

Mortal Engines – Lesson One

Mortal Engines is the first book in a series of futuristic fantasy novels set in a world where cities move around on giant tracks. The city of London is a predator city that looks to devour smaller towns to gather their resources. The extract is from the beginning of the book and introduces the strange concept of a hunting city on tracks!

Extract – The opening

It was a dark, blustery afternoon in spring, and the city of London was chasing a small mining town across the dried-out bed of the old North Sea.

In happier times, London would never have bothered with such feeble prey. The great Traction City had once spent its days hunting far bigger towns than this, ranging north as far as the edges of the Ice Waste and south to the shores of the Mediterranean. But lately prey of any kind had started to grow scarce, and some of the larger cities had begun to look hungrily at London. For ten years now it had been hiding from them, skulking in a damp mountainous, western district which the Guild of Historians said had once been the island of Britain. For ten years it had eaten nothing but tiny farming towns and static settlements in those wet hills. Now, at last, the Lord Mayor had decided that the time was right to take his city back over the land-bridge into the Great Hunting Ground.

It was barely halfway across when the look-outs on the high watch towers spied the mining town, gnawing at the salt-flats twenty miles ahead. To the people of London it seemed like a sign from the gods, and even the Lord Mayor (who didn't believe in gods or signs) thought it was a good beginning to the journey east, and issued an order to give chase.

The mining town saw the danger and turned tail, but already the huge caterpillar tracks under London were starting to roll faster and faster. Soon the city was lumbering in hot pursuit, a moving mountain of metal which rose in seven tiers like the layers of a wedding cake, the lower levels wreathed in engine smoke, the villas of the rich gleaming white on the higher decks, and above it all the cross on top of St Paul's Cathedral glinting gold, two thousand feet above the ruined earth.

Tasks:

1. Answer the following questions in full sentences:
 - a) When does the initial action take place?
 - b) How long has London been hiding from bigger cities?
 - c) Who controls what happens with London?
 - d) How many layers are there in the city?
 - e) What building sits at the city?
2. How does the writer establish the genre of the book from the opening paragraph?
3. When London starts chasing the small mining town it is described as a 'moving mountain of metal', what techniques have been used here and what impact does it have on the reader?
4. The final paragraph tells us a little bit about the way the city of London is structured. What can we tell about the society and how can we predict this?
5. What clues are there in the text that the world as we know it has been destroyed?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRsFc2gguEg> trailer for the film version

Mortal Engines - Lesson Two

London has chased down and eaten the small town of Salthook, much to the delight of apprentice historian Tom Natsworthy. He dreams of bigger things and worships the Head Historian, Thaddeus Valentine. He is in luck as Valentine has come to inspect the level Tom is working on. It is at this moment that a mysterious girl cloaked in black appears from nowhere trying to kill Valentine with a knife. Tom comes to his rescue and chases after the girl...

Extract

He flung himself at the ladder and scrambled eagerly upwards, determined to be the one to capture the would-be assassin. He could feel his heart pounding with excitement. After all these dull years spent dreaming of adventures, suddenly he was having one! He had saved Valentine's life! He was a hero!

The girl was already heading alone the maze of high-level catwalks which led towards the furnace district. Hoping that Katherine could still see him, Tom set off in pursuit. The catwalk forked and narrowed, the handrails only one yard apart. Below him the Digestion Yards went on regardless; no one down there had noticed the drama being played out above their heads. He plunged through the deep shadows and warm, blinding clouds of steam with the girl always a few feet ahead. A low duct caught her head scarf and ripped it off. Her long hair was coppery in the dim glow of furnaces, but Tom still couldn't see her face. He wondered if she was pretty; a beautiful assassin from the Anti-Traction League.

He ducked past the dangling headscarf and ran on, gasping for breath, fumbling his collar open. Down a giddy spiral of iron stairs and out onto the floor of the Digestion Yards, flashing through the shadows of conveyor belts and huge spherical gas-tanks. A gang of convict labourers looked up in amazement as the girl raced by. "Stop her!" yelled Tom. They just stood gawping as he passed, but when he looked back he saw that one of the Apprentice Engineers who had been supervising them had broken off his work to join the chase. Tom immediately regretted shouting out. He wasn't going to give up his victory to some stupid Engineer! He put on an extra spurt of speed, so that he should be the one who caught her.

Ahead, the way was barred by a circular hole in the deckplate, ringed by rusty handrails – a waste chute, scorched and blackened where clinker from the furnaces had been tipped down. The girl broke her pace for a moment, wondering which way to turn. When she went on, Tom had narrowed her lead. His outstretched fingers grabbed her pack; the strap broke and she stopped and spun to face him, lit by the red glare of the smelters.

She was no older than Tom, and she was hideous. A terrible scar ran down her face from forehead to jaw making it look like a portrait had been furiously crossed out. Her mouth was wrenched sideways in a permanent sneer, her nose was a smashed stump and her single eye stared at him out of the wreckage, as grey and chill as a winter sea. "Why didn't you let me kill him?" she hissed.

Tasks:

1. Answer the following questions in full sentences:
 - a) Why does Tom think he is already a hero?
 - b) What group does Tom think the assassin belong to?
 - c) What does the girl catch her headscarf on?
 - d) Why does Tom regret calling out for someone to her stop the girl?
 - e) How does Tom describe the girl's appearance?
2. How do the verbs in the first sentence create an exciting opening?
3. Look again at the following quotation "He plunged through the deep shadows and warm, blinding clouds of steam with the girl always a few feet ahead." How does this create tension? What is suggested by deep shadows?
4. The whole extract creates a sense of pace; we can feel the rush of the chase. How does the writer create this? Can you pick out five examples of words or phrases that create a sense of pace?
5. When Tom sees the girls face for the first time, how does the writer convey the gruesome picture that faces him?