brilliant fun. Such a fantastic premise.

THIS WAS SO WELL PACED THAT I SKIPPED ANY BUMPY PARTS. I mean, I assume there were bumpy parts, it's a debut. But honestly, if there were, I have no idea because I was too busy flying through the pages.

After recently DNFing another book that had two different parts that never gelled, this gelled perfectly even way before anything came together literally. I don't think I would have been so terribly excited by these stories if they were separate but together, rocked my fucking world. SO PLEASE GIVE ME MORE NOW PLEASE. WHEN DO THE NEXT BOOKS COME OUT? I NEED THEM.

And also, thank you fucking literary gods for not making the male and female protagonists bone or want to bone or think about boning or whatever. So fucking over that trope. Also, thank you for making these people annoying and stupid and unlikable. I LOVE TERRIBLE PEOPLE. THEY ARE WORTH SAVING AND THE BEST HEROES ARE ASSHOLES. BECAUSE YOU KNOW WHAT? HEROES ARE PEOPLE AND PEOPLE ARE ASSHOLES.

And also, guys. Do you know who DongWon is? He is basically my book whisperer. I mean, I think he's an editor or agent or whatever, he's something and I have loved basically every book that he has ever repped or

recommended. And this book was no exception. So, this PSA was basically to tell you that if you think you have similar tastes to me, get on his twitter page.

Elisabeth Jewell says

Fresh and exhilarating, even for a jaded and bored fantasy fan such as myself. Stayed up late several nights in a row, and let my kids eat too many junk snacks in order to burn through the pages.

Darrin Fiddler says

Finally a book equal to Pierce Brown's Red Rising series!

Mages versus robots, clashing in a post-Apocalyptic world. Yeah. Can't go wrong there with beautiful writing and characters. The world is like home, yet so not. I had a blast reading this one and cannot wait for the next!

4 1/2 stars

ASalazar says

Practically devoured the book, only to find the meal was cut short at the end.

The core premise (runaway science vs magic) is hugely attractive, it has plenty of action passages (sometimes barely justified), it has a doubly imaginative world building (needs more spells, though), and many characters are intriguing, even if not all are well-rounded... Why did I give it only 3 stars?

1. Too slow. The pacing is quick, but the plot advances slowly. A daring escape takes page after page after page, wasting precious space as the book nears its end, meanwhile loose threads keep piling.
2. Read bait. The book is evidently meant to be the first in a series, yet it could have done more with 500 pages. The ending feels incomplete, thrilling but hungry for real answers to its own questions.
3. Language. Imagine Harry Potter in his twenties, throwing f-bombs because it's cool. Imagine everyone important doing it occasionally. It's not very frequent, just enough to be distracting.

All being said, I will definitely read the next book in the series. I even changed the rating to 4 stars at the last moment because it's not a masterpiece, but it's a decent and entertaining book.

Kathy says

DNF @50%

I tried with this one.

I really, *really* did.

But between me and the book, something's gotta give and the book is, well, a *book*. It doesn't have emotions. It doesn't have a network of neurons all simultaneously screaming "Abort! Abort!" The book will remain cool and unbothered and utterly pristine.

I can't say the same for my tablet which has suffered from verbal abuse and my fantasies of hurling it against the wall.

Or the future of my tenancy in this apartment. Because I can't count the number of times I yelled "What???" and "UGH" as I was reading through this, and I'm sure my neighbours were all privy to my 1 AM musings.

I actually considered DNF at about 1/4 of the way in, and the only excuse I can give for continuing is that I was overcome by an especially strong bout of masochism.

Here's the thing. Nothing about the premise or the cover or the marketing screamed "DNF." *Harry Potter* meets *Terminator*? Sign me up! And if you look at it from a wide angle, you can see that **it's got some really interesting material to work with**: an Earth that's been taken over by machines, a human Resistance group created to combat them, a mage world that occupies the same space as the human world, and some snappy action scenes sprinkled throughout.

All of that is negated by the characters.

One character in particular.

Nikolai Strauss gets the honour of being the most irritating, rage-inducing protagonist I've come across this year, his glowing list of qualities including arrogance, entitlement, pettiness, and fits of jealous rage. I have *zero* good things to say about him.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Nik is a mage and a member of the Edge Guard which the book unceremoniously tells you right from the start is "a powerful government order charged with the defense and maintenance of magical domed Veils that hid the magi from the human world, which had been reduced to lifeless, magically radioactive wastelands a century prior, in 2020."

Clunky worldbuilding info isn't all that the story throws at you from the first page. There are also reveals of long-buried family secrets, confession of betrayals, blooming of romance and then *unblooming* of it, and all within the first 50-ish pages.

Naturally the next half of the book would be dedicated to untangling some of these mysterious and exploring more of the world, right?

Yeah, no.

The next half of the book is dedicated to Nik trying to get with a girl he likes but getting the "I'm not one for relationships" treatment, brooding about it for some bit, meeting his ex-girlfriend and her new boyfriend, and then brooding about *that* in the most childish ways imaginable.

At one point, after hearing about the boyfriend's promotion, he stomps to his bedroom, slams the door and thinks, "okay, that was kind of immature," and then proceeds to rip away all the posters on his walls in a fit of rage. Which is, of course, the *far more* mature option.

And the biggest kicker is that these **childish fits come with dollops of self-awareness**. Comments like "He knew he was being immature" and "What was he doing?" doesn't make him any more likeable or complex, it just makes his actions all the more baffling.

The side characters fare no better, with some verging on caricature-levels of ridiculous. I mean, just *what* am I supposed to do with dialogue like *this*?

"I have a girlfriend now. And you know what that means?"

"That you--"

"Sex!" he interrupted. "And I don't have to tell you, but this sex thing? It is some seriously good shit."

The other protagonist, Jem, is much more likeable, if a little bland. Through her PoV chapters we get glimpses of the Resistance group's conflict with the Synths, and *Terminator* vibes are most definitely present here in a good way.

But then halfway through the book I came across this one nonsensical sequence of events involving Jem and her love interest and I just had to call it quits. While a non-irritating protagonist is a big plus, I generally like my characters to come with credible motivations and actions that make sense.

If you can ignore cringey romance and unlikable characters, the story might be entertaining in a messy kind of way. It wasn't to be for me, unfortunately.

Review copy provided by the publisher via Edelweiss

Alex Can Read says

Mage Against the Machine is a true Science Fantasy novel. Strong story threads of both science fiction dystopia and utopic fantasy are woven together to create a seamless blend of Science Fantasy.

The synopsis focuses on Nik but a good half of the book is from Jem's perspective and I wish she'd have been more represented in the synopsis as she's a much more compelling narrator to me than Nik. Nik, unfortunately, has a terrible case of the poor-me's and I found him incredibly unlikeable, which resulted in the loss of the star. He makes terrible decisions, is aware that he's making terrible decisions and then doubles down on the terrible decisions with more terrible decisions. Half of the Nik's parts of the book are him throwing tantrums.

Throughout the book Jem also makes bad decisions, but at the end of the day, her motivations made more sense, and wherever she could she made decisions that were the best she thought she could do at the time. She may choose wrong, but she's choosing from a place I can sympathize with. I largely enjoyed her POV sections.

The overall story, unlikeable Nik aside, was a really enjoyable read. Two very different worlds exist and Barger did an excellent job fleshing the two societies out. I loved the tension he built when describing Jem's running operations. Nik's world was so interesting and I could read hours more about Focals and how the images function. The layers of conspiracy ran deep and I found that plot really engaging. I also loved the details like Nik's handmade knockoff Chucks. Barger obviously spent a lot of time working out how his two universes would work and it shows in his prose.

I'm looking forward to the second book, and I desperately hope Nik does some serious character growth in the next installment of the series.

Mage Against the Machine hits shelves October 30.

Thank you to Saga Press for providing me with an eARC of the book in exchange for my honest review.

Ari Fleeman says

Amazing book! Beautiful world building and deep characters I cared about the whole way through. The main character is so well thought out I was constantly rooting for him even when he was being an ass! I can't wait to see more from this author and from this world.

Derrick Sumerel says

A thrilling good ride!!!

Wow. I've never been fond of magic and technology meshing but Barger does a great job and had me hooked the whole time. The characters, plot, and the world he created were all spot on. I can't wait for the next one.

Dan says

Great read, started and done in less than 24 hours... Mixed my 2 favorite genres (SciFi/Fantasy) and was a great adventure. Hoping this new author followed up with a sequel!
