



Starlings

Jo Walton

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“Exquisitely written feats of imagination, each one leaving an impression long after it’s done.”—Kelley Armstrong, *NYT* bestselling author of *Rituals*.

In this intimate first collection from award-winning novelist Jo Walton (*Among Others*, *The King’s Peace*, *Necessity*) are captivating glimpses of her subtle myths and wholly reinvented realities. An ancient Eritrean coin uncovers the secrets of lovers and thieves. The magic mirror sees all but can do almost nothing. A search engine logically proceeds down the path of an existential crisis. Three Irish siblings thief treasures with ingenuity, bad poetry, and the aid of the Queen of Cats. Through eclectic stories, intriguing vignettes, inspired poetry, and more, Walton soars with humans, machines, and more than a hint of magic.

Starlings Details

Date : Published January 23rd 2018 by Tachyon Publications

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Author : Jo Walton

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From Reader Review *Starlings* for online ebook

Hollis says

Part of me wishes I had never requested this anthology of short stories, jokes, poetry, etc. I've long meant to read one of Walton's books (I have *AMONG OTHERS* on my shelf at the mo) and thought this would give me a glimpse into her writing or tease me to want to read other things she's written. Instead I was so bored I dropped my kindle on my face multiple times, skimmed, skipped, and put it down to do any possible other activity but read. Sadly the good intentions I had when starting *STARLINGS* never panned out.

I wouldn't **not** recommend this because I can see it possibly working for others but sadly this wasn't for me. I think I might have liked one of the opening stories but honestly it's buried so far underneath all the rest that I couldn't even tell you what it was about or what I liked. I do still intend to give this author's full-length work a try so if nothing else this hasn't scared me away; despite that rather telling rating. I just really did not enjoy this experience overall.

** I received an ARC from NetGalley and the publisher (thank you!) in exchange for an honest review. **

Nikki says

Received to review via Tachyon; publication date 30th January 2018

It's no secret that I love Jo Walton's work, and I'd better add here that I've spent time with her as well — I'd call her a friend. Still, I knew her work first, and this is a fun collection. Jo may say she doesn't know how to write short stories, but all the same everything here works pretty well. I only knew 'Relentlessly Mundane' and some of the poetry before, I think. It was nice to re-encounter the poetry here and spend some time with it — reading it online wasn't the same at all. I hadn't read the play, either, 'Three Shouts on a Hill'; entertaining stuff.

My favourite of the short stories... hmm, possibly 'Sleeper', and I liked 'What Joseph Felt' a lot too.

Really, I never know quite how to review short story collections: suffice it to say that I enjoyed it, and I think it's worth it, especially if you're already a fan of Walton's work. I'm glad I got to read it ahead of time.

Reviewed for The Bibliophibian.

Sherwood Smith says

As a kid, I and my sibs had candy so seldom that I could make a pack of M&Ms last for weeks, allowing myself one a day. I'd nibble that single candy with my front teeth so that it took longer to enjoy, until it began to melt in my fingers.

I have the same approach to short pieces of fiction I know I'm going to enjoy, and so it was with *Starlings*,

Jo Walton's collection of short work.

I say 'short work' because it's not merely short stories. In fact, Walton claims in the introduction that there's only one true short story in the collection. The rest are attempts, first chapters, experiments, and then there is her wonderful poetry (including a biographical poem that alone is worth the price of admission) and a play that had me cracking up so much I startled the dog. (*How* I'd love to do that play in a readers' theater reading!)

Anyway, I portioned these out over weeks, permitting myself to read only one at a time right before bed. (This was only a mistake once, when I encountered a piece so very dark in humor that it was basically extremely effective horror. To get the images out of my head I had to bring out the big guns: listening to Ralph Vaughn Williams' *In Windsor Forest* and reread some P.G. Wodehouse before I dared sleep. At least it was a very short piece!)

At the end of each, Walton talks about the inspiration behind it, sometimes evaluating it, and giving the history of publication. These notes are especially interesting to fellow writers, as well as for those who enjoy looking behind the stage curtain.

What to say about the pieces themselves? It's interesting that the 'true' short story that Walton picked came way after my own selection for which one it had to be. This raises the question of what exactly constitutes a short story. Each of these could spark debate on that question alone, before we get to the ideas. None of these pieces is predictable, pretty much every one of them could be called a chapter one to a wonderful novel, or else a fine example of flash fiction, or a fictional riff. Many of them could be broken up into poetry format as they are really prose poems.

One of my favorites was the short story "Turnaround," which takes place in a restaurant over lunch on an enormous spaceship that is destined for a new planet. The sfnal elements are there, but so are the arts, as well as the impractical and sometimes delightfully absurd joys that make human life so great, such as musical fanfares announcing the newest dishes. One of the things I love about Walton's work is the celebration of human possibility, choice, and a reveling in profligate beauty. This story evokes that, the best in the human spirit.

The voice, or tone, or mode of these pieces varies so widely. Walton is so flexible when it comes to narrative voice. The opening story, "Three Twilight Tales," reads as if told by a storyteller over the firelight on a wintry night. The dream-world of fairy tales is evoked through prose that slips into poetry just often enough to be enchanting.

Very different is the tight, wry voice of the next piece, a very short one called "Jane Austen to Cassandra." And different from both is the eerie tone of "On the Wall," which is in essence a novel contained in a short piece, because once the reader figures out who this is, they know exactly where it's going, and it stops at exactly the right moment for maximum effect.

They're all like this, wildly different in tone and effect, and yet there are flashes of themes from her novels here and there, and glimpses of characters, for instance I thought I saw Krokus from the *Thessaly* novels in "What a Piece of Work."

The collection finishes up with the play mentioned above, "Three Shouts on a Hill," and more of her wonderful poetry.

I wish this were coming out before the end of the year, as I can think of three people I'd buy it for as a holiday gift, but OTOH there are always birthdays, ha ha!

Copy provided by NetGalley

Lata says

3.5 stars. While not every short story is stellar, there were a few that I particularly liked, and a few that I wish Jo Walton would expand into longer stories. Stories That stuck with me were:

- Three Twilight Tales
 - Jane Austen to Cassandra
 - The Panda Coin
 - At the Bottom of the Garden
 - I can't remember the title, but the story is about people on a generation ship headed to a planet
 - Three Shouts on a Hill (A Play)
-

Jessica says

Jo Walton is a delightful human being and a gifted author, but she's known almost entirely for her novels. The only non-novel works that I have read of hers was her collection of essays ABOUT novels. When this collection was announced, I was like, WHAAAAT? She does short stories too?

But it turns out that she doesn't. Or, not usually, anyway!

She explains in the introduction that she has tried many times, but all her short stories turn into novels or just don't really work. So it's over many years that she has been able to amass enough stories for this slim volume, which is further padded (I don't mean that in a bad way) by the poems at the end. And the interesting thing is that . . . well, she's right. Many of these stories read like an outline, or a first chapter of a novel. One is totally the epilogue of a fantasy trilogy. Totally. I loved it, though, and I knew exactly what the rest of the trilogy would have been about and there is no need for her to write that trilogy.

There were, of course, several that were complete and whole and only needed that many pages. My favorite, The Burden Shared, was one of them. But I also really liked the snippets. It was fun, as a writer, to see those little glimpses and know that I'm not the only one who just really wanted to write one chapter of a book sometimes, and not the whole thing! Even her poems seemed like something that would be the heading of a novel, or a bard's song during a banquet chapter.

It was all just very Jo Walton.

Jo Walton says

It's a mix really. I've never found short fiction easy, and I've only relatively recently figured out how to do it at all. I'm frankly amazed that over seventeen years I've amassed enough for a collection. So there's a range

of quality in the stories here. There's also a play I like a lot, and some recent poems. I'm quite pleased with some of the stories, actually. And they gave me such a great cover, I love the cover.

Do you want to read this? It seems more likely than that I would, after all, you didn't write it in the first place.

Claudia says

Jo Walton has one of the most beautiful writings I have ever come across (Robin Hobb is the only one who can surpass her, from my PoV). I loved *My Real Children* and I hoped to enjoy this one just as much. However, no matter how beautiful she writes, the stories are on the 'too lyrical' side for me.

Half of the book consists in poems (which I did not read) and the other half in short stories. I read five of them and stopped. I just could not get into them.

One story is a version of Snow White, told from the Pov of the mirror but the resemblance with the fairytale stops here. Another is a letter from Jane Austen to Cassandra (!) – yes, that mythical Cassandra... Another is about an 89 years old woman (suffering from dementia and not realizing it) and her encounter with an alien. I guess the others are more of less in the same note.

Unfortunately, there are just too many allegories for my taste. But if you love her style, you'll love this collection too.

ARC received courtesy of NetGalley and Tachyon Publications

Sara says

I received a copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

I always find short stories to be an eclectic mix of good and bad, and this was no exception, with some poetry and plays thrown in for good measure.

Starlings covers the more folk and myths aspect of stories with a wide variety of settings, from a travelling coin who exchanges hands from thieves to lovers, to a retelling of Snow White (which I think was my favourite). There's even a story about artificial intelligence and the concept of biographies, which was interesting, and the afterthoughts from the author provided a little bit more understand as to the concepts she's using.

At times I did think this was more a collection of the authors thoughts, concepts and ideas rather than a coherent set of stories. The author even points this out in her introduction, as she states it's not really a short story collection. Which kind of begs the question- what's the point of this? I think I would have preferred just waited until the author developed their concepts into some 'proper' short fiction. Also, the collection itself is rather short, and without much depth to it.

Unfortunately my quest to find the perfect collection of short stories continues.

Peter Tillman says

Jo Walton's first collection. She says up front that she's not much of a short-story writer, and indeed most of the stories are vignettes, often humorous. They're all worth reading. And there are two major stories here:

"Sleeper" (2014), Good, solid sfnal extrapolation. How biographers might work, a little further up the line, if the tech gets better and society gets grimmer. Amazing character-creation in a short story. Wonderful twist-ending. Pretty near perfect. Go read it! <https://www.tor.com/2014/08/12/sleepe...> 5 stars, my favorite here.

"Turnover" (2013). A new take on a classic SF trope: the generation ship. Walton economically sketches characters and background in her flying metropolis headed for the New World, with new artforms and good food too. She wisely doesn't address how (or when) such a titanic ship could be built. 4.5 stars
<http://www.lightspeedmagazine.com/fic...> Well, maybe this is my favorite.....

Also noteworthy, and online:

"The Panda Coin" (2011) A series of vignettes, following a gold coin as it is spent over and over in an unpleasant space habitat. 3.5 stars
<http://www.lightspeedmagazine.com/fic...>

"At the Bottom of the Garden" (1998). The author says: "I wrote this on a Sunday evening after reading one too many twee bed-time stories..." Ick.
<http://www.infinityplus.co.uk/stories...>

"What Would Sam Spade Do?" (2006). Clones of Jesus! A bunch of them. One was murdered. Silly and fun,
<http://hell.pl/szymon/Baen/The%20best...> 3.5 stars

"Escape to Other Worlds with Science Fiction" (2009). A grim post-WW2 future. Part of her "Small Change" alternate history. 3.5 stars <https://www.tor.com/2009/02/06/escape...>

"On the Wall" (2001), the Magic Mirror retold. <http://strangehorizons.com/fiction/on...>

"Parable Lost" (2009). The story starts with a man throwing jellyfish into the sea.
<http://literary.erictmarin.com/lost.htm>

"Relentlessly Mundane" (2000). Jane and Tharsis try to get back to Porphyria. There's a unicorn too, and a forgettable guy. 3 stars, <http://strangehorizons.com/fiction/re...>

"Tradition" (2007). Walter was born out of a tank. On Pyrite, everyone was, at first.
<http://literary.erictmarin.com/archiv...>

"A Burden Shared" (2017), What if you could take on a loved one's pain?
<https://www.tor.com/2017/04/19/a-burd...>

Her short autobiography in blank verse, which ends the book, is remarkable. 5 stars!

And many more! 3.7 stars, rounded up.

Alina says

****Note: I received a copy courtesy of Netgalley and Tachyon in exchange for an honest review.*

The only thing that unites this collection is the author: the short stories are diverse, ranging from fairytale-like to SF, but all were entrancing and written with a lyrical voice that I liked quite a lot.

I must confess I was afraid of the poetry part, but the poems read more like ballads, and I was glad to find them enjoying.

I also liked the personal touch – after each work, she says a few words about it, what determined her to write it, for what publication or occasion.

As a final thought, some of the ideas are incredibly good, I would have loved to see them extended / detailed into novels.

Hannah says

I have wanted to read Jo Walton's novels for a while now and I can definitely say that after this collection of short stories that I am more excited than ever. As is sadly often the case with short story collections there were a few stories that did not work for me and a few poems that didn't either, however, the stories I liked, I adored.

Jo Walton has a way of choosing pitch perfect voices for her stories and they all sounded completely different depending on the genre she chose. She tells stories in a vast array of genres: re-tellings, science fiction, straight up fantasy. Some stories are more of a cheeky joke (she admits so freely) while others are highly political (I happen to like that in my genre fiction). I absolutely adored the fairy tale that starts this collection ("Three Twilight Tales"): it feels like a fairy tale while being completely original and I never saw the ending coming. I found "The Panda Coin" to be the strongest of the collection: here we follow one coin through different hands. Jo Walton manages to create a believable science fiction setting in just these glimpses. "Escape to Other Worlds With Science Fiction" would have been a brilliant start to a novel and I wanted more from this than I got.

The stories that seemed to be more for her own amusement were the ones that did not quite work for me: Especially "Remember the Allosaur" and "Joyful and Triumphant: St. Zenobius and the Aliens" just felt like extended inside jokes to me.

I am glad to have read this because I am now more eager than ever to get to Jo Walton's novels (where hopefully she won't need to tell me after each chapter how she thought it up).

I received an arc of this book courtesy of NetGalley and Tachyon Publications in exchange for an honest review.

Bradley says

I was delighted to find out that I could read and enjoy Jo Walton's first short story (and poetry) collection on Netgalley and saving it just in time for xmas. I do that with authors I really enjoy. The fact is, Ms. Walton has taste. Granted, I've only read three of her books before now, with this one making number four, but trust has been earned.

What else should I expect from someone who reads copiously and discerns with great verve?

But then there comes the introduction. She admits to experimenting and learning the short-fic craft and some of these aren't precisely over-practiced. To that, I say, nevermind. :) I'll read and judge based on my gut reactions anyway, and while a good number of them aren't overly fantastic in my opinion, a few stand out well.

It's on these that I'm resting the weight of my enjoyment.

The Panda Coin - The moon, androids, humans, and AIs... a full slice of lives lasting only as long as the coin remains in their possession. It's a great SF twist and I had a great time piecing out the world and feeling the commentary.

Remember the Allosaur - It may be a joke piece like a number of her other smaller works, but this one works best for me. I keep thinking of my favorite Raptor memes. :)

Sleeper - A pretty awesome future dystopia from the focus of a biographer and an AI-simulation of a real person during the early-mid 20th-century heretics (of mild socialism). I think I may have had the best time with this one just because it's so seditious. If only all biographical works could be the spearhead of a revolution, right?

A Burden Shared - I think I prefer this one for its basic SF-concept over the execution, but even that did a great job. Pain-sharing seems to be just the start. I keep thinking about the possible economic slant to it. Walton's take is purely interpersonal, but a whole society that has this is bound to abuse it. Fascinating, either way. :)

Three Shouts on a Hill - This one is an all-out Irish legend turned into a wild mish-mash mythology adventure and placed firmly into a stage production. It's pretty awesome, ranging from Cromwell, the Thunderbird, the Aztecs, Golden apples and underwater dragons, and even King Arthur. It's about tricksters and overwhelming odds and payback. I'd love to see this put on! :)

The poetry in this collection is very decent, too, but beyond that, I'll not say too much. There is an ever-growing field of SF poetry, after all. It's worth browsing. :)

Thanks to Netgalley for the ARC!

Sarah Marie says

Starlings by Jo Walton

3 stars

This is Jo Walton's first short story collection and she prefaces this collection with acknowledging that she isn't very good at right short stories. I think that it is important to keep that in mind when embarking into this collection. Not all of these stories are good, in fact an awful lot of them are... well, awful. It is a horrible collection and I have read for worse, but this isn't a particularly strong collection. *Starlings* is comprised of short stories, a play, and handful of poems. Walton writes in an array of genres within the science fiction and fantasy realm. Her ideas are very unique and outside of the box. I really enjoyed that aspect of this collection because it made the stories diverse in content, but all along the same vein of storytelling. I do think it is important to let readers know that Walton is fantastic at incorporating religious or God-like concepts into her writing and if you hate religious allegories, then this collection is not for you. But I love God and I love being challenged to think about God and know God in different ways and perspectives and I felt that Walton was incredibly strong in this area of storytelling. I love Walton's prose in her fantasy stories. For me that is when she is at her strongest and I do plan on picking up other work by her, particularly *Tooth and Claw*, which I'm excited about getting my hands on.

Whimsical Writing Scale: 3.5

Three Twilight Tales – **3 stars** The writing for this fantasy is quite beautiful and I loved the ending, but the formatting did not fit and it wasn't until the ending that I grew to care for this tale. My biggest problem was that this story had no real motivation until the very end.

Jane Austen to Cassandra – **2.25 stars** The concept of Jane Austen writing a letter and it winding up in the hands of the wrong Cassandra who happens to be living during the Battle of Troy is cute. However, this has no real purpose as story and is too short to be substantial.

Undeniable Witness – **3.5 stars** This is a nice story about an old woman who lives in a nursing home. She claims that she has been visited by aliens and is recording it in hopes of proving that she is not crazy.

On the Wall – **5 stars** This story follows the creation of the Magic Mirror and it follows the conflict that the mirror feels as it begins to see how manipulative Bluebell is and the lengths she will go to ensure her own rise to power. This was unique and fantastic. It's the type of story I gravitate towards, but I absolutely wasn't expecting to love this one so much. If you only read one story in this collection, find a way to check this one out because it is AMAZING!

The Panda Coin – **1 star** I didn't like the concept of following a coin throughout a futuristic society. There wasn't enough time to build up this world extensively and it was too much. I really didn't like this one.

Remember the Allo-Saur – **1 star** Well, that was a waste of time. It's letter to a famous dinosaur actor. Why?

Sleeper – **3.5 stars** This feels very reminiscent of classic dystopians like *1984* and I think a lot of readers will really like this one, especially because the twist is rather impressive.

Relentlessly Mundane – **3.75 stars** This follows three children who were once in a mythical world and are struggling as adults in this world. They know that they have to save the Earth, but they don't know how. My biggest problem was that this story was too short and I wanted it to be a novella. I wanted to see how they were going to save the world and why it needed saving. I left the story with way too many questions and not enough answers.

Escape to Other Worlds with Science Fiction – **3.25 stars** The concept of Nazi Germany become winners of the WWII has always been an interesting one to me and I really like Walton's take on it, but I wish that it hadn't been interrupted with newspaper articles. The idea of newspaper articles is cool, but they felt odd.

Joyful and Triumphant: St. Zenobius and the Aliens – **4 stars** I loved how unique this take on God and aliens was and it made the story so entertaining.

Turnover – **3.5 stars** I liked the world and the concept of people being born on a spaceship going to another planet. The debate that surrounds this novel is interesting, but it doesn't hold up past that and it falls short.

At the Bottom of the Garden – **3 stars** This was depressing, but I didn't like the path it took and it was far too short.

Out of It – **4 stars** This follows an angel trying to win the soul of a powerful man who has sold his soul and it is so good. A lot of these stories would be really interesting to debate and this is one that I would enjoy debating the content surrounding morality.

What a Piece of Work – **4.25 stars** This follows a supercomputer who becomes aware that she is becoming the totalitarian computer that begins to censor humans, but the reason why it gains consciousness of this is so interesting. I would love to see this one as a full-length novel.

Parable Lost – **2 stars** This story has no answers to give and it is frustrating.

What Would Sam Spade Do? – **3.75 stars** There's a talking dog that is a cop! This also follows a futuristic world where cloning has been made possible and there are thousands of Jesi (the plural form of Jesus) walking around. It's kind of amazing and there is also a mystery about why a Jesus would kill another Jesus.

Tradition – **2.5 stars** The idea of following someone's traditional background is sweet, but it wasn't spectacular.

What Joseph Felt – **3.5 stars** I wish this story had expanded more upon on Joseph's thoughts on Jesus's life and how he felt about his step-son being crucified.

The Need to Stay the Same – **2 stars** A review of a novel is cool, but it's a fictional novel and it's being reviewed within a sci-fi universe so it is hard to follow.

A Burden Shared – **3.5 stars** This follows a mother who takes the pain of her daughter through an app that shares pain and it tackles incredibly tough themes like motherhood, pain, and letting go.

Three Shouts on a Hill – **1.25 stars** This play was a hot mess.

Poetry – **3 stars** My favorite poem is "Hades and Persephone" because I'm basic and stick to my roots when it comes to my obsessions.

Overall, I think this collection has a lot of strengths, but it also has a ton of weaknesses. I'm interested in checking out Walton's future short story collections to see her progress because this a comprehensive collection of all her short stories. Walton acknowledges that this collection has some bad stories in it which I think takes a lot of balls to admit and for that alone I see more as a portfolio than as a novel.

Cover Thoughts: I LOVE this cover so much. The illustrations are wonderful.

Thank you, Netgalley and Tachyon Publishers, for providing me with a copy of this novel in exchange for an honest review.

Rachel (Kalanadi) says

Starlings was my first real dive into Walton's short stories and poetry. Ultimately it felt like a mishmash of stories I liked and pieces that didn't really feel like short stories. With Walton's own commentary about learning to write short stories, this collection naturally drew my attention to that question: "What IS a short story?"

A few of the stories really worked for me, but some others just didn't gel, or felt a little stale. For example, do we really need a sci fi lite version of the "why do you cut the end off the ham" joke? That one felt like filler, especially to someone like me who's come across this particular joke a lot in recent days.

"Sleeper" was a reread - I read it first when it was published on Tor.com, and it's one of my favorites. Also, it seems, it's one of her more recently written stories, and not necessarily a spin on a joke or a practice at writing from a specific viewpoint (which are two things that come up a lot when Walton talks about inspirations for stories in this collection).

Other stories I particularly liked were "On the Wall" (written from the viewpoint of the magic mirror from Snow White), "The Panda Coin" (where the POV changes to follow a coin as it goes through the hands of people living on a space station), and "Turnover".

"Turnover" was the particular story that tickled my fancy the most in this collection. The story is about a generation ship on its way to a planet - and a younger generation wants to preserve their way of life even when they arrive. Yes, there will be a lot of scientists and engineers in space colonies, but the arts and ballet (or low-gravity ballet) are just as important to society and civilization and people's souls. And there's something very uplifting in a story about creating more options for the future, rather than narrowing it down. Let's give our children wiggle room for their lives. We'll all be happier for it.

I feel that Walton really lives in her poetry in this collection. She seems to have a confidence in it that she doesn't have in her short stories (going by her own remarks). Sadly, I am not a fan of much poetry so far, so it was lost on me. A matter of my taste rather than her quality, for sure.

Overall, this was a pleasant collection with a couple of standout stories that I would especially recommend to Walton's fans from her novels.

(Thank you to NetGalley and the publisher for the e-ARC)

Kaitlin says

* This was sent to me by the publisher for an honest review *

I was really quite excited to receive this book as I have read Jo Walton's work before and enjoyed some of it greatly. However, I also knew that some of her work wasn't really my cup of tea, and I wanted to try out her short fiction to see what worked for me and what didn't. This is a collection of 21 very short pieces, and also 15 poems at the end of the book too. It's quite a mixture of topics, with themes of supercomputers, ancient gods and mythology, and a whole lot of poetry as underlying themes.

On the whole, I found there were more stories in here and poems in here that I didn't 'get' or like than those I did. Most of the stories either felt too short, too experimental or just left me cold, and I definitely feel like poetry isn't my forte so I only found one poem I liked (a retelling of Goldilocks).

Despite the many stories I wasn't a fan of, I found it interesting to take a look at just what a short fiction piece could be. Many of these are unconventional, and so they are interesting. I may not have come away from this with any new favourites (although I enjoyed Three Shouts on a Hill (a play), On the Wall, Three Twilight Tales, The Panda Coin and At The Bottom of the Garden) but I did come away from this pondering short fiction more. I don't think I would read more of Walton's short fiction (though I intend to try more of her novels) but it was good to try this out and confirm that. 2*s from me overall.
