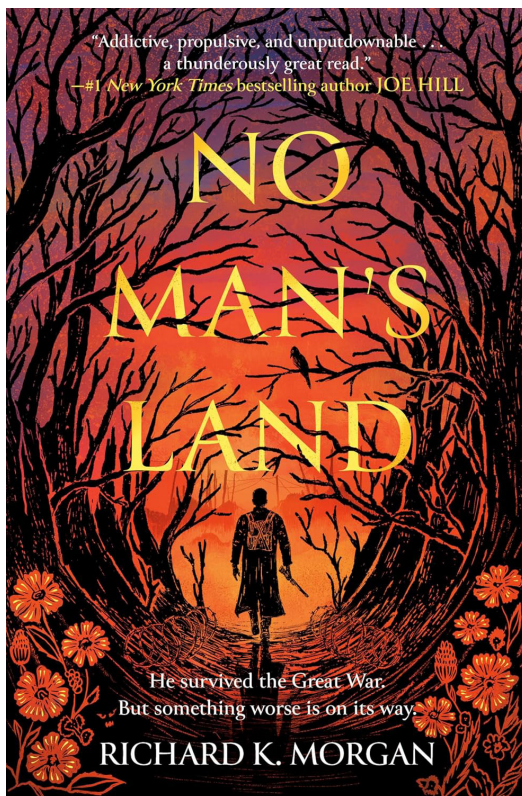




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Wild Rewilding

SARA MARTÍN



Richard K. Morgan

No Man's Land

New York: Del Rey, 2026, 478 pp.

No Man's Land is the tenth novel by Richard K. Morgan¹ (b. 1965, Norwich), an author mainly known for his cyberpunk novels about tough hero Takeshi Kovacs (*Altered Carbon*, 2002; *Broken Angels*, 2003 and *Woken Furies*, 2005), novels that were the object of a Netflix adaptation (2018-2020). Morgan has also published the high-fantasy trilogy *A Land Fit For Heroes* (*The Steel Remains*, 2008; *The Cold Commands*, 2011; *The Dark Defiles*, 2014), and three SF thrillers: *Black Man* (*Thirteen* or *Th1rte3n* in the USA) and *Thin Air* (2018), which are set in the same universe, and *Market Forces* (2004), actually the first novel he wrote. Morgan is so far the recipient of the Philip K. Dick Award, the John Campbell Award, the Arthur C. Clarke Award and the Gaylactic Spectrum Award.

¹ See the interview by Sara Martín "The Wilderness and the Wild Hero (Richard K. Morgan, *No Man's Land*, 2026)" in *Hélice's* issue 39 (11.2, 2025-2026), pp. 99-108, https://www.revistahelice.com/revista_textos/n_39/Morgan-Martin-Interview-WildernessWildHero.pdf

As Morgan's fans know, he was at work on a sequel of *Thin Air*, provisionally titled *Gone Machine*, when a creative crisis led him to eschew that novel and start instead *No Man's Land*. In the acknowledgements, Morgan grants that this new novel is "something of a departure from previous books, a bit of a leap in the dark, and therefore a risk taken" with the generous complicity of his patient editors and supportive readers. He thanks the latter for allowing him to work on "the book I wanted to write than one I felt constrained to put out."

What surprises is that even though the subgenre he adopts here, dark fantasy with grimdark touches, may be new in his oeuvre, his protagonist Duncan Silver is very close to Morgan's other raging heroes (or anti-heroes), from Takeshi Kovacs to Hakan Veil, passing through Ringil Eskiath or Carl Marsalis. All are hard-boiled men who use extreme violence to solve the cases in which they are involved, for Morgan is above all, heir to the Raymond Chandler tradition of detective fiction. His men are not professional detectives but assume the role of investigators in cases always shaped by the villain's abuse of power. His detractors might accuse Morgan of repeating the same formula, while his admirers might applaud the consistency of the author's style and his brave crossing of genre boundaries.

The title *No Man's Land* alludes to the strip of ground that separates the enemy trenches in WWI and also, more specifically in this novel, to the very thin line separating human civilization from the invasive Forest, awakened by a mysterious event called the Unbinding. Whether it is caused by the Forest's disgust at the cruelty of WWI or other unknown forces, the Unbinding breaks the barriers between the humans and the rather cruel Fae, who find themselves empowered to finally fight back the Neolithic onslaught against their land. The

Fae, who are split in different factions, indulge in particular in the abduction of children, whom they replace with changelings, as many European myths and legends narrate. Duncan Silver, Morgan's protagonist, is a dour WWI veteran who makes a living rescuing abducted children in Northern England. When Irene Rush hires him to save her daughter Mimi from the clutches of the Fae, Silver finds himself emmeshed into power games much bigger than he could initially imagine.

Set in the early 1920s, a few years after the abrupt end of WWI caused by the Unbinding, *No Man's Land* merges actual historical events and allusions to the period's culture with the presence of the conquering Forest and, within it, the aggressive Fae tribe called the Huldu and other creatures, such as tree pixies. Morgan has done his research both on the Great War and on folklore (mainly British and Scandinavian), and has written a compact alternate history novel (though he forgets to explain whether only the United Kingdom is invaded by the Forest). His worldbuilding is commendable, especially in the scenes set in the Forest itself or in villages, like Miller's Frith, that have been swamped by the relentless vegetation. There might be touches of John Wyndham's triffids in the oaks, elms and birches that so constrain human lives, though the role of invading aliens is actually played by the Fae, who can be as beautiful as monstrous and who, as queen Mebhuranon declares, cannot understand why the humans can't simply bow down and accept what she calls their 'gifts' but is actually plain enslavement.

No Man's Land is unpretentious, entertaining, and a good, fast-paced read that will please Morgan's readers, though it might puzzle those who expect a gentler tale about elves and magic. Perhaps one of its main problems is that the second part, focused on

the conflicts between Duncan and the men trying to manipulate him rather than on his confrontation against the Huldu, feels overlong and less motivated than the first half, which is better built. Morgan is at his best combining the presence of WWI veterans and witches (they are, the narrator claims, tolerated though not fully accepted like many other practitioners of magic in the new, desperate times), though he is less convincing in characterizing four-year-old Mimi as a much coveted child. While the plot leads, inevitably, to a showdown, the way in which this is solved and the implications of, literally, the last line of the novel, undermine somewhat the carefully built narrative. This is also undermined by the constant sexualization of the female characters, the main problem Morgan needs to solve as a writer if he still wants to appeal to women readers and grow as an author.

To sum up, *No Man's Land* is not as different from his previous novels as the author claims, but at the same time it is different enough to offer his habitual readers new pleasures. Readers less used to Morgan's staccato prose and dialogue, often profane language, and gory fights might be surprised in other ways. Duncan's experiences indicate that while the Huldu have no justification to abduct and ill-treat human children, the governments that sent young men to die in the trenches of WWI also performed a collectively act of brutal abduction, followed by appalling abuse. As for the Unbinding, the trees' wild rewilding of the land is a reminder that nature might one day tire of our abuse and lash back to reconquer the Earth, with or without us.