

Unstoppable soldiers: grasshopper jungle and dangers of the military industrial c...



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Grasshopper Jungle by Andrew Smith follows Austin Szerba, a Polish-American teenager, as he and his friends witness the end of the world at the hands of genetically engineered six-foot tall praying mantis super soldiers. While the novel offers a surprisingly heartfelt perspective on friendship, sexuality, and growing up, it also serves as a warning to its readers of the military industrial complex. Smith uses fantastical science fiction concepts to create an apocalypse which functionally informs readers of the dangers of the military industrial complex and United States government in real historical and political context.

At first, the introduction of the six-foot tall praying mantis super soldiers seems ridiculous and perhaps contrived, a fantastical element of the novel used as a vehicle to propel the real story about Austin's relationships and his sexuality. As the novel progresses, though, Smith unravels the historical narrative that leads straight to Austin, and provides a lot of new context on just how exactly the unstoppable soldiers came to be. Austin, Robby, and Shann enter the silo aptly named Eden, which is stocked with not only supplies in case of impending apocalypse, but instructions as well. The instructions urged survivors of the apocalypse to breed, but also provided a historical explanation: "After the mishap with the grasshopper-semen-and-plant-sperm experiment, McKeon Industries went to work on a variety of theoretical methods aimed at stopping the global spread of Communism. There were multiple units within the scientific department at McKeon Industries, each of which was developing its own creative anti-Communist ideas" (Smith 235). This quote places the narrative in both a historical and political context, while before, its fantastical nature kept it removed from

reality. With this information, we learn that the unstoppable soldiers were created to stop the spread of Communism in the context of the Cold War. Smith does not often elaborate on the specific details of the Cold War itself, and therefore the commentary relies on the young adult readers already having at least a vague idea of what the Cold War was. From Smith's details alone, readers will recognize that McKeon industries was anti-Communist. Later, he provides more context on the other nations and political entities involved: " Their goal was to dissolve Russian balls around the world. Later, I did find out by researching archived records in Eden that President Richard Nixon also brought some of Dr. Grady McKeon's Unstoppable Corn to China as a gift" (Smith 236). This furthers Smith's image of the Cold War, placing McKeon industries (and therefore the United States) against Russia and China as well. Therefore Smith has functionally placed the narrative of the unstoppable soldiers in real world historical and political context that is recognizable to young adult readers.

With this historical context established, Smith provides a commentary on the toxicity of the military industrial complex of the United States. This relies heavily on the fact that this history is tied inextricably with Austin, as his grandfather Felek Szczerba was the first Unstoppable Soldier: " Felek Szczerba, whose American name was Felix Szerba, was the first victim of McKeon Industries Plague Strain 412E. Nobody knew anything about it" (Smith 239). Since Austin finds out this information later, from a historical standpoint, the hypocrisy of McKeon Industries is extremely apparent in the narrative and parallels the events of real, common American military events. While watching the tapes in Eden, Austin, Robby, and Shann are subjected to

military, anti-Communist propaganda. “ The pictures showed the faces of the scientists and secretaries who worked with Felix Szerba at McKeon Industries. Dr. Grady McKeon explained how these brave patriots lost their lives while developing an Unstoppable Soldier to fight against Communism” (Smith 239). The euphemisms here are obvious. McKeon states that they “ lost their lives”, which is a much nicer way to say that they were killed by the very weapons they were supposed to be developing. He also mentions the “ fight against Communism”, but at this point, the scientists at McKeon Industries were not fighting against anyone. They were victims of the industrial complex itself, as they died producing military weapons. This is not a purely fictional concept. It almost exactly resembles the development of nuclear weapons in the United States during World War II and the Cold War. For example, in 1945, a physicist’s assistant Harry Daghlian was killed by an accidental nuclear reaction in the lab developing nuclear weapons. (Rothman) Therefore he was not a victim of military combat, but the military industrial complex itself, just like Felek Szerba, and later, many others who became Unstoppable Soldiers, in Grasshopper Jungle.

There is also the matter of the civilians who died at the hands of the Unstoppable Soldiers. The only things the Soldiers knew how to do were eat and copulate with each other, so many random citizens of Ealing were eaten, even though they had nothing to do with the project. This parallels the thousands of people who died of radiation poisoning after U. S. nuclear tests. The testing caused 49, 000 direct cancer deaths, but the damage was much more far-reaching than just that. Cows consumed radioactive fallout through the air, therefore transferring it to their milk. This means that the nuclear

testing killed seven to 14 times more people than the original measurement. (Fernholz) As we see in Grasshopper Jungle, the victims are all local citizens paying the price for the scientific military exploits of the state, exactly the way thousands of US citizens were victims of radiation poisoning. This leads his young readers to discover a parallel, perhaps subconsciously, between the Cold War era events of Grasshopper Jungle and those of our own United States history. Granted, Smith does rely on the fact that his readers will probably have a vague idea of World War II, the Cold War, and U. S. military exploits in general, but if they do not have this context, the meaning is not lost. These readers will most likely come to learn about these historical events later in their education, and then will draw parallels from Grasshopper Jungle to these real historical events.

The damage brought on by the military industrial complex is even more significant in the context of the apocalypse. Smith could have written this narrative where it is not an apocalypse, and Austin and Robby could have defeated the Unstoppable Soldiers, but the point would not have been the same, and the ending would have been very much different. The point is that nobody can defeat the Unstoppable Soldiers, and people will continue to die from them until the world ends. It offers the point that nuclear warfare will bring about the end of the world as well, which has historically been acknowledged, especially during the Cold War. The United States and Russia came to the agreement that a nuclear attack would lead to mutually assured destruction of both nations, and even knowing this, they continued to build nuclear weapons and build their respective nuclear arsenals, placing their political conflict over the lives and well-being of citizens. At first, the

comparison with Grasshopper Jungle seems a bit contrived, because the plague activating the Unstoppable Soldiers laid dormant until it came back to the present day, but this is another parallel to the United States nuclear arsenal. All of these weapons are still available for use at any time, which means that essentially, the world is one push of a button away from nuclear destruction at any time, and there is no coming back from that- in the novel, the ending is essentially a nuclear winter, and the main characters must live in the silo with only the faintest hope at the end of animals returning and nature taking its course.

While other young adult novels like The Hunger Games use abstract models to represent real political events and systems, Grasshopper Jungle does the opposite. It uses real life political events and systems while incorporating other fantastical and abstract science fiction elements to move the story forward. Therefore, when young readers are confronted with these real historical events in either an educational or political setting, they will recognize them from reading Grasshopper Jungle and associate them with the negative, apocalyptic events from the novel, which is much like the phenomenon young readers experience when reading The Hunger Games and associating real world political systems to the fantastical ones set up in the novel. These models are functionally similar, and both essential components of the Young Adult genre. This makes Grasshopper Jungle functionally both a political commentary and political guide for its young readers, offering both its own viewpoint and a structure for which readers can establish their own views.

Smith has created a fictional apocalypse that relies on real historical and political events and context to both tell its story but also provide its commentary. Austin is directly tied to the past events with McKeon industries, so history is important to his personal growth and development in the story, but placing him within the narrative of the dangers of the military industrial complex gives the novel its function of a political commentary and warning. This relies on both genre and the content itself to make its full point, because the story would not exist in the same way were it not an apocalypse. Smith uses both direct history of the Cold War and parallels between the military industrial complex in World War II and the Cold War to create what is essentially a nuclear apocalypse and genuine warning of the dangers of the United States idea of military power.