

The Continent

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9780373212392 ▪ \$19.99 U.S./\$21.99 CAN.

On sale: January 3, 2017

Behind the Book Essay

The inspiration for THE CONTINENT was singular, emotional, moving.

I was listening to the radio in my car, and a woman from Baghdad was being interviewed. The city was being bombed. She spoke in detail of huddling together with her family at night, listening to the explosions—which were nearby—and not knowing if any moment was going to be their last. She had no political agenda. She was only a citizen—afraid, terrified for her family, coming together with mother, sister, husband, brothers, nephews.

I drove along the freeway, listening to this woman's experience, crying, my heart aching. I could not reach her or comfort her or truly understand what her life was like. I thought to myself how I live in a country where we hear these stories of war—overseas. Always overseas. We think to ourselves *how sad for those people*, and then we switch off the news or the radio and go to Starbucks, pick our children up from school, go to a Slipknot concert. Because that is our privilege. Though we certainly have violence to contend with on our own streets, we do not live in a country torn apart by war. Relatively, we are safe.

And so, I thought...what if someone privileged, someone like *me*, was unable to just turn off the news and go about my day? What if I were thrust into a consistently violent situation from which I could not escape? What if war was the norm and peace only an idea?

By the time I arrived home, the premise for THE CONTINENT was clear in my mind, and I began writing the book that very day. And so I wrote the story of Vaela Sun, a privileged young girl and brilliant apprentice cartographer who comes from the Spire—a group of united nations that has transcended the ways of war in favor of peaceful negotiation. For her sixteenth birthday, Vaela receives a ticket to tour the Continent—a piece of land many hundreds of miles to the north, upon which two “more primitive” nations have been at war for centuries. To most Spirians, a trip to the Continent offers the chance to see the spectacle and violence of battle—a thing long banished in the Spire, a true peek into history. For Vaela, it is an opportunity to improve upon her maps of this vast and frozen land, though her own curiosity about the conflict on the Continent is as real as any other Spirian's.

But an idyllic aerial exploration is not to be had: the realities of war are made clear in a bloody battle seen from the heli-plane during the tour, leaving Vaela forever changed. And when a tragic accident leaves her stranded on the Continent, she has no illusions about the true nature

of the danger she faces. Starving, alone and lost in the middle of a war zone, Vaela must try to find a way home—but, first, she must survive.

THE CONTINENT examines the nature of privilege, of war, of whether or not humans truly strive for peace or cannot live without violence. A character in the book proposes this concept in regard to the Spire: *“That’s the thing about war. It’s easy to avoid as long as no one is trying to break down your door.”*

And is that true? Is war inevitable? THE CONTINENT provides no answers—it only examines a fantasy world that is painfully, obviously similar to our own. Fantasy, action adventure, survival, allegory, romance—THE CONTINENT is all of these things. But, at its heart, it tells the story of a girl who wants the world to be better and who must rise above the pain, grief and challenges that befall her in order to be an agent for peace and to find the strength that lies within.