



# The Light Ages

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## **The Light Ages** Ian R. MacLeod

In a bleak and gritty England, in a fantastical Age of Industry, the wealth that comes from magic is both revered and reviled. Here, an ambitious young man is haunted by his childhood love--a woman determined to be a part of the world he despises.

## **The Light Ages Details**

Date : Published April 26th 2005 by Ace (first published May 2003)

ISBN : 9780441012749

Author : Ian R. MacLeod

Format : Paperback 496 pages

Genre : Fantasy, Science Fiction, Steampunk, Fiction, Alternate History

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# From Reader Review *The Light Ages* for online ebook

## Ben Babcock says

It's a shame. I really enjoyed *Journeys* , but my first attempt at novel-length Ian R. MacLeod falls short.

*The Light Ages* takes place in an alternative England where the ability to manipulate *aether* has jumpstarted steam engine technology somewhat. Other technologies, like electricity, have fallen by the wayside as too unreliable. The result is a grittier, dirtier, more magical and more chaotic industrialized England.

My problems stem from the writing style. MacLeod doesn't value the nature of the scene in this book. Narration is interminable, and very little seems to happen—or things happen, but we're told about them instead of being shown them. Ten chapters and a hundred pages in, and I don't really have a handle on what the stakes are or why I should care. It's a drab, dusty, dreary place to live, and I sympathize with Robert a little bit ... but why, exactly, is he special? So far MacLeod hasn't bothered to answer that, or drop more than a few frustratingly dim clues.

I went into this looking for a good ol' fashioned fantasy novel—by which I mean, something that has a little magic, a little conflict, a little fun. There's plenty of magic in here, but it's constrained. There's conflict here, but it's all in the background, under the surface, and it never boils over to the point of holding my attention. There is no fun to be had here, at least not from what I've read so far.

By all means, you might enjoy this book much more than I did—I don't think it's bad, but I just don't want to read it right now.

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## Carole says

I have just picked up this book and the writing is wonderful. I have read six pages and only pause to hold myself back from devouring it in a rush of gluttony so I can savor the writing. I will have to read this slowly and reread passages so I can completely immerse myself in the prose. This is the most entrancing book I have read in a very long time. I want this experience to last.

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## Nicole Mackey says

All right, I am giving up on this book. I'm a quarter of the way in and still not engaged with the main character. The descriptions, while comprehensive, are heavy handed and verbose. I keep losing the plot in the midst of all the 'color.' I've been working at this book for two weeks now. That is more than it takes me to finish a book and I just can't get into it. I'm very disappointed, as I picked it up after reading a great review. Time to move on.

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## Eli says

Finishing this book was a bit like being hit by a truck. In the good way. *The Light Ages* has almost everything I love in a sf/f novel: a plot that drops me into the world and leaves it up to me to figure out what's going on; a mystery revealed piece by piece; social issues I didn't feel hit over the head with; opposing but equally "right" sides (no "these people are evil because the author said so"); a touch of romance...I could keep going on. There's a wee bit of aimlessness in the middle, but once I saw how everything fit together, even that became clearer. And the ending was so beautifully bittersweet and hard-hitting.

Maybe this book isn't for everyone, but without a doubt it's for me.

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### **Tamara says**

There's a revolution in this book, but it turns out you need to care about the past for it's shattering to have any emotional or narrative impact. When one character accuses the protagonists of trying to destroy her world, it means nothing, as we never got to have any real sense of her world and why it would matter to her. This is odd, given the slow, slow start and generally languorous pace, but this is all concerned with the rather tedious childhood of the protagonist and manages to never get across much real worldbuilding.

It's possible that it merely aims not to glamorize the past, but the book is explicitly about the *act* of the revolution itself, not the doctrinal differences between the fantasy capitalism and (failed) fantasy syndicalism of before and after. As such, it's vague, dreamy atmospheric vibe holds up well the confused, frustrated loneliness of the arcs of its heroes. The protagonist tries to substitute unrequited longing for a relationship and politics for wonder, and the revolution merely goes round again. It fails to fulfill *desire* and the personal remains the personal. The revolution becomes a hollow shell over the skeleton of the *magical*, that the characters turn to again and again to provide that which reality cannot.

It's ultimately a powerful notion, that our own flawed needs and weaknesses, our need to be someone we are not, underpin the structures of oppression. It's just too long by half and could have used more of a plot.

Recommended for those more interested in reflection than action.

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### **Marvin Marc says**

[grabbed from this site][return][return]This creation owes much to Charles Dickens. It also owes much to Mervyn Peake at least in a Gormenghastish way, but the writing is all McLeod. This is a sumptuous book, with a wonderful use of language. If you want a whiz-bang adventure story, well, sorry. This one won't do.[return][return]Robbie Brown was born in what we might think of as 1876 in England. But not our England. Note the day of the week he was born; Sixshiftday. As you read on, you find that the "Guilds" have done away with the old 6 days of work and one of rest. Now men work 12 days, Firstshiftday through Twelfthshiftday, and wonder of wonders, get Halfshiftday and then Noshiftday. Aren't the mighty Guilds kind?[return][return]Bracebridge is a mining town in West Yorkshire that mines a rare commodity. Aether. The magic of the world, the Magick of Faery, has been extracted, and converted to a wondrous liquid which with the proper spells can build castles in the air and allow shoddy workmanship to become usable, and even valuable, and create unicorns, dragons, pitbeasts. As in the extraction and refinement of radioactive material, aether is dangerous, and Robert's mother is contaminated a number of years before our story starts when

Robbie is seven. She turns into a troll and is taken away.[return][return]The story moves through the stages of Robbie's life, first as a child when he meets Annalise, the changeling girl who is the center of his life while swirling through his periphery, his move to London, falling in with a thief who is also a political activist desirous of bringing down the Guilds, his political activism, and his "illegal entry" into the Guilds. In a sense, I am minded of Starman Jones by Robert Heinlein, from the standpoint of the characterization of the Guilds.[return][return]Robert begins to see the Guilds as the source of evil, pollution and corruption in 19th century England, but McLeod's characters are finely drawn, and even the "highest source of evil" is simply a man caught up in his time. The massive disparity of wealth between the Guildmasters and the "marks", who live in filth and poverty is well delineated, and all the characters live, and breathe.[return][return]But in the end, it is the flow, the quality of writing, that draws the reader through the book, and causes this book to stay on the bookshelf, to be read and savored again.

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## Monika says

Dwie gwiazdki, rzadko daję księkom tak niskie oceny i sama nie jestem przekonana, że powinno być tak nisko. Choć opisowo ta ocena wydaje się już być lepsza: "it was ok". Sam koncept świetny - akcja dzieje się w Anglii, gdzie na moje rozeznanie w okolicach wieku 18, kiedy w naszej rzeczywistości zaczyna się wiek przemysłu. Ale rzeczywistość w księce jest rzeczywistością alternatywną i w fabule wszelkie postacie wzięte z wydobywanego z ziemi (jak w giel) eteru. Eter napędza maszyny, telegrafy i inne urządzenia, znane nam z naszej rzeczywistości. Wymaga znajomości zaklęć, nie tylko wystarczy go użyć, ale jeszcze zaczarować. Odczarować też go można, a wtedy wszystko może się zapaść.

### SPOILER ALERT!

Niestety okazuje się, że eter się kończy, a nasz bohater wyrusza w podróż aby się 1. po pierwsze dowiedzieć tego 2. po drugie stara się napędzać rewolucję i rozpocząć nowy wiek.

I to wszystko brzmi ciekawie - jak początek fascynującej powieści. Niestety jej realizacja już według mnie nie była taka dobra. Postacie mało przekonujące, wiarygodnej motywacji. Akcja raz przyspiesza, raz zwalnia, raz była prowadzona z poziomu lat, a raz z poziomu chwil i momentów, co może się sprawdzić, jeżeli się umie to poprawnie przeprowadzić. Ale jak dla mnie autor zepsuł dobry pomysł, słabym pisarstwem.

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## Kevin says

I made it to page 132 out of 456 in *The Light Ages*.

Strike one was the very slow plot.

Strike two was the unwieldy prose that featured overly long sentences and too many commas.

Strike three was the lack of intrigue or anything that captivated me. I just didn't really care what happened next.

Maybe I missed out on something awesome. Hope not.

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## Wayne McCoy says

'The Light Ages' by Ian R. MacLeod doesn't feel much like light reading, but it's an enjoyable story for the right reader. Think of Charles Dickens meeting up with an alternate England powered by a kind of magic crystal.

The book follows Robert Borrows who was born on sixthshiftday in the grimy factory town of Bracebridge. His early days are accompanied by the sounds of the factory as it churns outpower for the wealthy. Shoom, boom. Shoom, boom. What's being manufactured is a byproduct of a magical crystal known as Aether. Robbie sees his father's hard life of working and his mother's odd ties to this aether. He also meets a strange young girl that he will run in to as he gets older.

As he gets older, he rails against a system that uses men up and supplies the wealthy with strange and useless toys. He tries to fight the corruption he sees, and finds that his life is tied to the life he once knew and the strange girl named Anna.

It's a large novel that feels somewhat like something from the 19th century. That's a complete compliment to the author. I don't know that I ever felt any connection to the main characters beyond a sense of pity. That might be where the book failed me, but I did enjoy the journey and this strange alternate take on the Industrial Age.

I received a review copy of this ebook from Open Road Integrated Media and NetGalley in exchange for an honest review. Thank you for allowing me to review this ebook.

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## Jim says

In a way, this book reminded me of Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell*, not in its subject matter but in the way the author approached his work. This reads like good historical fiction, focused on a sort of alternative Victorian England. we see the same stultifying class structure, the horrible working conditions, and the awful, grinding poverty.

I suppose this could be classified as urban fantasy of a sort. In this alternative history, industry, indeed the entire economy, is based on the magical element aether. It is dangerous; people directly exposed to it suffer various mutations and are ostracized as "trolls." But it is also crucial to the economy, used to make machines run and buildings to be structurally sound. It is a metaphor for the weakness that lies behind the confidence of Victorian English.

Victorian, however, is not entirely descriptive, in the sense that, in the story, the Age of Kings (as they call it) is long past. One gets the sense, though, that this development was not entirely a good thing. Society in the novel is run by an all-pervading system of guilds, as stifling to social mobility as the actual class system ever was.

Much of the plot of the book involves the revolutionary activities of the protagonist and his friends. through the book, MacLeod looks at the processes of social change, questions the efficacy of revolutionary activity, and overall looks at the dynamics of industrial society. It's an alternative world, but it seems very true to the real world. along with this, the author weaves a coming of age story, a tragic romance, and a social novel that

reads a little like George Eliot or Charles Dickens (but less wordy).

All in all, a good read, and a decent stretching of the fantasy genre's parameters.

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## **Adam says**

While comparisons to Pullman and Mieville are not off entirely off base for Macleod's work of industrial fantasy it is a much slower paced but if you let it take its time it weaves a subtler and deadlier spell like its obvious model, Keith Robert's Pavane (did Pullman also use this for a model?). Melancholy character and touches of the grotesque this novel details an alternative history where a 300 year industrial revolution (based on the substance aether) freezes progress leaving England in an eternal Victorian age. Rather than take the dime novel approach of James P. Blaylock or D'Elia this reads more like an unearthed serious novel of the 19th century. Slow patches are made up for by the surreal and tragic revolution in the last third. Also some wonderful bits where the fantasy clichés are giving a grotesque trouncing (the dragon and the unicorn, the quest narrative) that brings to mind Swanwick. Macleod's prose as always has painful beauty despite some unfortunate typos in my edition.

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## **Simon McLeish says**

Originally published on my blog [here](#) in April 2004.

The small number of books that I would consider my favourite serious fantasy novels (E.R. Eddison's *Mistress of Mistresses*, Michael Moorcock's *The Dancers at the End of Time* series, Jack Vance's *Lyonesse*, John Crowley's *Little, Big*) share one important quality - atmosphere. There are other novels with similar power that I don't actually like very much, notably China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station*, and at least one series that I suspect would join the list if I got round to reading it, Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy. Now *The Light Ages* has to join the list; it will surely also establish itself as one of the classics of the genre.

The setting of *The Light Ages* is an alternative industrial England, a place where the essence of magic, a mineral named aether, is mined alongside iron and coal. It is the story of a man born in a Yorkshire town which is a centre of aether mining, and how he travels to London and becomes part of a train of events which threaten the power of the Guildsmen who are the magnates of the Age, the Third Age of Industry that many think is coming to its end.

This background is itself enough to make *The Light Ages* stand out as an original fantasy novel. Alternate histories are almost always fit better into the science fiction genre than fantasy, with a special version of the "What if..." question that is the core of the genre. It is almost commonplace to ask questions like "What might have happened if Nazi Germany and Japan had won the Second World War?" (Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*) or "What might England be like if the Reformation had never happened?" (Keith Roberts' *Pavane*). But almost always these are straight extrapolations from the science and technology of the time, without the extra magical dimension used here. Where magic is interpolated into the real world, or a background as clearly related to the real world, it tends to be at the fringes, "beyond the fields we know" or in an unseen world underpinning the everyday, as in Neil Gaiman's novels. *The Light Ages* is pretty much unique as an alternate history which seriously looks at how things might be different if magic is real. (The

only novel I can think of comparable in terms of the use of magic in an alternative reality is *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase* - a children's classic in the genre.) *The Light Ages* is also one of only a small number of fantasy novels in which magic is an industrial raw material used in processes which produce pollution. (Saruman's industrialisation in *The Lord of the Rings* is easily the best known example, though there and in *The Second Chronicles of Thomas Covenant* it is the misuse of magic which pollutes. Holly Lisle has also set her novels in a world contaminated by fallout from an ancient war between wizards.)

The England portrayed in *The Light Ages* is very much the polluted, industrial and worker-exploiting England of the Victorian era, Dickensian in inspiration though MacLeod is able to be more explicit in his depiction of squalor than Dickens ever did. While the quality of his evocation in places approaches Dickens, its attention to the industrial poor and radical politics is more akin to the writing of Elizabeth Gaskell. This fantasy novel is one of the best ever written, and any reader of the genre would be well advised to pick it up. They may find that it's too slow for their tastes, but I just found it magical.

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## Whitaker says

If this book had been a movie, I can imagine that the pitch session would have gone like this:

Writer: Think: *Great Expectations* meets *Germinal*!

Producer: Germa-what?

Writer: It's this French novel by ...

Producer: Nobody's gonna wanna watch a French story. What are you? Crazy?

Writer: But with magic, you know, like *Harry Potter*! But it'll take place in the Victorian century, and instead of coal we'll have this magic called aether, and instead of coal pits, we'll have aether pits.

Producer: Now, you're talkin'.

Writer: So, we have this kid right, and he meets this old lady, like Miss Havisham...

Producer: Does this have monsters? Kids love monsters.

Writer: And Miss Havisham is a monster, cause of the aether. Only she doesn't look like one.

Producer: And it's gotta have sex too.

Writer: Well, this Miss Havisham character brings up this little girl, Annalise, who's also a monster. But pretty.

Producer: Awww, no monster sex. That's way too weird.

Writer: But then, even though the kid falls in love with her, she wants nothing to do with him, see. Just like *Great Expectations*.

Producer: Okay, I think we can sell that. Star-crossed lovers! Boy loves girl monster! Any violence? We gonna need some violence.

Writer: Yeah, that's where the *Germi*...errr...yeah, there're going to be riots cause the people are fed up of being crushed by the rich. And the boy will grow up to be this radical revolutionary. And there'll be this big scene where this bell-tower comes crashing down. And lots of fire and explosions. And dragons! And unicorns! Just like *Harry Potter*!

Producer: Oh excellent! Gimme a script tomorrow!

The sad thing is that there are some great scenes: Robbie's mother slowly turning into a troll due to overexposure to aether, the ball when Robbie meets Annalise for the first time as an adult, the bell-tower crashing down on Robbie and Annalise... For these, I give it three stars.

But not more than three. Because these individual scenes don't gel into a compelling enough vision of an



aetherised England. It's not enough to just write a story about the Victorian age, and then instead of "coal" write "aether" and instead of "coal pits" write "aether pits", and pretty much leave everything else the same. When Susanna Clarke wrote *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*, she had it set in 1800's England at war with Napoleonic France. The rendering of the culture and society was sufficiently similar to be recognizable. But the magic was woven in with such loving detail that it made that world subtly, weirdly, magically and compellingly different.

This is not what happens here: yes, this is an age powered by some exotic-sounding type substance but of that substance, of that magic, little more than a slapped-on name and some superficial descriptions of shimmering threads. So, you see, that's pretty much the problem. You can take the idea of an age powered by magic, you can take ideas from history, but ultimately it still has to fuse together into a living, breathing whole. Otherwise, all it is is an Aetherpiltown Man: an awkward dead construction cobbled together unconvincingly from various disparate parts.

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### **Michael Underwood says**

Alternative history SF/F. I wasn't a huge fan of the style, but the story was solid and the ideas were great.

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### **AJ says**

It was hard to really get into this book because despite being written fairly well and having an interesting setting, the entire thing pretty much read like an extended character sketch. Told from the first person point of view, it follows Robert Borrows all the way from his childhood to sometime in late middle age at the conclusion of the book.

Now, don't get me wrong, I like character-driven fiction and I have nothing wrong with first person narratives. This one just suffers from a bad case of nothingishappeningitis. It takes forever to even build up a sense of what is going to happen, and a second forever for it to happen, and then you're like "Oh, is that all?"

It doesn't help that Robert is not a particularly engaging character. He is neither especially likeable or dislikeable. He is, perhaps, believable as a real person, but not as a real interesting person. I was never really invested in what happened to him. Perhaps if more time was spent in dialog and less time in introspection, he would have felt more dynamic and alive. Perhaps if he had taken more actions throughout the book, or seemed to care more about the people around him, I would have cared more about what was going on and who it happened to.

The review blurbs on the cover and first couple pages make a lot of comparisons to Mieville, especially *Perdido Street Station*, but I found the similarities to be few. The authors have completely different writing styles. Both stories have a certain political leaning, a certain sense of looming dystopia, and the occasional glimpse at the gruesome realities of the world the characters live in -- but Mieville gets deeper into all of these than MacLeod does. MacLeod's story is more of a conventional steampunk alternate history (suggesting how the Industrial Age would have progressed if machinery had been powered by a strange magical substance called aether rather than coal), whereas Mieville is New Weird or whatever you want to call it.

Much like its narrator, this book ended up being neither particularly likeable nor dislikeable. I'll probably have forgotten all about it in a few months.

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