



The Sky So Big and Black

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At the end of the twenty-first century, Earth is under the control of a single intelligence, the apparently benign One True. Mars, meanwhile, is slowly terraforming, and the human settlers there are still free of One True's control...but you still need a pressure suit to survive outside, and it will be a century or more before the planet's fit for terrestrial life.

Terpsichore Murray is growing up on Mars. She wants to quit school and become, like her father, an ecoprospector. He has other ideas; not only does he want her to stay in school, he wants her along on his next long trip, conducting a group of younger kids from the highlands at Mars' equator back to school in Wells City.

What happens next will change Terpsichore, will change Mars, and will open the door to a new chapter in the history of intelligent beings in the solar system...all of them.

The Sky So Big and Black Details

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Rich says

The Sky So Big and Black is a first-rate novel, clearly a Hugo contender in my view. It's scary at times, sweet at times, it presents a fascinating social structure, and some excellent SFnal speculation about terraforming Mars. And it features one of the scariest SFnal ideas since Vernor Vinge's "Focus" (in A Deepness in the Sky).

It is very well structured, presented as a psychologist listening to a series of interviews he did with Teri-Mel Murray, a young woman on Mars who was working with her father as an "ecospector". It's clear from the start that something terrible happened, and indeed that the psychologist was forced to erase Teri-Mel's memory. It's also clear that he likes her a lot, and is really torn up by what has happened, and worried that he may have to treat her again, for some mysterious reason that takes a long time to become clear. The interviews tell of Teri and her father travelling across the lightly terraformed planet to a "Gather" of the "rounditachis", people who live more or less in the open on Mars, working to help advance the terraforming. Teri is hoping that she will be certified a "Full Adult" at the Gather, and be free to marry her boyfriend. Her father wants her to go back to school for one more year, because he's not convinced that ecospecting will remain a good living. As they travel, they plan to make one more attempt at a big "scorehole". And Teri is starting to worry about her boyfriend.

All the above is cute stuff, and interleaved with neat SFnal details about the terraforming of Mars. In the background lurk details about the future history up to this point, especially the takeover of ecologically ravaged Earth by a "meme" called "One True", or "Resuna", which more or less has turned Earth's population into a hive mind. Also we learn bits and pieces about the psychologist's feelings, which give us hints about the disaster which has clearly occurred. So it's a scary book, as we learn to like Teri more and more, while we just know that she's going to get hurt real real bad. And when the crisis comes, it's exciting, and terribly sad, and even scarier than I had first expected. The resolution is moving, real, and open-ended.

Barnes' future is on the one hand full of hope, and of cool SFnal stuff, and on the other hand it is very very scary, and much of it dominated by something purely evil, yet not sneeringly evil. I should note that this is a sequel to three earlier novels: Orbital Resonance, Kaleidoscope Century, and Candle. But it reads just fine alone.

Magdelanye says

It occasionally happens that a clever ending redeems for me a fairly pedestrian book.

The Sky so Big and Black is a rambling, incredibly detailed story of human life on the Mars colony established by 4 waves of refugees from the conflicts and devastation on Earth in the latter part of our new century. In other words, the backstory is the main story, and the book is really a prophecy in disguise. A favorite patient has contacted her old shrink signalling an emergency of some sort. Barnes uses the technique of having the main character revealed only through taped transcriptions of their earlier interviews, so all her remarks are addressed to Doc. Personally, I am not fond of this method, finding it a bit static, preferring to get directly inside the characters head. Almost the entire book is taken up with this review, the real time episodes consisting of the alcoholic ramblings of the old Doc, with many detours and asides about

life on Earth and the end of civilization there.

Barnes also has the fairly irritating habit, which I find puzzling and coy, of assuming the reader already knows the slang, essentially leaving us to figure out what the heck he is talking about, interspersed with plodding and methodical descriptions of procedures and things that don't exist.

Somehow, and this is hard to describe without spoilers, a thread that runs through the entire book, is pulled out and the whole tone of the book shifts. Just as the narrator comes to awareness, so we do get the story in focus.

In the end, I am left with a fond impression of the life of a roundichi and a sharper awareness of some fuzzy areas in my understanding of certain concepts. Food for thought, so ultimately worth the plodding pace. A book for rereading.

David Bishop says

I don't remember when I first started trying to read this, but it was a while ago. I remember the beginning being very confusing, with very little in the way of hand-holding. I recently picked it up again from where I left off, about a third of the way through. I kept reading, it was more interesting this time. But I think I've bounced off it for the last time. I don't know if it's the excessive dialect and jargon or what, but I just had a very hard time staying engaged. I finally gave in, read the plot summary on Wikipedia, and walked away. Even though I didn't finish it, it wasn't horrible. I just...

Steve Hughes says

Seems to be a whole bunch of vaguely disconnected ideas thrown together to make a rather disquieting story. A coming of age teenage adventure story turns into a vague and disturbing dystopia.

Not a conventionally put together story at all, but pretty satisfying for hard-core genre fans.

Grady McCallie says

The plot starts slow, and the two main characters - a scrappy young woman coming of age on Mars and an old alcoholic cop - are a little cliché. The driver to keep plowing along is the knowledge that some major disaster has happened shortly before the book opens, and exactly what it was will eventually be made clear. Similarly, one of the narrators keeps lamenting that the young woman will suffer/ has suffered terrible losses, and a reader can't help but wonder what they were. As it turns out, the ups and downs are played for sentiment and are therefore mostly predictable. What makes the book better than a wash are (1) the elaborate vision of the process of terraforming Mars that serves as the stage for the story, and (2) the ominous background threat posed by a post-Singularity intelligence that has taken over the minds of everyone on Earth, and would love to do the same on Mars if it could. When he's not slumming (as in his lurid *Mother of Storms*), Barnes' fiction plays with some really interesting ideas, and that creativity is the best part of this book.

Leila P says

This was my first novel by John Barnes that I read and I loved it. Mars is slowly terraforming, and Earth is under the control of a single intelligence/meme/mind virus called True One which is constantly trying to infect Mars and other colonies. Terpsichore Murray is a 15-year old Marsian girl who is an ecoprospector like his father Telemachus. She is about to get his FA (Full Adult) exam, quit school and get married, but stuff happens and disaster strikes and nothing will be same again. It's a rare to find a male author who can characterize a 15-year girl so authentically. The story was vivid and the future history exciting.

Geoff says

This started out as a Science Fiction mystery novel, but it quickly evolved into a life story of a girl coming of age, a catastrophic environmental occurrence, on Mars and an invasion attempt of the True One. The True One is a computer of sorts created on earth which links up the minds of humans and controls their feelings, allowing one to not experience anxiety or stress for example. A human part of The True One is called a meme, and this book is part of a loosely based collection of books called the meme wars. This book had a good twist at the end, that I was not expecting. It is not a difficult read, the and perfect length at about 300 pages. This was my first book by this author, and I would have to admit I was impressed. I will try out something else from him in the future, probably another one related to the meme wars.

Dan says

The adjective "Heinleinesque" is terribly overused. But in this case, it is quite apt. The echoes of Heinlein's "juveniles" (a term I dislike because it makes them sound less good than they are) are to be found throughout this whole book: the folksy vernacular, the emphasis on a teen-age character being thrust into situations that would challenge adults, etc. What I most appreciated about this book, though, was the science. Barnes really did his homework here; the science behind the story is good and solid. Unlike far too many authors I have read, he does not forget (ever) that his characters are moving in a lower gravity field. Little things like that mean a lot to me.

The only reason I'm not giving this a 5-star rating is because I'm not sure I'll come back and re-read it at some later date. (Only re-readables get the highest rating from me.) But if I do wind up re-reading it (and there's a better than average chance of this), then I'll raise my rating.

Scott Holstad says

The Sky So Big and Black is a sci fi novel by John Barnes that is good, not great. Above average. Interesting, intriguing, mysterious, fairly well told in a now somewhat common, but perhaps then unique way. It has some frightening aspects to it and some scary things to consider.

The setting is Mars, one of the Earth's colonies. Mars has been settled by four waves of settlers from Earth,

which is now a place to be avoided because it has been taken over by a monster meme (basically a giant computer virus) called One True and it has small versions of itself called Resuna it's sending to Mars, trying to infect everyone there and take over that planet too. Some people wonder if that might not be a good thing, actually, because the new versions of Resuna seem peaceful and want to "help" people, make them happy, ease their stress. Or so it seems.

The story begins with the reflections of a cop/psychologist reviewing videos of interviews he did with a very young woman named Teri, an "ecospector" with her father. Ecospectors help terraform Mars and in doing so, they "roo" around the planet. They are individualists.

Something terrible has apparently happened to Teri, or so we're told by the shrink, but we only find out as he watches video after video in a drunken stupor. He likes Teri a lot and wants to help her, but worries she may be beyond help now.

Teri has been hoping she would pass a test to let her become certified as a "Full Adult," meaning she would have opportunities young people and people who don't pass that test have. Her father wants her to remain in school and continue her education. It's a bone of contention between them. She is also engaged to another ecospector who is a total loser and who, when she gets together with him at an ecospector annual "Gather," she finds has gotten married behind her back.

Meanwhile, Teri and her dad think they have hit on the "scorehole" of all scoreholes, one that will make them rich beyond their wildest dreams. Meanwhile, memes keep bombarding Mars and the planetary defenses do their best to kill them before they do any damage.

She and her dad have some kids along with them, friends of the family, out in the wilderness at this scorehole when her dad suddenly dies, leaving her in charge. But communications are suddenly cut out and they can't contact or be contacted by anyone on the planet. What to do?

There's a certain phrase one must say out loud in order to allow this meme to invade your mind and take over. One of the children uses the acronym for it over and over, thus making it impossible for the others not to think about that phrase. It's frightening.

The ending is nearly predictable, but is also at the same time a bit of a shock, because things are much, much worse than the reader realizes. The conclusion of the book leaves you with some small hope, and it better, since this is part of a series, but the damage was too great for me to ignore. It's frankly a bit open-ended.

One of the things that irritated me about this book is typical of Barnes. He uses other languages in his books. In one I just finished, he used Portuguese, or some variation of it. I don't know what he uses in this book. It, too, could be Portuguese. It could be anything. Many of the words and phrases are simply made up and he never translates these in his books, assuming for some stupid reason, that the reader can figure it out on their own. At times, you can. At others, you can't. After reading the whole book, I feel like I think "rooing" is a mode of transportation on Mars, but I still have no damn picture in my mind of what the hell it actually is! And this annoys the hell out of me. So, one star off for that. It's too pervasive to skip. Otherwise, the plot is pretty good, the character development above average, the tension feels real, the dialogue, what you can understand of it, seems nearly decent. Not a bad book. I like Barnes, even though he has flaws. Four stars. Recommended.

Chris says

An example of good Sci-Fi. Involves terraforming, super powerful ai, and moral quandaries most of us probably won't live long enough to have to worry about. Can be wielded as a foil against modern society.

Gar says

Like "Orbital Resonance" this is more of a side-story in Barnes' interconnected Century Next Door books than the main event double ("Kaleidoscope Century" and "Candle"). First-person narration between two viewpoint characters, that ends up kludgy because both viewpoints involve clumsy amounts of exposition.

Strong ending, though, that fits the overall arc of the series' titular century of a war of all against all--in the "end" there's really no victor, just survivors at varying levels of damage.

Shelby says

I enjoyed this book, particularly for the interesting sci fi plot. I know a lot about Mars and the upcoming events that will take place to actually send people there, so to read how humans evolved on Mars really took my interest. However, what really caught my attention, was the fact that the people on Mars actually left Earth because it had been enslaved by people controlling their minds. For me, I have never read something along the lines of that, so it grasped my attention quickly. Teri is an interesting character, she lives this harsh life on Mars, trying to help her dad make Mars a habitable place. Throughout the story, you see Teri grow, emotionally and physically, into a "full adult".

Lianne Burwell says

Set in the future, a computer virus that infects brains controls Earth, uniting everyone in One True. Mars and other space colonies are working hard to keep from getting infected themselves, being highly individualistic. The book is split between a psychiatrist/cop who helps clean up anyone who becomes infected, and recordings of the story of a sixteen year old girl who is an Ecoprospector with her father, and deals with a sneaky attack by One True to infect Mars. But One true is also changing, and the question is, would it really be *that* bad to be infected?

This is the fourth book in a series, but can be read completely on its own. Every book is a story in itself, with little to no crossover, other than the setup of the solar system. I've only read one of the other books, and so long ago that I don't completely remember it. This one is good enough to get me interested in going back and reading the others.

Judy says

Great sci-fi: Lots of interesting science, great characters that you can't help but like, some drama, and some

fun odd language (some basis in Japanese). Terpichore (Teri-Mel) Murray and her dad are eco-prospectors on Mars. They live out in the "roundings" with the other rounditachi, meaning they all live out on the surface of the planet, not in the enclosed cities. They all wear special suits that provide life support on the freezing Martian surface, and they are in the business of any taking actions that help the terra-forming of the planet, like releasing pockets of methane or planting trees. Barnes did a great job of portraying the lifestyle of the rounditachi, the "rooing" or leaping moves they make to move quickly across the landscape in low gravity, the life in exosuits when not in a tadj (a sort of tent structure), and the overall appeal but also inherent loneliness of this pioneering life. It was a limward great story, posreal! It ended in a way I could not have anticipated but overall satisfying. Recommended!!

Lynn Calvin says

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