Bitter Seeds by Ian Tregillis

It's 1939. The Nazis have supermen, the British have demons, and one perfectly normal man gets caught in between.

Raybould Marsh is a British secret agent in the early days of the Second World War, haunted by something strange he saw on a mission during the Spanish Civil War: a German woman with wires going into her head who looked at him as if she knew him.

When the Nazis start running missions with people who have unnatural abilities—a woman who can turn invisible, a man who can walk through walls, and the woman Marsh saw in Spain who can use her knowledge of the future to twist the present?Marsh is the man who has to face them. He rallies the secret warlocks of Britain to hold the impending invasion at bay. But magic always exacts a price. Eventually, the sacrifice necessary to defeat the enemy will be as terrible as outright loss would be.

Alan Furst meets Alan Moore in the opening of an epic of supernatural alternate history, the tale of a twentieth century like ours and also profoundly different.

My Personal Review:
Ian Tregillis' stunning debut novel, Bitter Seeds, escapes categories and defies description. It's an alternate history of World War II, in which the Germans truly develop "supermen," battery-powered, and in which the beleaguered British secretly call on malevolent powers beyond our space/time to defend their island, paying in blood. Tregillis bases his fantastic elements so thoroughly in philosophical, scientific, and occult
preoccupations from the mid-20th century, however, that the novel reads almost like mainstream historical fiction. The echoing footsteps in the halls of the Admiralty after the blackout curtains have been drawn might almost be sounding in C.P. Snow's Strangers and Brothers novels. Indeed, the escalating cost of defending Britain, though expressed as dark fantasy, resonates strongly of the desperate race to develop a nuclear bomb that Snow recounts in his novel The New Men. The New Men (Strangers and Brothers)

Our primary viewpoint characters are Klaus, proud of his successful engineering as a superman but increasingly haunted by the process, and Raybould Marsh, an intelligence officer who would have preferred to be in an Alan Furst novel. As Marsh begins to grasp how much the Gotterelektrongruppe changes the nature of the war, he turns to William Beauclerk, whose grandfather taught him a secret language that allows negotiation with the Eidolon—a language Will would much rather forget. The internal conflicts that drive the main characters make them complex and interesting. Additionally, both Klaus and Marsh come to realize that they are being manipulated by Klaus' precognitive sister, Gretel, who has her own enigmatic agenda.

The plot runs like an advanced-level ski slope with perfect snow, and the novel can be thoroughly enjoyed just at that level. We are left in the end with a question that drives deeper, however. When you have done the unbearable to keep others from doing the unthinkable, who have you become?

Bitter Seeds is the first volume of the Milkweed Triptych. I strongly recommend it and eagerly await volume two, The Coldest War.

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