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Time travel fiction is of a particular flavour that doesn't always fit neatly into a specific genre. For sure, it's speculative fiction, but is it sci-fi? Historical fantasy? How about a dash of conspiracy thriller? *Million Eyes* by C.R. Berry includes all of the above in this new novel from a young author.

"I shan't be long," says King Edward II of England on the first page of this book. *Shan't*. What a lovely word. It has unfortunately fallen into disuse, as part of what we call the 'archaic' English language, and so here serves as a marker of a different tongue, a different time. Anyone who uses the word 'shan't' surely isn't from our millennium.

Of course, no one would have used *shan't* in England in the year 1100, either, as the country's language was shifting between Old and Middle English through the medium of Anglo-Norman. Edward himself hardly recognises any of the modern English words on the title of a mysterious tome he carries: *The History of Computer-Aided Timetabling for Railway Systems*. Still, words like *shan't*, like regressive social norms and alien perspectives on divinity, are excellent markers to make a scene *feel* like it took place long ago. The feel of a time is particularly important to stories that take place in decades or centuries past. That's why period movies spend millions of dollars on antiquated clothing, to create the feeling that we are revisiting a time long past. It's why *Captain Marvel* highlighted Blockbusters stores and pagers, taking us back to the oh-so-simple era of the 90s.

Of course, in written works, we don't have the advantage of letting the sight of frock coats or pagers place us in a particular time period, so it's vital that the writer of a time travel story be able to capture a vernacular, or a mood, or a societal infrastructure that feels like it comes from the time period in question, and Berry proves adept at this. As our perspective jumps around to various times throughout the second millennium, we feel as if we're stepping backwards to a time when things were intangibly, almost imperceptibly, different. Then, once we get back to the 21st century, there's nothing to make us feel like we're back in the present day like a good "fuck." Time travelers should always cuss. It's science.

According to an interview¹ with Time Travel Nexus, Berry draws inspiration for these elements from *Star Trek*, which pioneered certain tropes of time travel and brought it into the mainstream. His fascination with the concept shows in his writing and use of popular tropes ('what's going on in this timeline? Someone check Wikipedia'). It's all fantastic, but believable and consistent at the same time. As pivotal moments in history shift, the world starts to become more and more... *off*, offering a disorienting but enthralling experience. We won't spoil some of the more delectable twists here, but it gets interesting.

For all the thrill that comes from manipulating timelines and confronting grandfather paradoxes, though, time travel is merely a backdrop to the centric draw of the novel: conspiracy thrills. The

¹ <http://timetravelnexus.com/contributor-spotlight-c-r-berry-and-his-new-novel-million-eyes/>

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book focuses on the efforts of a pair of modern-day innocents who stumble across a horrifying truth; that history as we know it is a perversion of its natural course. Drawing on the power of conspiracy thrillers like *The Da Vinci Code*, Berry throws his two victims — a university grad named Jennifer Larson and a history teacher called Gregory Ferro — into a disturbing web of danger. Before long, they've uncovered that the assassination of Princess Di, among other historical twists and turns, was the work of time travelers, and we're off to the races as those temporal manipulators hurry to silence them.

Knowing that we humans have an ancestral fear of being watched by something we can't see makes the terrors these two heroes face even more horrid, as the titular *Million Eyes* corporation is constantly watching through the massive network of technology built up through consumer goods production. It's like something out of Orwell's *1984*, or... real life, actually.

That terror is brought to the UK as Larson and Ferro have to fight for more than just their survival, but to track down this story's MacGuffin — a mysterious textbook. But this MacGuffin moves through time as well as space, making it all the more dangerous and difficult to find. As their efforts progress, Larson and Ferro demonstrate

one of the most important elements of character work: believable and genuine conflict as conflicting priorities drive them apart.

Million Eyes is the first in a trilogy, and to that end is in large part set up for what comes next. Or before. Or at the same time. Who can say? At any rate, Berry does the necessary work to build his world and set the stage for future adventures set in it, with clearly understandable stakes and forward momentum. He does a decent job of doing that setup in interesting ways, although does take us a little too far into the weeds at some points. His characters, including a number of historical figures brought to life by their proximity to historical pivoting points, are believable and real. His writing is clear and easy to understand, even as the world twists and turns.

Million Eyes is a strong start. One of its most noticeable omissions to a reader today is the lack of any reference to COVID-19 and its impact, although that might be explained in-universe by the so-called butterfly effect and the impact of historical changes on the story's world. It's most obviously not included in the present and near-future time of the story because the coronavirus was not yet present in the news cycle when Berry wrote the book; it'll be interesting to see if and how he incorporates this new twist in our planet's history in future volumes of the trilogy. Still, if you're looking for an escape from current events, and can handle the disorienting effect of the fractured, fictional alternate timelines, *Million Eyes* is an excellent read.

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