

Leviathan by Scott Westerfeld

This is my first venture into any books by Scott Westerfeld (who is perhaps better known as the author of the YA book *The Uglies* and its sequels), and I must say that I'm not disappointed!

I loved the juxtaposition of Mechanical and Organic that this book (series) elicits.

We are all familiar with the idea of giant Mechanical War Machines, both in the real world and in fiction. However, this alternate-historical fantasy makes many of the mechanical war machines of World War I into giant walking gunners, similar to those from *Star Wars*. The People of Germany and Austria-Hungary are known as Clankers - that is, people who believe that machines are the future and are willing to fight for that belief while also wrestling for power over the other nations of the world. When the Archduke of Austria-Hungary and his wife are murdered, the Clanker Empire take this as a sign of war, and they plan to bring every Storm Walker, zeppelin, battleship, and giant 8-legged friggitt to the Front to show the other powers of the world that well-built machines will always be the last ones standing.

On the other side of the war and belief system are the Darwinists who believe that the future of the world and progress lies not in cold and clanking metal but in the living, breathing world of creatures and evolution. The Darwinist scientists have mastered the art of combining living strands of DNA into new and useful creatures that power their world, and have even gone so far as to create whole working ecosystems. Their finest work, the Leviathan, is a whale-like hydrogen-breather that functions like a zeppelin and is many times larger than any of the Clanker flying machines. Manned by over a hundred Airmen of the British Royal Air Service, the Leviathan is unlike anything the skies of the world have seen before and the people who man her firmly believe that when the smoke of war clears, the Leviathan and her fellow fabricated creatures will still be standing over a pile of broken metal parts.

With the world on the brink of War, 16 year old Prince Aleksandar Ferdinand (Alek) of the Austro-Hungarian Empire is on the run with a worthless title (due to his mother's common blood) and only a handful of trusted men to protect him. Because he's the son of the late Archduke, the Clankers see him as a threat to the rule of the Clanker Empire, even though all Alek wants is peace. However, after a hazardous escape into the Swiss Alps, the plans of Alek and his men are foiled when the giant Darwinist hydrogen-breather, Leviathan, is shot down by German pilots and crash lands practically on their doorstep, stranding over a hundred Darwinist Airmen of the Royal British Air Service. Now Alek has a serious choice to make: he can either let the Leviathan's crew die slowly of cold and starvation, or he can risk his life and that of his men to save the very men who consider him an enemy.

Dylan Sharp, a commoner from Scotland, enlisted in the Royal British Air Service as a Midshipman on the Leviathan in order to train to become a real airman – like his dad used to be before the big accident. However, Dylan harbors a dangerous secret; Dylan Sharp's real name is Deryn, and he is actually a girl disguised as a boy. Deryn is brilliant as an airman, but her secret is in constant danger of being discovered. After the Leviathan crash-lands in the Swiss Alps, she crosses paths with a strange boy who says he's Swiss and lives across the mountain, but he speaks fluent German, made it to the downed ship within hours of it crashing, and comes bearing Clanker supplies and first aid. Sensing something off, Deryn takes the strange boy prisoner and presents him to her captain...

But soon, Deryn and Alek will have more to worry about than just a crashed hydrogen-breather; the Germans are returning to finish off the Leviathan and her crew, and they would love nothing better than to snag the runaway Austrian Prince in the bargain.

This book is loads of fun! I personally have never seen historical fiction presented in this way before. The idea of creating giant animals to use as whole airships, submarines, cars, and other types of transportation... honestly it's fascinating! But then mix it with the dichotomy of gargantuan metal *Star Wars*-esque walkers, German Battleships with giant towers on them that shoot lightning, and a humongous 8-legged friggit gunner... and place everything in the early 1900's during the start of World War 1? I'm telling you right now, this book is an absolute treat for the imaginative Steampunk-loving mind. And then, if you like book 1, the story continues (and in my opinion, gets even better) in Behemoth (book 2) and Goliath (book 3).