

New Fiction from Matt Gallagher: Excerpt, 'Empire City'

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Mia Tucker woke before the alarm. She usually did on weekdays. She was a person of routine and that's what routine did. Sleep whispered like a lullaby through the black morning but she pushed it away, sitting up in bed to put her mind in order. If she'd been dreaming, she'd already forgotten what about.

Monday, she thought. Cardio.

A storm had rolled through the city late in the night, leaving the brittle musk of rain. A coldness nipped at the top of Mia's shoulder. How do they keep getting in here? she wondered, rubbing at the mosquito bite. I shut the screen last night.

Jesse hadn't come home. He'd sent a few texts, first saying he wasn't sure when he'd be leaving work, then saying he wouldn't be. All-nighters during Bureau emergencies weren't unprecedented. Mia knew the deal. All part of marrying a special agent. Even if waking up by herself in darkness brought on a loneliness she didn't trust.

Mia ate a yogurt, then changed into light workout gear and fitted her running leg and sneakers. Downstairs, the summer air smelled of metal and moss. Dim streetlights lined the corners like sentries and the sidewalks had almost dried. A garbage truck on an adjacent block groaned through the still while monitor drones pulsed red in the sky. She stretched her left leg and then her core in front of her building, looking up to watch the flag whip around atop the Global Trade. Sixty stars and thirteen stripes, pale against the dark. It didn't

strike her as cluttered, anymore, all those rings and stars in the blue canton.

Mia finished stretching and tapped at her right knee. Her running prosthetic was hard and coiled, like a spring. She appreciated the city most during these early morning runs, because it was empty enough to seem welcoming, even hopeful. It reminded her of the city from her childhood. It reminded her of the America she'd grown up in.

Daybreak always ended the spell.

Cut the crap, Mia thought. These ten miles aren't going to run themselves. Then she took a deep breath, set the digital green of her wristwatch to 00:00, hit start, and began, the joints of her leg cracking with the motion while the socket of her prosthetic did the same. She headed west, toward the harbor.

Mia had run most of her life, discovering as a girl that she was good at it and being good meant respect, and trophies, and approval. It made an object of her body, but it was a functional object, something that mattered to her even before she'd figured out why. She'd pushed herself to be very good at points in her life, competing in college for two seasons before it interfered with ROTC, and later running the city marathon her first year with the prosthetic to prove that she could. But she'd never crossed into greatness, and for that she'd come to be thankful. Mia lacked the masochism of true runners, the renegade fanatical gene to ignore and ignore all the warning blinkers thousands of years of evolution had instilled in the human brain. Bloody calluses and angry muscles were one thing. Tendons ripping from bone were another.

The baby, or not-baby, entered Mia's mind. She focused on her breathing. Then came General Collins's job offer. She focused on her breathing.

The first scratches of sun were tracing the water. Lady

Liberty rose in the distance, droopy torch in her right hand. The whole statue needed repair, though how, and when, had become a political hot potato. Decades' worth of money allotted for national monuments had gone to the Council of Victors, toward honoring the triumph of Vietnam. No one wanted to be the congressperson who redirected funds from that.



A lot of citizens had come to loathe the statue, considering it an eyesore. Mia's father thought it a sentimental leftover. She sort of liked it, the way a person enjoys a musty childhood blanket found in storage. She remembered climbing to the torch on a field trip as a girl, through a staircase of graffiti and rickety metal, seeing the city from an entirely new angle. A snapshot of old American might, sealed in memory.

They'd closed the torch after the Palm Sunday attacks, then the entire island. Students like her adolescent cousins wouldn't ever see Empire City as she had. No one could now. The sad, corroding statue was their normal. It was all they knew. In the meantime, Lady Liberty sank slowly into the island it rested on. Turned out it'd been set on sodden ground.

Mia adjusted her sports bra and glanced at her watch. A mile in, which meant her warm-up was over. She lengthened out her strides.

She turned north along a waterfront path, moving into the bike lane to dodge fallen tree branches and loose rocks. Other than the occasional taxi striking through the predawn and a man in rags watching the city from a bench, she was alone. The wharf across the river jutted out like a broken jawbone, suggesting a past when its docks did more than shuttle around office workers and tourists.

The city changed like a photo album, slowly and slowly and

then all in a rush. Repair shops became delis. Parking garages became art studios. In the water a flotilla of coast guard barges that'd been restored as restaurants and pubs drifted to and fro. Steel and glass high-rises gave way to the architecture of the last century, rowhouses and squatty brick apartments. The streets narrowed, a few dotted by tidy cobblestone. The waterfront path leveled off, though Mia kept her strides long. She knew an incline awaited. She wanted to meet it in force.

Sunrise arrived somewhere between miles three and four, stained-glass clouds chipping the sky. Mia passed a vomiting young man in a sport jacket too large for him. Probably an intern for one of the banks, she thought, before turning around to make sure it wasn't one of hers.

"Call in sick!" she shouted. He raised his fist and managed a weak "Defy!" before purging again. The motto of the old radicals' caucus in Congress. Funny, Mia thought.

Another mile on, Mia ran into a short concrete tunnel. The tunnel lay underneath an abandoned railway line. Sunlight filled it with a fierce yellow shine. Around ten feet long, the sides and top of it had been covered in graffiti, dozens and dozens of circles of different colors and sizes. Just about every inch of available concrete had been tagged, leaving a sort of rainbow mosaic. Each of the circles contained three arrows pointing down and to the left. The job was fresh—Mia could tell by the tint to the spray paint. She came to a stop in the center of the tunnel, her breaths sharp but controlled. She rubbed a hand against a small purple circle. It smeared across her palm.

I know what this is, Mia thought, looking at her palm, then at the purple circle, sifting through her mind to place where. It took a few seconds, but she remembered a course in modern European history, and this shape and question from the final exam. The antifascist sign, she thought. From Nazi Germany.

A gust swept through the tunnel, and Mia smelled storm from the night before. She fought off the urge to shiver. It was going to be a cold summer day.

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Most mornings Mia turned around and headed home on the same pathway, but the tunnel had spooked her. She pushed east and then south instead, running the sidewalks. The light and the city rose slow, together. A medley of urban noise was beginning to tune and it sounded mostly like construction din. There was order within the mayhem; one just needed to know the refrains. Mia did. She made it back to her apartment building on time, stopping only to remove her running leg before showering and dressing for work. She was back out her front door sixteen minutes later.

The air had turned and smelled of humid dew. Mia decided to walk through Vietnam Victory Square. Under the gaze of the Four Legionnaires sculpture, a couple of kids had waded into the fountain, laughing while splashing water at each other. Across from them, a tour group stood in front of the grand white marble wall with the simple words: "Praise to the Victors/In Honor of the Brave Men who went forth to Vietnam/1955–1981." The guide was explaining why the inscription stopped there, despite the insurgency continuing after in parts of the north. He was stumbling through the history and Mia wanted to intervene. Because wars have to end, she thought. Just tell them that.

Coffee-charged angst and white-collar id crackled along the streets, bankers and lawyers and digital communications associates hustling to be at their desks before the workday siren sounded. As she turned onto Wall Street, Mia passed the brownstone Trinity Church she attended every month or so. She'd considered herself an atheist since her tour to Albania, but she still appreciated the ceremony of church and the sense of renewal it allowed for. Her family had fled to America in

1620 for that ceremony and sense of renewal. She wouldn't give up that heritage for something as banal as not believing.

Then there was Jesse. "Jesus's heroin needle," he liked calling Trinity's Gothic steeple. The church's adjacent cemetery, where a slew of American founding fathers and Union generals from the Civil War rested? "A yard of goy bones."

And he's all mine, Mia thought. Trinity was an option for their wedding, though her family wanted it held in Connecticut. One more decision that she needed to make, and soon.

Mia's bank was located in the Westmoreland Plaza, a mass of skyscrapers bundled together at the end of the island. As she neared it, a vast, bright fire engine came into view, its lights twirling and flashing like a hallucination. A row of police barricades separated the vehicle from the street, uniformed officers turning away confused citizens trying to get to work. Mia joined the crowd.

"No one's allowed in the plaza today," a cop was saying, not for the first time. "And yes, that includes you." His eyes lingered on Mia's blouse, and she stared at him flatly until he looked away. Her grandmother had taught her how to do that on her fourteenth birthday. It worked in Empire City boardrooms just as well as it had in aircraft hangars along the far edges of the world.

"Ms. Tucker." A man shaped like a square wearing a rumpled dress shirt and overlong tie called to her from a corner of the barricades, close to a large bronze globe. It was the security director of her bank. He looked wired to Mia, even eager. "Ms. Tucker," he repeated. "The office is closed today. Your father sent out a message to everyone—work from home, as you can."

"Hadn't checked my email yet." This didn't make any sense. The office, as far as Mia knew, had never closed. Finance didn't

“work from home.” That was for other people, other jobs.
“What’s going on?”

“I shouldn’t say,” he said, in a tone that suggested he very much wanted to.

“Mum’s the word,” Mia promised. “I’ll be finding out, anyhow.”

“A threat,” the security director said, his voice low and hushed. “Whole plaza. Homeland marshals got it last night.”

“Oh.” There’d been a few lockdowns in Empire City over the years, for both real and false alarms, but Mia couldn’t recall any of them shutting down a main cog of the Finance District. “Must be some kind of threat.”

The security director looked out the corner of his eye to make sure no one else was listening, then pulled out his cell phone and read.

WITH FIRMNESS IN THE RIGHT AS GOD GIVES US TO SEE THE RIGHT,
LET US STRIVE ON TO FINISH THE WORK WE ARE IN, TO BIND UP THE
NATION’S WOUNDS, TO CARE FOR HIM WHO SHALL HAVE BORNE THE
BATTLE.

MAYDAY, MAYDAY. FROM THE ASHES, HOLY REDEMPTION.

“Mean anything to you?”

Mia shook her head.

“The first part’s from a speech Abraham Lincoln gave. Used to be the motto of the old Veterans Administration. The second part . . . I don’t know. The distress signal or something.”

Mia contemplated that. “There’s a Council of Victors office down here. Some crazy’s angry about the colonies again?” She tried not to laugh but couldn’t help it. “It all needs to be taken seriously, of course. But shut down the plaza?”

The security director shrugged. “Federal’s think it means

something. The Mayday thing, especially.”

“I see,” Mia said, wondering if this was the Bureau’s emergency, and if so, why Jesse hadn’t said anything to her. He worked intel analysis, not counterterrorism. Though he hadn’t always been behind a desk.

Gallagher, Matt. [Empire City](#) (Atria Books, 2020).

New Fiction Review: Matthew Komatsu On Matt Gallagher’s ‘Empire City’

As *Avengers* was wrapping up last year, I mentioned how excited I was to see the finale to a friend, who responded with a barely suppressed sneer. Granted, it’s the same friend whose Blu-Ray copy of Richard Linklater’s *Boyhood* I’ve had for nearly six years, never watched, and now that I think about it, *might* have been in the console of the car my wife and I just sold.

“Superheroes? Really?”

The question dogged me for the past year. 2019 marked the end of the seventeen-year *Avengers* franchise, the release of *The Joker* to immediate Academy Award buzz, HBO’s critically acclaimed re-imagination of Alan Moore’s graphic novel *The Watchmen*, Netflix’s superb adaptation of *The Umbrella Academy*, and Amazon’s remarkable superheroes-gone-bad-and-wild series *The Boys*. And it is into this tableau of a fanboy and fangirl paradise in which all our favorite comics and graphic novels are finally seeing the cinematic treatments that seemed

impossible at the turn of the century, Matt Gallagher's second novel, *Empire City*, has sauntered.



[Empire City](#) is an alternate history of present times, one that through rich world-building and attention to all the right details, asks us to imagine a world in which the US won (sort of – an insurgency is still ongoing) the Vietnam War through the heroic efforts of something familiar to anyone paying attention to our very real, very present Forever War: a military force of volunteers who, in a unique twist, are comprised of internationals serving in the hopes of US citizenship. The victory in Vietnam has been elevated and lionized so much that a “Council of Victors” would appear to control the national military narrative in its entirety. In this world, the present is, too, an unending global war against terrorism. With a wrinkle however. Our protagonists – three veterans and one civilian – have superhuman abilities.

The abilities appeared after they survived a friendly fire “Cythrax” bombing during a direct action mission gone bad. The protagonists who are veterans call themselves “the Volunteers” in a nod to our world’s all-volunteer military, and are drawn into a conflict brewing in “Empire City” and perhaps across the country, as the social order of over-the-top military veneration is challenged by a growing movement of disaffected veterans organizing around someone who might not be entirely unlike the Volunteers.

Gallagher’s three main narrative protagonists have relatively hum-drum abilities as far as superheroes go. Sebastian Rios, a bureaucrat and one-time war journalist who was a hostage at the hit site compound when the Cythrax bomb was dropped, can disappear. Mia Tucker, a pedigreed Wall Streeter who piloted a helicopter on the raid, can fly. And the immigrant soldier, Jean-Jacques Saint-Preux, can move at super-speeds. Which made me wonder why Gallagher would choose such recognizable

abilities at all.

The answer of course goes back to my friend's question earlier this year: it's not about the abilities. OK, I'll revise that statement: it's not *just* about the abilities. The superhero phenomenon have always been about investigating what makes us human through a speculative lens. Even in the golden age of comics, when Jack Kirby and Stan Lee and all the old hats realized that giving human characters super abilities, and presenting their stories in graphic format, was a fun idea, they were doing things in their serialized stories to give them gravitas. We all know Superman can fly, that he's a Man of Steel with x-ray and heat vision. So it's not a surprise when he uses those abilities to crush the bad guy. It's the story behind that counts: how does one live one's life given these abilities? What does ultimately tell us about humanity? Marvel's mutant X-men were thinly veiled discussions on the human invention of race; DC's Batman questioned the role of privilege and social order. Time now, superhero tales grant creative permission to carry out discussions that need to happen within society writ large, by attracting us with a wow factor (Check out character A! They can do B!) and sucking a consumer into a story in which that wow factor fades behind a substantive investigation into very real, very everyday, human dynamics. *Watchmen* – racism in America; *The Boys* – the fundamental question of whether a human would choose to apply their superhuman ability towards good or evil; *Umbrella Academy* – the unique dysfunction of the modern American family: we want to be drawn in as viewers and readers, but we also want something deeper to sink our teeth into.

Empire City succeeds in a similar fashion. Veterans, already totemized in the real world, are taken by Gallagher one logical step further and given abilities that set them apart from the rest of humanity. But that's just the appetizer. What's really happening in the book, as our heroes find themselves thrust into the beginnings of conspiracy set off by

the potential presidential election of a retired general officer – one that threatens to unravel a modern social order that entirely revolves around the veneration of military service – is an investigation of our troubled real world. Less than 1% of the US have, are, or will serve in the military. The national has waged nearly two decades of war across the world with little accountability to an electorate willing to write a blank check to it, no questions asked. Veteran has become an identity, a flag around which to rally political and cultural inclinations. War criminals have become public figures and welcome pundits. Given what's happened in the real world, is it so far a narrative leap to consider a veteran with superhuman abilities?

The book isn't perfect; Gallagher's first novel, *Youngblood*, had a tighter story arc, and the effort he takes to build a convincing world in *Empire City* sometimes feels like overkill. But it's a fascinating narrative. I've seen other readers comment on the novel's relevance – the whole thing has a *Man in the High Castle* feel to it. Recognizable as almost being our current reality, but tilted towards frightening. But the novel's relevance will hopefully fade over time, if the country can come to realistic grips with its military reality. What stands out to me about Matt Gallagher's second novel is that he was willing to do the legwork necessary to give contemporary war fiction a speculative edge, which puts it in territory more closely aligned with Joe Haldeman's graphic novel *Forever War* than it does with *Youngblood*, and enviable terrain if Gallagher is willing to claim it.

When I reviewed *Youngblood* a few years ago, I wrote that it delivered what we needed from contemporary war literature because it shunned the stereotypical war story for something more unique. With *Empire City*, Gallagher has reinvented himself yet again and produced another fresh, and timely perspective on the consequences of war.