



The Dark Between the Stars

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Twenty years after the elemental conflict that nearly tore apart the cosmos in *The Saga of Seven Suns*, a new threat emerges from the darkness. The human race must set aside its own inner conflicts to rebuild their alliance with the Ildiran Empire for the survival of the galaxy.

Galactic empires clash, elemental beings devastate whole planetary systems, and factions of humanity are pitted against each other. Heroes rise and enemies make their last stands in the climax of an epic tale seven years in the making.

The Dark Between the Stars Details

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From Reader Review The Dark Between the Stars for online ebook

???? Czaja says

I would like to thank this book -- my kitchen is clean and the laundry is folded because every time I picked up this book, I found something more interesting to do.

The writing is stilted and wooden. The dialog is flat. It's all telling and no showing.

I knew I was in trouble when I read:

Pannebaker had silvery hair and intense eyes, as well as a mustache that framed his mouth all the way down to his chin. Every day in the Sheol lava mines excited him like an adrenaline rush, and his extreme competence sometimes led him to take unwarranted risks for the sheer fun of it.

By page 120 I was skimming instead of reading, waiting for something interesting to happen so I put the book down and abandoned it.

If this is the kind of writing that gets you going, you may enjoy this tedious space opera that has more characters than a Russian novel with none of the charm or drama.

I may try again closer to the Hugos, but for now this is my first DNF in more than a year.

Kelly says

The Saga of the Seven Suns is the very definition of space opera, so I'm thrilled Kevin J. Anderson has returned to this universe. My enjoyment of this first book in a new trilogy is due in no small part to the narration of Mark Boyett, however. He did an amazing job.

It's been a few years since I read the last book of the previous saga, yet when I dove into this book, the complete story came rushing back to me—and not just because Anderson does a fantastic job of layering in previous events. His universe is complex and coherent. It's easy to dwell in and a delight to return to. As a writer, I'm jealous of it. It's so complete!

Anyway, The Dark Between the Stars picks up twenty years after the end of the elemental war. There is a new threat on the horizon which may require all of the galaxy's inhabitants to work together. Not enough time has passed for the elemental races to be at peace, however. Many of the wounds are still fresh.

As always, there are a number of personal stories threaded through galactic events, weaving a rich tapestry of plot and emotion. As a reader, I care about these people! Anderson also delivers some shocking blows this time 'round.

I just finished the second book in the trilogy, Blood of the Cosmos, and need the next book ASAP!

Pat says

Oh dear...

I enjoyed the original Saga of the Seven Suns for what it was. I enjoyed it in the same way that I enjoy a cheesy, big budget action movie. Don't look too closely, disengage brain, sit back and enjoy the fast paced plot and explosions. Sometimes you just want to be entertained.

I approached this first part of the follow up series with that firmly in mind & was looking forward to more of the same but its so bad that even with a disengaged brain I couldn't overlook the gaping plot holes & the ridiculous characters and their equally ridiculous behaviour. A big budget action movie is one thing but this has crossed over into Sharknado territory.

Don't let the 2 stars fool you either. The extra star is purely sentimental as catching up with the characters from the original series and seeing what they were up to 20 years later was the only good thing about it.

Timothy Ward says

Just what I was hoping for in a space opera after having discovered this genre through his Dune prequels. Great pacing and scope in a unique war through the stars. My favorite character interaction was the father rescuing his son from his wife and her desire to raise her child while working at the most dangerous place in the galaxy. I also liked the coldness of the scientists researching genetic advancement. The plant priests (my term, not the authors) were a cool kind of warrior/magic system, as were the darkness monsters (again, my term). There are a lot of people and plot lines, but listening to this multiple hours a day allowed me to just enjoy the ride and hope I'm not quizzed on names. I was able to enjoy this without having read the previous series set in this world, though now I certainly would like to go back and catch up. Excellent audio production and vocals for the characters.

The only thing that keeps this from a five star is that, while it kept me entertained straight through to the end, I wasn't really blown away by any of the POV climaxes. They were all exciting and fulfilling, but none really made me think, wow. Of course, this is book one, so let's see what happens next.

Bradley says

I've finally got around to reading the last official entry to the 2015 Hugo Nominees and I'm caught in a conundrum.

I wanted to give this novel a thorough dissection, but only because it didn't leave me feeling like I'd just passed through something wonderful and grand. No beautiful metamorphosis of my soul or imagination, nor even a romp through a digestive track.

Instead, I find myself wanting to say that this tale was paid in homage to the old space-opera tales, notably

Lensman. The other homages are a little more murky for me, strangely enough, because I'm reminded of Hyperion of twenty-six years ago which was, itself, a homage to other authors' imaginations.

There's nothing wrong with this, of course. Ideas are always stolen. As a novel of BFI's, this novel ought to sit up there with Ringworld or Rama or any number of comics like the ones I've enjoyed by Dan Abnet. Big Ideas are fun, and executed well, they overflow with a sense of wonder.

But there's still a catch.

The writing must be superlative.

I just don't think the writing was as good as it ought to be if it is going to be nominated for a Hugo. The writing is fine for pulp fiction. It's fine to get from point A to point B, but it just didn't grab me as so many novels have. It took me a full 2/3 of the novel before I felt like I was flowing with either the characters or the action, and that's because the grand space battle was finally beginning.

As for the cast of characters, I only started feeling kinship with them as they either died or got into supreme danger. Those who missed that ride were either an ex machina to resolve conflict or amp up the melodrama. I didn't feel like I was cheated, per se, because I already know that I'm going to have to read the books that follow in order to reap the real benefits, but as a standalone novel, it rests very heavily on events that have already passed or on those that will be. The action of the big NOW was sort of... well... Alderaan didn't explode.

Maybe I'm too harsh. I didn't dislike the novel. It was industrious and accomplished a lot.

Unfortunately, the writing didn't sparkle. The characters weren't awesome. The tension didn't aggravate. I actually wondered at various points if the big battles could have benefitted more from a horror perspective, full of hints and drama but no perfect reveals. Maybe so, but that wasn't the novel I read.

I've read a pretty decent amount of Mr. Anderson's novels, and this one is pretty much on par with them. It is a bit better than most, and a lot better than a few. It hearkens people back to some of the old grand space-opera days, and successfully so.

Unfortunately, This isn't my primary choice for the Hugo Award, and, worse, I'm not certain it really belongs as a nominee.

Brad K Horner's Blog

William says

There seems to be another powerful elemental abroad in the saga universe. The great elemental stupidity. Read and listen as the elemental infects everyone. Not a single damn person in this book acts or reacts like common sense is any thing but a new thing on the block. I regret that I bought the audio book and not the hardback at least with the hardback I could beat my self about the head untill the memory fled. The one star is because the narrator was pretty good.

Carole P. Roman says

Richly diverse, this is science fiction at its best. The Dark Between the Stars is an intergalactic epic involving a wide range of creatures with rich and varied history. There is trouble brewing at Iswanda Industries. It begins with the revelation that big business won't listen to a report about the instability of their investment planet. Garrison, a worker there, escapes with his young son leaving his power hungry wife. His action of kidnapping his son reveals the gaping differences between his wife and his own background. The books jumps from species to species, the plot thickens revealing a background of conflict between humans and aliens. The opposing forces realize they must put their enmity aside to battle an enigmatic new enemy. Anderson builds credible world, filled with imaginative but believable beings. Fascinating and lush, it was a joy to read.

Megan Baxter says

I will, some day, read all of the Hugo nominees for Best Novel. I'm slightly over 50% done, and now that I'm voting each year, that means that I'm not losing ground to new nominees. I pick from here and there in the history of the award, and eventually I'll get there. So of course, that meant I came to one of the years where the nominations were gamed by certain groups that shall go unnamed. And this was one of the books that definitely made it on to the nomination lists because of that.

Note: The rest of this review has been withheld due to the changes in Goodreads policy and enforcement. You can read why I came to this decision [here](#).

In the meantime, you can read the entire review at [Smorgasbook](#)

Sandra says

May I never read another book by this guy. It just left me cold and I only finished it out of sheer determination. Can't decide whether it's fantasy or science fiction.

Phrynne says

It was long but I enjoyed it so much! I had no idea when I started it that it was a continuation of The Saga of the Seven Suns. It is set twenty years later and most of the characters of the previous books are featured plus their now grown up children and a few new ones like Tom Rom and Zoe who are amazing! It was such a pleasure to return to this wonderful universe with the Verdani, the fantastic World Trees and the Green Priests. I loved every minute of it. Short, choppy chapters keep the momentum going and stop the reader putting the book down even when sleep is calling in the early hours of the morning. So many wonderful characters populate an absolutely amazing universe. I think Kevin J. Anderson is a genius and I can't wait for the sequel.

Nathaniel says

This year is a contentious year for the Hugo award nominees because some of the books (including *The Dark Between the Stars*) were recommended by a controversial pair of groups known as Sad Puppies and Rabid Puppies. But, for the purposes of this review, that is totally irrelevant. My reluctant 2-star rating is based purely on my reading of the book.

Back story: I was not a fan of Kevin J. Anderson's work in the Star Wars universe many years ago. I loved Timothy Zahn's contributions, but I didn't feel like Anderson's lived up to that standard. Then, several months ago, I heard about an original series he had written (as opposed to a tie-in novel) and I felt anyone who had worked so hard at franchise fiction deserved a shot for their own series. Unfortunately, when I started reading *Hidden Empire* I had such a visceral dislike for the prose that I gave up before I even finished the first chapter.

The problem is that Anderson is writing the kind of sci-fi that I thought I liked (big, galaxy-spanning space opera), and so I didn't want to have to read (and then negatively review) a book that I felt nostalgic about.

Which brings us to *The Dark Between the Stars*.

The book opened really, really strongly and I was very happy at the prospect of a big, old-fashioned space opera with strong, active characters. Unfortunately, the opening sequence was about the only interesting, motivated, well thought out sequence in the entire book. For the next 130+ chapters, most of what the characters did struck me as incredibly foolish or just downright irrational.

The fundamental problem is that this isn't really science fiction as I've come to understand. It's space fantasy. There is absolutely nothing that is in any way futuristic about the setting. I mean: yes, there are space ships and "jazers." But the space ships are really just 19th century sailing vessels with a coat of genre paint. There is no sense in which any futuristic technology has any impact whatsoever on the setting, the plot, the characters, or anything. You could easily replace the planets with islands, the space ships with sailing ships, the weapons with canons and muskets, and you'd even get to keep the "crystal katanas" and the like.

So, I'm not making an objective critique here. (I do think a lot of the plotting and characterization is a little diffuse and threadbare, but that's not what I'm focusing on.) I guess it's just a matter of taste. But when the stereotypical chaos bad guys who hate all order decide to construct a giant space umbrella to blot out the sun and slowly kill the "world forest" on a planet, I have to ask why on earth they didn't just drop a rock on it from orbit. This would have been trivial and far more effective. They want to purge all life from the universe, but seem utterly incapable of using the most obvious and simple route to do so. Instead, they hang about for a few days until the cavalry can ride in and save the day in an exciting space battle. Why? And, while we're at it, where exactly did they put the space umbrella? Planets don't exactly sit still. They tend to move. So you'd have to be really, really specific about finding a place to put your giant space umbrella so that it would stay in geosynchronous orbit around the planet. From the description, it sounded like the space umbrella was farther out.

Maybe I'm just old and grumpy, but I guess I'm getting tired of some particularly stale sci-fi tropes. Here's a big one: how do you explain levels of technology that remain basically stagnant for thousands of years? We've got empires here that are that old, and they talk about how their technology is better now than back then, but compare what 2,000 or 3,000 years of history look like on Earth. It's the difference between the Iron Age and the Computer Age. In this novel (and many, many more) it's more like the difference between

the iPhone 5 and the iPhone 5s. What explains that incredible stagnation, and what effects would it have?

And how on earth do you even explain the astonishing statistical improbability of having multiple sentient species develop on independent evolutionary lines that stretch back hundreds of millions of years and yet somehow magically end up discovering space technology within the same 5,000-year (to be generous) window? In a universe that is approximately 14,000,000,000 years old, what are the chances that all the sentient life is coordinated within just 5,000?

I guess you could just say that these are the tropes that sci fi has inherited. And that's why I feel guilty about the 2-star review. Maybe I just don't like sci-fi as much as I thought I did? I dunno, but I want stories that make me think. I thought sci-fi was the literature of ideas. I thought the point of props like space stations and space ships was to enable ideas to be explored. They don't have to be serious attempts to extrapolate our future and--in fact--most of the time they shouldn't be. That's boring. But there has to be some *reason* for including space ships in your story other than as decoration. At least, for me there does. Otherwise you should just stick with sailing ships, dragons, wizards, and elves and call it fantasy. That's what the genre is there *for*.

At the end of the day: I guess I just really don't like space fantasy.

Maggie K says

OK-so this is a book I normally would never have read, and I have to say I did enjoy it better than I thought I would, but it still had a lot of issues.

What did work was the actual story, although I'm not sure how original it was, but it was a good story of various aliens coming together over a common foe.

I think the problem was that there were SO MANY characters. I really didn't connect to ANY of them, and they seemed to ALL have viewpoint chapters. Now, I know that CAN work, here it just seemed a hodge podge. Plus, they were all kind of wooden, everyman type characters. Only the villain seemed a bit out of the mold. All the dialogue sounded like it came from the same person.

The writing was okay. Yeah, just okay. No way with words, no brilliance. Just okay. Even with all the viewpoints, I really felt I was being told, not shown.

But like I said, there was a good story. That saved a lot of it.

Lyn says

WHYYYYYYYYYYYY?????

Why did you have to make this six hundred and seventy something EFFING pages???? And so damn dull I don't want to finish???

It could be a weird but fun retro gem.

But, OK, to be fair, I should take some of the blame for why this did not work out. I know it is a very rare plus size novel that I like, and I had seen many of the luke warm reviews, but what the hell man, this had promise?!?!

Author Kevin J. Anderson has given us what could be a fun space opera written in the style of Poul Anderson, or perhaps even a Heinlein juvenile. Actually, in the one third of the book I was able to get through before abandoning, Anderson made clear references to many classic SF books and writers: Asimov, Silverberg, Le Guin, Larry Niven, etc. And much of his characterization was good; I was especially liking the virus doctor and investigator with issues.

I mean, it was nominated for a Hugo.

But it was just too long, TOO GODDAMN LONG!!! And just not enough going on, too little to hang onto, too little and too stretched to make me care. I could not take anymore and the rest of the novel looked like a marathon course that I just had no interest in. And this is supposed to be the first in a series???

No thank you.

You're making a series anyway, so just find a good stopping place somewhere around 250-300 pages and wrap it up and maybe someone else will tune in later for the sequels.

True, Anderson's imaginative world building is superb and really the highlight of this work, what with the intricate Roamer clan backstory and the off stage references to a galactic struggle. I also liked the short chapters and the shifting perspective narrative,

but

I just could not go on. When a book is a chore, it's not worth it. Life's too short and there are too many other great books.

prcardi says

Storyline: 3/5

Characters: 3/5

Writing Style: 3/5

World: 3/5

The Dark Between the Stars came to my attention because it was a finalist for the Hugo Award for novels. I've been using the finalist list as my science fiction reading guide, but there was a controversy in the years around the 2015 awards. The nomination and award stages were overtly politicized with what might be referred to as the Puppies campaigns. I wasn't actively following science fiction happenings at the time and have only learned about it after-the-fact. From what I understand, the Puppies started off as somewhat of a self-deprecating joke, writers of contemporary pulp science fiction grumbling that only message fiction was being considered for the top awards. They wanted the fun put back in and the leftist politics taken out. Some statistics-minded Puppies figured out how the nomination process could be gamed – indeed claimed that it had been gamed for years by a Hugo voting clique – and used the rules to their advantage, getting a slate of their favorites nominated as finalists. The Dark Between the Stars was a Puppy nominee that made it to the finalist round in just such a fashion. I find the feud between the Puppies and the Social Justice Warriors particularly interesting because it presaged a divide that has manifested itself more widely in the American

political and social spheres. The Puppy debate evolved to a point, where it seemed that ultra-radical progressives were as vociferously narrow-minded and condescending as the far right. Many on the left condemned the entire conservative awakening as racist, misogynistic, and homophobic. Surely there were those such as Vox Day and his Rabid Puppies element that appeared to fit this characterization. In the Hugo Awards debate it became a guilt-by-association problem. Many nominees voluntarily withdrew their candidacy from consideration as a finalist when they found that they'd gotten there with the support of the Puppies. Novels were deemed off-limits or insupportable because the fringe right also happened to like them. I don't approve of this guilt by association approach and wanted to see for myself what *The Dark Between the Stars* offered.

What I should have seen if this Puppy nominee was a regressive as the Social Justice Warriors claimed, was some defense of white Europeans or of some mythical golden years of white America. Instead, I found this science fiction-fantasy to positively portray cultural progressives. The story focuses largely on two space-faring races, both of which have their own nationalistic and xenophobic tendencies. The characters we are supposed to cheer are those that defy tradition and reject ethnocentrism. If this work were as traditional-minded as critics of the Puppies suggested, we ought to at least see some argument for racial purity or superiority. Instead the most affecting love stories are those that feature bi-racial or bi-species marriages, couples that withstand social stigma for the sake of love. Some of the best human characters are people of color or various non-Caucasian ethnicities. If the Puppies nominees were all "right-wing to Neo-Nazi", then eugenics or some sort of minority population control measures should have been slipped in approvingly. The message here, however, is quite to the contrary. It is a historical villain who forcefully experimented on and manipulated the genetics and lives of unwilling research subjects. Surely then this book must have been replete with homophobia or transphobia and exclusively supportive of rigid gender roles. *The Dark Between the Stars* doesn't fit the stereotype there either, though. There are strong women who have no need of men, men who stay home and take care of the child while the mother leads the business, tomboys and shy lads. There's even some plutonic or not-so-plutonic relationships between human and robot and across couples of wide age ranges. There were no homosexual or transsexual characters in the book; but I refuse to deem something regressive simply because it isn't actively promoting someone else's pet cause. There's bound to have been some stereotype or implicit bias at work in Anderson's novel, but it was no more egregious than any writer's obliviousness to his or her own underlying assumptions. It could very well be that other works nominated by the Puppies for some of the other categories were as regressive and incendiary as portrayed. *The Dark Between the Stars* was not some right-wing manifesto though. And it is unfortunate that voters in the Hugo Awards chose to vote "No Award" over this. There were reports of voters acknowledging that they hadn't read Kevin J. Anderson's book and that they were simply voting against anything that was affiliated with the Puppies. That strikes me as being both narrow-minded and manipulative. So my determination on the social issues element is that just because it appeared on one or both of the Puppies' slates doesn't mean it is right wing. I'm not interested enough in the Sad Puppies' pulp preferences to support or follow their slate, and I'm opposed the values expressed by Rabid Puppies' Vox Day, but I did not find this to be either mindless pulp or base bigotry.

Socio-political expectations and Puppy Gate aside, how did *The Dark Between the Stars* do. It was fine. I enjoyed the first half more than the second. This was much more of a fantasy tale than a science fiction one, and I enjoyed the introduction to the world and found it vibrant and descriptive. The highlight of the book was the plot-building through perspectives. I'm usually not fond of the multiple-unrelated-viewpoints approach where the characters finally intersect later in the novel. In *The Dark Between the Stars* we have approximately 30 unique first-person perspectives spread across one hundred and thirty-nine chapters, and I was surprised by how well Anderson made it work. The characters were related in various ways, sometimes a family member or part of the same business, at times they were both witnesses to the same event or on good terms with a common party. The chapters were short and the transitions between them were rarely

repeated. It was a great way to build up a vast world and explore it. I thought the short chapters would be too choppy, but I found that even the shortest of them – sometimes just a couple of pages – held just enough information to pique my interest and keep me engaged with one of the many subplots. There was a real artistry here in worldbuilding that I hadn't experienced before, and Anderson's work was worth considering as a potential Hugo winner for that alone. In other areas the writing and worldbuilding was much weaker. Anderson had a tendency to doubt whether he had conveyed something adequately. Thus he might describe an individual as he made meticulous preparations and, unsure whether we had picked up on this character attribute, he would then drop to a third person omniscient view and clearly state that this was the kind of person who took preparations seriously. Then, he'd do it all again a hundred pages further on. There were these odd reminders, almost verbatim, cluing us in on the attribute or feature the author didn't want us to miss. They were the kind of reminders you would expect to pop up in a sequel that was following years after the first. I'm not sure if Anderson doubted his readers' ability to keep track of details over 672 pages or if it was bad editing or just bad writing, but it recurred frequently enough to be distracting. Despite the immense worldbuilding I found it easy to keep track of the characters and places, not needing the glossary and never feeling overwhelmed with exotic names and locations. That worldbuilding stagnated about halfway through, and it became very much a breadth-rather-than-depth kind of fantasy. The science fiction elements were more disappointing. Though a space opera featuring lasers and space ships and gargantuan factories and technology, it was all embellishment for the fantasy. The science and mechanics simply didn't matter. The space battle scenes were awful, in fact. There was little to distinguish these monumental battles in space from bi-plane dogfights in the air. Gravity, speed, distance – nothing of physics – had any implications in the battles. Thus the space environment and the technological options didn't have any importance in understanding what was going on. This was about as far from hard science fiction as one could get, and it was embarrassing at times. Some of the battles had little more to them than the commanding officer aboard a ship yelling out, "Light 'em up!" and the tactical officer responding, "With pleasure!" It was as if all the two sides of the battle had to do was push a button and their part in the battle was over. There was little planning or strategy or tactical improvisation. This wanting-to-do-something-neat-but-unable-to-fill-in-the-details flaw was present with the primary antagonist as well. Anderson wanted to escalate the conflict, up the scales. So he created this awesome opponent with overwhelming abilities. He was unable, though, to give its powers adequate description. He couldn't get make it comprehensible, and abstracted out into vague description and generalization. This made the villain distant and incomprehensible and kept the reader from fully enjoying the stakes of the conflict.

It was an acceptable but not a great book. I enjoyed it but was also disappointed with a number of elements. One might conclude then, that if the best the Puppies had to offer was only mediocre, then they don't have much to contribute to science fiction. That might be true if the other Hugo finalists in the years surrounding the 2015 awards had been much better. To date I've read 57% of all the finalist nominated for the Hugo; that's 179 works from 1939 onward. Looking at the finalists I've read in the three years before or after the 2015 awards, I consider *The Dark Between the Stars*, to be better than Jo Walton's *Among Others*, Mira Grant's *Deadline* and *Blackout*, John Scalzi's *Redshirts*, and Ann Leckie's *Ancillary Sword*, and *Ancillary Mercy*. It was on par with James S. A. Corey's *Leviathan Wakes*, Kim Stanley Robinson's *2312*, and Katherine Addison's *The Goblin Emperor*. It wasn't as good as George R. R. Martin's *A Dance with Dragons*, China Mieville's *Embassytown*, Ann Leckie's *Ancillary Justice*, or N. K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* and *The Obelisk Gate*. In my estimation that means that it was worthy of consideration and of comparable quality to many novels that were also Hugo finalists. If anything it is an indictment of the Hugo Awards and its claim to present the best of science fiction.

One final note. I did not realize this was a spin-off series when I started it. I knew that Anderson was a prolific writer with some expansive series, but I did not notice that this was a follow-up to his signature *Saga* of the Seven Suns heptalogy. I wish series installments like this (or Jim Butcher's 15th-in-the-series, *Skin*

Game) would be excluded from the novel category and placed into a sequels only category. The recent changes to the Hugo system have made a series award, but it doesn't remove books like this from the novel award category. To his credit, Anderson wrote this in such a way to introduce the new reader to his universe. I never felt lost or that there were critically missing pieces. There were times where there were hints that two characters had met before or had some backstory. I felt a little left out not knowing that backstory, but the narrative proceeded just fine without it, and really, those intersections are there for the benefit of the longtime fans. It was an accident then, that I read this without reading the Saga of the Seven Suns, but it worked out fine. I liked this enough to read on and finish the trilogy, but I don't see myself reading the original saga.

David says

This is the definition of mediocre space opera. It had its moments, and will entertain anyone who wants space battles with robots and random alien powers and everything cast on a grand scale, but from beginning to end it smacked of unoriginality and uninspired writing - Babylon 5, Star Wars, Dune - Keven J. Anderson is trying to write something on the scale of Frank Herbert or Dan Simmons's epics, but his characters are flat archetypes and his ideas are flat derivations.

The Dark Between the Stars is set some time after another series Anderson wrote, which I have not read. There are frequent references to the wars and events of the previous books, and the accelerated worldbuilding made it evident that there were previous books to read if you really want to catch all the references, but I will say that it dives right into the current story without leaving you behind even if you're not familiar with the universe.

The main plot is the appearance of a race of beings of pure darkness called the Shana Rei, who exist to return all matter in the universe to primordial chaos. As is typical in big sci-fi epics, they are mentioned in ancient dread prophecies (apparently they showed up before but somehow failed to destroy the universe), so when they begin attacking human and Ildaran star systems, there is lots of "disturbance in the Force"-type shock and horror.

But as adversaries, they're about as flat and stereotypical as they sound - beings of darkness who want to destroy the universe because. Booga booga! They are aided by evil black robots who used to serve a now-dead genocidal bug race called the Klikiss. (Yes, the bugs are called "Klikiss.") The robots just want to kill everything, so they manage to ally themselves with the Shana Rei, even though the Shana Rei really don't seem to need their help. They are basically unopposed until the big climactic battle when a space fleet that has conveniently discovered an ancient weapon called a "sun bomb," joined by fiery alien beings called Faeros who are recruited by a messiah-character who can communicate with and summon the aid of Faeros because.

The B-plots include a crazy super-rich girl named Zoe who collects diseases on her very own planetary research lab. Zoe lives in complete isolation because of her fear of viruses because she was so traumatized by Daddy's death, and when her scientists (who she treats as completely expendable) find new cures, she keeps them locked up with her viruses because she's mad at the world. She has a henchman named Tom Rom, who's a sociopathic killer who inexplicably is completely devoted to Zoe. These two characters could have been interesting, but their purpose in the story is not evident by the end of the book, and they never develop beyond being a monomaniac comic book supervillain and her loyal igor.

There is a spacer clan called the "Roamers" who are constantly going on about how resourceful and adaptable they are. There's a disaster on a lava planet, and the man responsible then discovers a bunch of "floaters" in space that are full of "ekti," the magical space-fuel needed for starships. He starts harvesting the floaters even though it's perfectly obvious to the reader that this will be a mistake and they are going to turn out to be some sort of cosmic McGuffin.

I could go on - there is a telepathic world-tree, through which "Green Priests" can communicate instantly at interstellar distances, and there's the Ildaran Mage-Imperator's half-human offspring including the two warrior princesses who fight with "crystal-tipped katanas" (seriously, why is it always katanas?), and a bunch of other ideas that in the hands of a more skilled author would perhaps have been more impressive, but like I said, I just kept feeling like KJ Anderson wants to write a Great Big Epic Space Opera on the level of Lensmen or Dune (or something that will be optioned as a big-budget movie), but isn't really good enough to escape his tie-in fiction background. I'm giving this book 3 stars because it was pleasing enough for what it is, but it's a generous 3 stars - the writing and the characterization was flat enough that 2.5 stars is closer to the mark. I will not be reading the rest of this series.
