



The Secret City

Carol Emshwiller

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The Secret City is a proud enclave carved in stone. Hidden high in a mountain range, it is a worn citadel protecting a lost culture. It harbors a handful of aliens stranded on Earth, waiting for rescue and running out of time. Over years of increasing poverty, an exodus to the human world has become their only chance for survival. The aliens are gradually assimilating not as a discrete culture but as a source of cheap labor.

But the sudden arrival of ill-prepared rescuers will touch off divided loyalties, violent displacement, and star-crossed love. As unlikely human allies are pitted against xenophobic aliens, the stage is set for a final standoff at the Secret City.

The Secret City Details

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From Reader Review The Secret City for online ebook

Ryandake says

so what would happen if a bunch of mostly-humanoid aliens came here for a tourist junket and got stuck?

Emshwiller is not your standard sf writer--she has a lovely humanist way of subverting all your expectations. this book is a surprisingly gentle meditation on difference, on outsiders, on how we can (or fail to) connect across all our differences.

this is not a plot-heavy book. things do happen, and they resolve in ways you will not at all foresee. but all the resolutions carry some inevitability, which springs from the fine characterizations Emshwiller has drawn.

this book is a rather fine, delicate thing, and trying to say much about it feels rather like stomping across new spring ferns in steel-toed boots. so i won't. but i enjoyed this book immensely. it's not a long read, but it's one entirely worth returning to.

Brook says

4 stars for novel content.

Emshwiller has received mixed reviews, but this one seemed to be most up my alley. As others have said, there is "sci fi" to this book, but it is really a novella about "foreigners" working to survive in a place where they are the minority. Pick a marginalized minority in modern history, and you can apply this book to it. The race of people that don't quite fit in on Earth also might not fit in somewhere else.

Emshwiller is spotty on details about the other world, and the writing style in general is very light on details. Some "sci fi" goes into great deal about how stuff works, or makes it critical to the story. The technology and "alien" world are only incidental to the story of Fitting In, and are treated as such.

The story as a standalone is not 4 stars, however the *idea* for the story is very good. There have been fish-out-of-water stories involving alien species on earth before, but this combines that with a plain writing style of some mid-20th century American writers. Very interesting stuff.

Adam says

This one didn't do much for me. I feel like there's a larger commentary about "the other" here, and class, but the story is so thin that none of the ideas are developed; they're just shadows at the edges.

I didn't find much interesting in the characters, our love interests seem so similar as to basically be brother and sister, and all conflicts are resolved immediately.

We're given peeks at the mysteries of the home world, but we never see enough to know what was going on. It's not mysterious enough to stick with you, and not defined enough to teach you anything.

(For example, I feel like even the views of the Capital we're given in the Hunger Games give a better sense of an "alien" society than the Neanderthal world here.)

Stacy says

Emshwiller only started writing when she hit her 80's. Her books are full of interesting observations and quiet wisdom as well as being a really good yarn.

Res says

The one where the aliens came long ago to vacation on earth and were stranded here, and the home planet finally comes to take the offspring home.

Present tense is a tricky choice for a novel, because novels use time in complicated ways -- for instance, they often need to skip ahead to the next interesting part and then loop back briefly to cover what's been left out, which is difficult to do in present tense.

I've seen it work -- I think Bright Lights, Big City is in present tense -- but there it makes perfect sense to have strobe-flashes of immediacy punctuated by absences, because the protagonist is stoned all the time.

It doesn't work here. It gives the entire book a dreamy, static feel of waiting for something to happen, even while things *are* happening, which gets old fast.

The characters are problematic, too. As soon as we meet Lorpash, he's developing relationships -- with his jailer, with the old woman -- and yet we're supposed to believe he's lived well into adulthood without ever making a friend, taking a job, having any sort of connection. Allush doesn't know how to track, how to hunt, how not to injure herself, even though she's apparently survived in semi-wilderness conditions and is in her mid-twenties.

It's obvious on page 1 that Youpas is a psycho, but people continue to trust him so that he can provide peril when needed.

I think this could have been a lovely short story. I don't think much of it as a novel.

Jan says

Rather childlike sci fi about aliens living among the humans.

Shel says

A tightly written, smooth read, in which second generation aliens await rescue on earth (think *Space Mountain*) and struggle with identity and where they belong. In 200 pages, the novel covers a lot of ground

and contains a variety of scenes: a poignant section where the alien cares for and befriends an elderly woman, a portion where the plot mirrors Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, and an engaging chapter where one of the aliens returns to her home planet. The protagonists are caught between two worlds with little knowledge of either culture, therefore very little about the aliens' origin or their home world is explained or divulged — they may be Neanderthals.

Rebe says

Weird but strangely compelling. Vivid.

Bri Fidelity says

After a first chapter that reads like a wonderful and perfect Emshwiller short story - which it turns out it is: 'World of No Return' ('Asimov's Science Fiction', December 2005) - *The Secret City* turns oddly frustrating oddly quickly, and I can really only blame myself.

I'm biased. For some reason - bad genes; bad upbringing; who knows? - I just can't stand it when a long text decides to adopt the rapidly-alternating viewpoints of two or more first-person narrators. It just makes me angry. *Especially*, for some even more obscure reason, when each section is helpfully headed by the character's name. (*The Time Traveller's Wife*, I am looking balefully at you. And then I'm coming to get you.)

Emshwiller's full-length novels have a maddening tendency to *do exactly this thing that I hate*, and if she weren't one of my all-time favourite short story writers, I'd have probably wiped my hands of her long ago. When she finds one narrator and sticks with them for long stretches, she's a boss! (Almost certainly why I prefer the near-identical *Mister Boots* to the fan-favourite *Ledoyt* - and, yes, somewhere in the world, Ursula K. le Guin has just shuddered violently and doesn't know why.) Here, all the pogoing around just serves to undercut the text's momentum - and, here more than in any of her other novels, there's really not enough story for that to keep happening, however much the present tense keeps trying to tell me that these events are immediate and vital.

There's a lot of charm here - and at least, unlike *Ledoyt* and *Leaping Man Hill*, there are only the *two* observing characters to contend with. This could easily be adapted into, say, a heartwarming family film. And I adore that opening chapter (I hope it's part of *The Collected Short Stories* someday, so I can see how it *really* stands alone). But it's no *The Mount*, that's for sure.

Natlyn says

You don't know what you've got 'til it's gone.

Intriguing premise—second generation alien castaways have the opportunity to go to their parents' homeworld. It's okay as far as it goes, but really seems more like a short story. It's all character (good). The tight POV from the two aliens worked well to convey character, but created an insular almost claustrophobic feel. Answers about the homeworld are only hinted at.

Okay, but I was expecting more.

Christa Van says

High in the mountains, a city of aliens are living on earth awaiting a trip home. They have been there for awhile. Some of the aliens have integrated with Earthlings in "the down" and live among us. Lorpas is one looking for others of his kind when a rescue party comes and tries to take him home. Communication is poor and things don't turn out well. Soon after, Lorpas does find the secret city where others of his kind are living. He quickly falls in love with Allush. They are soon separated and an adventure follows to get them back together.

In the end, your fairly typical alien love story.

Charles Dee Mitchell says

They came as extraterrestrial tourists, but something went wrong and their rides home never showed up. They can pass for human, although they are a little rough around the edges and think all earthlings dress in Hawaiian shirts and Bermuda shorts. And there is a language problem. But they make do. The older generation remains disdainful of our backwards little planet, but the second generation find they kind of like it here. As the parents die off, the diaspora of alien young have to make it on their own. They can take low-paying jobs where people don't ask too many questions. Some slip into homelessness, Some dream of a Secret City where others of their kind live in anticipation of the long overdue return flight.

Emshwiller's short novel is a well-told and entertaining variation on the immigration story central to American history.

Jake says

This is the story of a group of humanoid aliens who become stranded while visiting Earth in the guise of tourists. As the wait for rescue stretches into years, they do their best to remain on the outskirts of society, in an attempt to keep their children from becoming enamored of our culture. This breeds a sort of xenophobic contempt among the majority of the aliens.

Carol Emshwiller tells her story by switching between first person accounts of the events that befall her main characters. As a major structural element of the novel, I believe the author makes good use of it to clarify that the story revolves around these characters.

I really enjoyed reading this story, and I would have given it a higher rating, but in the process of creating the back story, piques our interest in the alien culture without delivering more than a just a taste. I was left wondering about how the author would envision the encounter between the cultures and how they would come to terms with one another on a larger scale.

That said, once her focus clarifies, she tells a beautiful story. I look forward to reading other works by her.

Christina Packard says

Trying to get unto Sci Fi books, but I didn't get into this one. Didn't follow who was where or why. I kind of got the gist of the book, but what I read did not seem to get that point across interestingly enough.

Rob says

...*The Secret City* is a wonderfully understated meditation of being different, of not fitting in. The otherness of the main characters is constantly present in the narrative and, usually between the lines, they are permanently struggling with it. It is perhaps not the most ambitious science fiction novel ever but the minimalist style and clear language appealed to me...

[Full Random Comments review](#)
