FUTURE TENSE: 'THE FOREVER WAR'

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"The Forever War" is a military sci-fi novel that chronicles one man's experiences living through the longest conflict in human history, and there's really no way to understand it without first understanding its author.

In 1967, Joe Haldeman graduated from the University of Maryland with a bachelor's degree in physics and astronomy, according to his article for the U.S. Naval Institute, "Answering the Call: 'In My Work, It Always Comes Back to the Jungle.'" By the age of 24, he was finished with his undergraduate degree, married and on track to earn a Ph.D. in physics.

That same year, he received a draft notice from the United States Army.

In 1968, Haldeman found himself serving as a combat engineer during the height of the Vietnam War. By the year's end, he returned home a Purple Heart recipient and a disabled veteran. A few years later, in 1974, Haldeman's scientific pursuits were long abandoned in favor of writing, and his most famous novel "The Forever War" was published.

Beginning in the distant future year of 1997, "The Forever War" is told from the perspective of William Mandella (whose last name is a near anagram of Haldeman), a physics student drafted to fight for humanity in a war against the alien Taurans. Equipped with deadly power armor, Mandella and his fellow soldiers are sent lightyears away to the front lines of the Tauran conflict, setting the stage for the horrors of which forever change him.

After serving his two years, Mandella returns home to an Earth as alien to him as the Tauran lands he invaded. His time traveling at near-lightspeed had considerable relativistic time effects, with time passing on Earth far faster than he had been experiencing. Finding himself living on Earth in 2024, Mandella struggles to adjust to civilian life, a consequence of both his trauma and his inability to understand Earth's new culture.

Ultimately, Mandella decides that he has no place left on Earth and willingly rejoins the military. From there he is reassigned to combat, and, due to time dilation, lives long enough to fight the remainder of Earth's seemingly never-ending war against the Taurans.

Even in this brief overview of the novel, its parallels to its author's life are immediately clear. Like Haldeman, Mandella was also a physics student drafted to fight a war against a distant enemy. Another similarity is that Mandella's fellow soldier and love interest, Marygay Potter, effectively shares the same name as Haldeman's wife, Mary Gay Potter. Later in the novel, Mandella also sustains a life-changing injury like the one his author received, although he recovers with the help of technology and is forced to resume fighting.

Of course, these similarities were a deliberate choice on Haldeman's part, and he has spoken frequently about using writing as an outlet to express his experiences and emotions regarding his time in Vietnam. Despite being a novel about intergalactic travel and space wars, "The Forever War" feels like a very real work of literature.

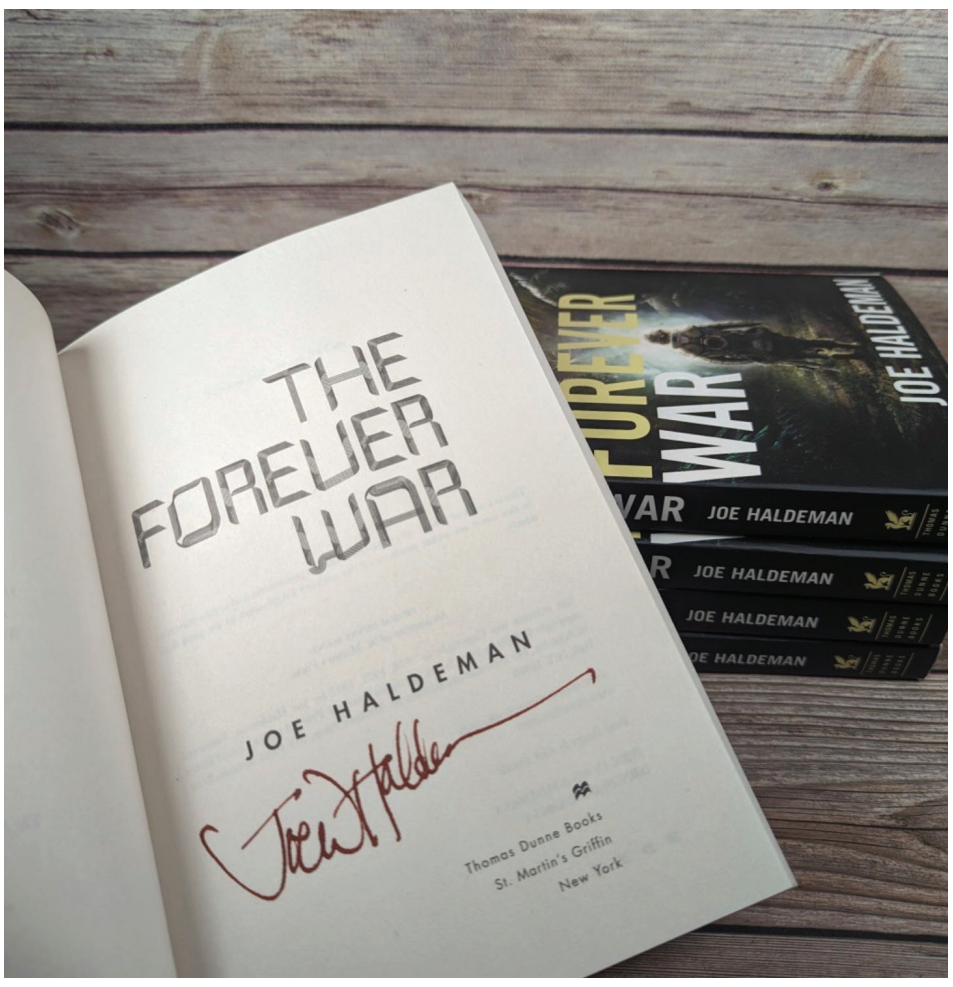
Throughout its narrative, readers may assume that Haldeman uses Mandella's first-person perspective as an outlet to express all his shame, anger and trauma associated with his military service. Consequently, unlike most works of military fiction that end up glorifying warfare, "The Forever War" stands apart by being firmly anti-war.

The battles described by Haldeman are always brief, visceral and deeply disturbing. It becomes clear early on to both Mandella and the reader that there is no glory in taking life, even when it belongs to seemingly monstrous aliens.

Beyond the terror of combat, Haldeman also uses the novel to satirize military bureaucracy and the governments that command, noting that incompetent leaders often kill as many of their own as the enemy they fight against.

However, where "The Forever War" really stands out, both for better and for worse, is in its middle section in which its protagonist returns home to a future Earth. During this chapter, Mandella struggles to reintegrate into society, with him and his lover Marygay finding it impossible to find their place in the culture of a fictional 2024.

For Mandella, the most shocking aspect of 2024 is that almost every human, including his own mother, is now homosexual, which is explained in the novel as being a somewhat deliberate mechanism against overpopulation. Now, how the novel justifies this shift, and its portrayal of



A signed version of Joe Haldeman's military science fiction novel, "The Forever War." The book parallels Haldeman's time in the army during the Vietnam War.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ANDREW LIPTAK ON FACEBOOK

homosexuality, feels fairly dated, and it's something that modern readers are likely to have very different opinions on.

While I certainly don't feel like it's my place to definitively rate its depiction of gay people, I'll say that any offensive material present in the text feels much more like the result of ignorance than hate. Haldeman made that creative choice because he wanted to come up with a culture that would be highly alien to both his protagonist and readers at the time. For him, a straight man raised in the 1940s, making nearly all of humanity gay was potentially the easiest way to do that.

Personally, the only part of the novel that felt entirely dated to me was its emphasis on 1960s style free love, with near constant casual sex being described between soldiers. It's something that's common in a lot of sci-fi works developed during the sexual revolution — think Captain Kirk's constant womanizing during the original "Star Trek."

Here it feels especially out of place considering that much of the novel's emotional throughline is generated by the (eventually) monogamous relationship between Mandella and Marygay. To its credit though, their relationship does become one of the story's strongest attributes, and it leads to one of the most emotionally affecting conclusions to a novel I've read.

Overall, while portions of it do feel antiquated, "The Forever War" remains an incredibly effective and excellently written novel. For those interested, I'd recommend first reading Haldeman's 2011 article for the U.S. Naval Institute for some background on his life and then getting a copy of the novel's 2019 publication, which Haldeman considers to be the narrative's definitive version.

'HEELMATIC': NEW WESTSIDE GUNN ALBUM REMINDS FANS EXACTLY WHY THEY LIKE HIM

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Westside Gunn dropped a new 16-track, eerie and hard-hitting hip-hop album, "Heelmatic," on Friday.

The album features frequent collaborators Conway the Machine and Benny the Butcher, who helped co-found his record label Griselda Records, along with additional features from Nas, Stove God Cooks and more.

The Buffalo rapper has a distinctive style of atmospheric instrumentals over a fixed drum loop. Lyrically the album takes Gunn's natural road presenting lyrics about drugs and fashion, with a tight flow and unnerving delivery. In all, the album shows Gunn's brilliant consistency throughout his career.

Two singles were released prior to the album drop, "Zilla" and "Martin 4Sese," which feature rappers Rome Streetz and Nas.

"Zilla," the first release, built great anticipation for the album. Gunn getting on the haunting instrumental with his classic animated delivery and witty lyrics was a great way for the single to showcase the feel of the album and make fans excited for something that sticks to his archetypal style.

"MARTIN 4SESE" was just as spooky of an instrumental as "Zilla" but included a half-way clean beat switch-up that was exciting and nifty.

The album opens with "Grant Heel" which is based on a sample from Michael Jackson's "Heal the World," where we hear a child's voice singing the song followed by a particularly visual monologue by AA Rashid.

Gunn is known for his brief skits and unusual interludes, so the album opening like this wasn't surprising at all. However, it still creates a distinct world for what listeners are in for on the album when paired up with the prior singles released. It has a daunting sound to say the least.

We see that same type of theatrical interlude on "Giant Leather," the third-to-last track, which is just 46 seconds of chainsaw noises. As annoying as it is, it still assists with the visualization of the album.

Songs like "Bottom Bunk Legends," with Benny the Butcher, and "Sock A Knee" were definite standouts. Gunn typically dances around themes of fashion and street life, and these songs hit the target with great detail and punchlines.

The lyrics of "Bottom Bunk Legends" cleverly reference WWE (another classic Westside Gunn topic) and themes of hustle and being underestimated. Not to mention the inclusion of rhyming "Senegal" with "been a god," which was a particularly crafty kicker.

"The Bastard Pac" features Conway the Machine and has a grimy, industrial feel, but is lacking in texture compared to other songs on the album that were more compelling.

Followed by the final song on the album, "Upstate Farms," featuring Brother Tom Sos, has a crisp and prominent drum loop and dissonant piano instrumental. This song was a personal favorite, with the layered vocal hook and the tight flow giving the song immense replay value and cohesive groove.



The album cover for Westside Gunn's new album, "Heelmatic." The album features 16 eerie, hip hop tracks.

PHOTO COURTESY OF @WESTSIDEGUNN ON INSTAGRAM

"Heelmatic" is an album that is lyrically clever with an incredibly smooth flow and dark, eerie instrumentals. It was consistent with Gunn's past work and typical style, making it a solid piece in his discography, but nothing incredibly standout.

Rating: 3.5/5