Barbary Station

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Adda and Iridian are newly-minted engineers, but in a solar system wracked by economic collapse after an interplanetary war, an engineering degree isn't worth the paper it's printed on. Desperate for gainful employment, they hijack a colony ship, planning to join a pirate crew at Barbary Station, an abandoned shipbreaking station in deep space.

But when they arrive at Barbary Station, nothing is as they expected. The pirates aren't living in luxury — they're hiding in a makeshift base welded onto the station's exterior hull. The artificial intelligence controlling the station's security system has gone mad, trying to kill all station residents. And it shoots down any ship that tries to leave, so there's no way out.

Adda and Iridian have one chance to earn a place on the pirate crew: destroy the artificial intelligence. The last engineer who went up against the security system suffered explosive decapitation, and the pirates are taking bets on how the newcomers will die. But Adda and Iridian plan to beat the odds.

There's a glorious future in piracy…if they can survive long enough.

Barbary Station Details

Date : Published October 31st 2017 by Saga Press
ISBN :
Author : R.E. Stearns
Format : Kindle Edition 384 pages
Genre : Science Fiction, Lgbt, Fiction, Adventure, Pirates, Glbt, Queer

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From Reader Review Barbary Station for online ebook

Samantha (AK) says

DNF at page 189

I'm never quite sure what to say when I DNF a book.

I tried, guys. This was one of my anticipated releases of 2017. I sat on the waitlist for over a month after my library system bought a copy, even as the first (disappointed) reviews started coming in.

I should have known. As it turns out, there's a reason this is getting mixed reviews. It's just not that good. Great concepts, but ideas alone do not a good book make. The first 30 pages or so are excellent, but it trends downhill from there.

The protags are ok, but behaviourally inconsistent at best and stereotypical at worst. The various characters around them are interchangable cardboard cutouts. Several of these secondaries die or are maimed--whatever emotional response I was supposed to get, it didn't happen.

There's a somewhat unique/retro method of interfacing with AI here (I was vaguely reminded of Gibson's *Neuromancer*, but only in conceptual terms.) Sadly, it suffers from the same lack of exposition as everything else.

Yes, I said "lack of exposition." There comes a point in speculative fiction where you really do have to shed some light on what's happening, otherwise your audience can't connect.

Given another draft, this might have been pretty good. As it is, I'm shelving it.

Didi Chanoch says

This is really 3.5 stars, rounded up. There's a lot to like about this novel, which is, after all, about a couple of lesbian pirate wannabes and the deadly tasks they must undertake to become pirates.

Unfortunately, the good is bogged down by too many characters who are barely more than sketches, and a story about AI which never goes deep into the fascinating aspects that are glimpsed.

Adda and Iridian, our two leads, are terrific characters, smart and brave and loving. That makes up some for the rest of the cast being... there, mostly. Some are nice, some are assholes, none is fleshed out in a way that worked, for me.

I'm glad I read Barbary Station, and I think I'll read the next book in the series, but I didn't love it.

Elena says

Listed in Publishers Weekly as "queer WOC pirate space opera" and I am SO. FREAKING. IN.

Lata says

Despite the interesting concepts: piracy as a way to pay off student debts and to stay with one's significant other, killer AI terrorizing people on a space station, a committed and loving relationship between the main characters Adda and Iridian, different sides of a conflict having to work together to survive, good diversity in the characters, different kinds of AIs, I found this book was a sloooooooow read. The author's style actually was a detriment to me enjoying this book. I find the text did not flow, and I was frequently rereading paragraphs to understand what was going on. I wanted so much to love this story, but I kept finding myself taking frequent breaks from this book, and only persevered as I don't generally like dropping books mid-read.

Gavin says

Barbary Station was one of those weird books where the blurb was just so awesome that I had super high expectations for the book despite the fact that I'd seen zero hype for it anywhere!

The story had the potential to be absolutely fantastic. Adda and Iridian, engineers, hijack a spaceship and rush join some space pirates at the pirate haven of Barbary Station. It seemed a great plan at the time as the pirates were rumoured to be living the life of luxury at their captured station and both Adda and Iridian are running from debts but it does not go as smoothly as they might hope. As soon as they arrive at Barbary Station they learn that the pirates are struggling to survive as the stations AI has turned on them!

Space pirates and murderous AI's should have made this story a sure-fire winner but for some reason I just never connected with R. E. Stearns writing so I could not get sucked into the story. It was a real pity as the premise of the story was great and the world building was even pretty good. This felt like a viable sci-fi world. I even liked the fact that Adda and Iridian were lovers who had a relatively drama free relationship.

I should have loved this one but sadly I never gelled with the writing and ended up a bit bored with the happenings. I could have read on as this was nothing overly wrong with the story but I decided to DNF around the 60% mark as I found I was avoiding the book when I put it down so decided it was time to move on to something better!

All in all I'm a bit disappointed I failed to connect with this one as I had high expectations and I do feel like the building blocks for a great story were in place.

Rating: 2.5 stars.

Audio Note: Mia Barron was a little monotone in her delivery but I think she was passable enough as a narrator.

Milliebot says

Lesbian space pirates versus a murderous AI? Sign me the hell up! The result left me feeling conflicted, however. Buckle up!

We're immediately thrust into the story and Adda and Iridian's dreams for their future, all of which intrigued me. The action throughout the book is kept at a fairly steady pace – Adda's introverted and tech-minded observations are offset by Iridian's near constant action scenes. Once the couple is aboard the ship, there's a lot going on. The pirates are living in the walls in order to stay alive, a bunch of refugees who left their planet after a war are living inside parameters set by the AI and there's a handful of doctors the ship seems to want to protect.

For the most part, I found it easy to imagine what was happening, but when it came to the general layout of the station, most notably any scenes taking place on its surface, I was utterly lost. I would have loved a map (or maps!) of the ship to get a better handle on where everyone was traveling to and from. In those cases, I just imagined an amalgamation of various space stations I've seen in movies, but it took me out of the story to have to do so.

I loved the unsettling tone set early on by the AI – I'm a sucker for "evil AI" plots, the creepier the better! Nothing quite so frightening as imagining floating through the deadly darkness of space inside of a machine hell-bent on killing you. (Note: It wasn't until photographing the book that I noticed the A and I in the title were highlighted – clever!) The AI in this book, known as AegiSKADA, considers the pirates to be the biggest threat and is constantly sending drones to kill them if they leave their hideout and eventually its tactics evolve to more sinister means. AegiSKADA does still want to keep the station intact however and must do its best not to do too much damage when exterminating the pests (hence why it doesn't just bomb an entire portion of the ship). Iridian and Adda's presence only upsets it further.

I found the rest of the cast to be less interesting than the AI, with the exception of Iridian. She and Adda are ridiculously opposite. Iridian is a tall, dark-skinned, bald, well-muscled, boisterous, ex-soldier with a really cool, high-tech battleshield. Adda is a short, light-skinned, red and purple haired, self-consciously curvaceous, socially awkward, techie with what's essentially a hardware jack in her nostril. I couldn't understand why they were together – they clearly cared about each other (or Adda attempted to worry about Iridian when she wasn't in a drug-induced tech trance) but I could never get a sense of what brought them together, or kept them together. They felt more like friends than lovers, and while this doesn't largely affect the story, their relationship felt out of place.

Iridian has enough personality for two main characters and I friggen loved her. She's strong, smart and won't take any shit, unless of course she has to, for the betterment of her and Adda's future. She knows when to stand down and when to kick ass. In contrast, Adda seemed put upon any time she had to interact with a human other than Iridian (or sometimes even Iridian) and spent much of her time in a drugged state to achieve a deeper connection with AegiSKADA. She's a sort of hacker (the book describes her skill far better than I could), but in order to get into the ship's systems she has to take a drug and then plug into the system so she can manipulate it in her workspace (I'll come back to that.) Adda just fell flat for me.

Adda's brother, Pel, has a few interesting scenes, but was mostly the clichéd troublemaker. The crew was too large to get to know. There were some diverse relationships among the members and the Captain's gender is

never declared (the Captain also had some fabulous sounding outfits), but I couldn't bring myself to care what happened to any of them.

So, Adda's workspace: her specialty in systems engineering has led her to get implants that allow her to literally connect herself to a machine's systems. In order to concentrate she takes drugs and enters a strange state of mind where the information she is looking for becomes a surreal, interactive experience. For example, during one session the information was presented in the form of moths and other bugs, pinned to the wall as though preserved by an entomologist. Clouds of undead bugs would then flicker and move about the room and at one point something bloody hit a window? It was like reading a strange dream (or nightmare, in my book.) I loved this mix of human and computer and I've never read anything quite like it.

What lost me much of time, however, was all the technical talk. I'm assuming Stearns knows what she's talking about, because it's all Greek to me. Sometimes I can gloss over these details and just accept that stuff is happening because people know way more about science and technology than I do. Other times I get caught up and confused, struggling to make sense of the words on the page. This was one of those times. This certainly won't be an issue for everyone though.

In the end, this was a middle of the road read for me. I expected to be blown away, but the tech-talk made it a dense, slow read and the characters were lackluster. Iridian is awesome though and AegiSKADA was as creeptastic as I could have hoped for, so it balanced out. If you like a lot of science and technology in your sci-f and you love AI-driven plots, certainly check this out.

I received this book for free from Geek Girl Authority in exchange for my honest review.

Stella says

I liked it well enough. Plenty of action, lots of hard SF things. Could easily be a movie. Super open ending though, a bit unsatisfying. And it took me a long time to read. Maybe because I'm tired and stressed, but I didn't find it as engaging as I wanted it to be.

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anna (readingpeaches) says

3 words, 19 letters. say it & i'm yours.
lesbian *space* pirates

Lucille says

Since there were so few reviews out I was a bit anxious about this book, but I'd also been excited about it ever since it was announced last December and it sounded so promising (come on, who wouldn't be very hyped for a book pitched as "*lesbians of colour space pirate vs rogue AI*"??) that I thought I should give it a chance and I preordred a copy a few days before it came out. I kind of bought this book on a whim and I'm very glad I wasn't disappointed and had such a nice time reading. While it's not joining my all time favourites, I'm happy to have it on my shelf and will surely read it again one day.

Barbary Station is a book about the science and tech (mechanical, software…) aspect but it isn't hard SF either. The main characters are engineers and will have to figure out a way to take an Artificial Intelligence out or understand why it is behaving the way it does.

The story felt like one of these stories set in a space station where one character has to go exploring and repairing while the other has to keep close to the computer or manuals. It also felt like a video games, having to make choices and going from point A to point B without dying. There were one or two times when I became a little bit bored and was expecting more to happen, but it was only in passing and there still was always something happening closely after I started feeling that way.

I also felt at first that it wasn't made clear soon enough on the chapters who was talking between Adda or Iridian and I found myself a bit lost as to who was who on the chapters but I quickly grew to recognize them by voice and caracterization. They are very different individuals and it became clear soon enough that the chapters needn't be named after them and it would have been a shame to get rid of these clever chapter names!

I loved that *Barbary Station* has a f/f couple as main characters, especially an already established couple when the book starts so there was no romance plot or slow burn or anything. While I don't love that much to read about love story, I do like to read about a couple who stick together no matter what, sneak kisses every now and then. Plus they seem to be a couple made of an introvert and an extrovert looking out for each others, caring and always ready to do whatever the could to protect each others. I loved how they were so aware of the preferences, fears and anxieties of the other, ready to say or do what the other needed. I found this very nice and felt my heart warm for them. I loved that they are that couple that won't hesitate to sacrifice themselves or others to protect their loved one.

There's also the relationship between Adda and her brother and the fact that this novel had a complicated sibling relationship AND an established romantic couple made it all the more special to me.

"Love you, babe, but I have to concentrate on something other than what a fuking dangerous idea that is."

I liked how inclusive the story felt, but there still was something that bothered me.

Iridian constantly has to fight her binary views on gender and tries to show respect to people that are not on the gender binary. So she is aware of her flawed vision and tries to work on herself BUT while she asks for pronouns she still slips sometimes and has to slap herself mentally when she ends up calling the captain "sir" (here's a random example: "*The captain broke into raucous laughter, which the back of her mind still tried to catergorize as masculine or feminine. Gods, that was rude of her*".)

While it is addressed that she shouldn't do that, I wish the author hadn't made her continue to call the captain "sir" for such a long time in the novel. It's understandable that Iridian has this instinctive reaction from her background in the army but still.

I feel like bringing the matter of gender to the front line was done in this slightly hurtful way and could have been done better, not as micro agressions, even if they're challenged every time.

I loved how the book addresses the fact that english isn't the only language in space, that some slang has developped and how translation devices exist but aren't perfect either. There's also a neopronoun used at one point when someone talked about his parters : "*Well, girlfriends, zefriends, boyfriends[…]*"

Like I say just above, the book tries to be inclusive and doesn't show a strictly white and heterosexual vision of space, which is nice.

The book as an object is very beautiful: I love the chapter design, the font style used by Saga Press is one of my favourites and floppy paperbacks are my prefered kind of physical books to read so I'm glad I took the chance on paying a bit more for a physical copy and didn't buy an ebook instead ?

My conclusion would be that this is a very nice addition to the space opera novels and that while I had expected to love this more – the curse of high expectations! – I wasn't let down or disappointed either! I would definitely recommend to anyone intrigued by the initial pitch.

Content warnings: eye injury, sudden deaths, death of infant, misgendering (challenged)

Review first posted on my blog!

AC says

since i told myself to write more reviews of the books i like instead of just angry reviews of the ones i Don't, lemme crank something out real quick

so first off, the premise of this book alone is worth five stars: Lesbian Space Pirates. Lesbian. Space. Pirates.

gods bless.

secondly, the characters and the plot and the worldbuilding are also five star worthy. i'm a huge sucker for what i call stealth worldbuilding, which is mostly just minimalist infodumping, but whatever. i love that these lesbian space pirates are basically anarchists on the run from student loan debt! i love that adda is a space hacker and that space hacking as a concept involves doing like... straight up hallucinogens to help the squishy human brain keep up with the computers! i love that iridian is basically samus aran!! i love sloane's crew (I LOVE SLOANE) and the fact that most of the ZVs are Tall, Buff, Gorgeous women and that all the pirates have Such Good Names (special shout out to grandpa death)

and of course, i (ever-predictable) love love *love* aegiSKADA. the concept of zombie AI and awakened AI is *terrifying* and i want more books about them immediately

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Acqua says

DNF at 30%
2.5 stars*.

Barbary Station has one of the best premises ever:
?? Pirates! Even better, two pirates *in space* who are women and also engineers (women in science!)
?? and love each other (established f/f couple!). One of them is black and butch, the other is chubby
?? they became pirates because of student loans.
?? and they have to fight an evil AI!

And yet, **I couldn't finish this book. The writing is dry and I struggled to focus on it.** I found myself rereading paragraphs many times because I just couldn't care about the details of the political stuff or the side characters.
Since I've mentioned the side characters: once Adda and Iridian got on Barbary Station, we're introduced to more than ten side characters, and I started confusing them almost immediately. Was I supposed to care about the ones who died? How could I, if I knew nothing about them but their name? Writers: killing off

(view spoiler) for shock value isn't a good or original idea, especially when it's obvious that they were introduced just for that.

Adda and Iridian themselves weren't that interesting as characters. It's not that they were terribly written - they were just a bit flat - it's that **the writing was so dry and dull that they sounded exactly alike**, which is one of the worst things that can happen to a book told in first person PoV + dual perspective.

Some of the pirates hate each other because of a war between different places in the Solar System that ended a few years before the events of this book. Or so we're told through **graceless infodumps I skimmed**. I think I was supposed to care about that too, but there are no stakes. The war has already ended and seems to have nothing to do with the actual enemy - the AI - so...?

There were **two things I actually liked about this book** apart from the premise:
?? **Adda and Iridian as a couple** - women who love each other and support each other with no miscommunication involved are some of my favorite things to read about. Yes, the relationship having no conflict also meant it had no tension, but that wasn't what made this book boring.
?? **The hacking scenes**, if they can be called that. There's a lot of interesting technology in this book, and it's sad that I hated the writing so much, because *hallucinatory hacking* involving insects is a very cool idea and I wanted more.

I don't like writing negative reviews of f/f books, especially if they're genre fiction and not standalones, but I just couldn't get into this.

*2.5 stars because I still liked it more than some of the books I DNFed recently which I rated 2 stars. This looks like a high rating for a DNF but I don't care, this wasn't bad, just boring and unremarkable and okay (which a book with this premise shouldn't be). I know I would rate this book 2.5 stars if I finished it, and I don't want to waste my time on finishing a book that is going to be just okay.

Gary says

Barbary Station, the debut novel from R.E. Stearns, is the story of Adda and Iridian – two deeply in love engineers who desperately want to become space pirates (!?!) – who hatch a plan to join an infamous crew that recently hijacked the titular space station. Once they arrive at their destination they discover that the station's AI actually returned the favor and hijacked the pirates, and the couple's hopes for gainful employment (and staying alive) rest on their ability to wrest control of the station back from their captor. Adda and Iridian could have easily been voted "least likely to want to become space pirates" by their high school classmates; one of the strengths of Stearns' worldbuilding is that their prospects in this hyper-capitalist dystopian future are so bleak that it is convincingly their most attractive option. Stearns definitely has a talent for disseminating the nuts and bolts of tech-savvy hard sci-fi, and Addy and Iridian's relationship is sweet and affecting. The book often feels like it was written for and by a gaming enthusiast, which gives it a kind of "nerd chic" sheen, but also, unfortunately, gives the story a chunky, attention deficit feel. The plot unfolds at a distracting, scattershot pace and at times struggles to stay focused. The novel is interesting enough to make me want to see more from this author, but not enough to get a higher recommendation.

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thefourthvine says

This is a story about two women in love who decide to become space pirates, and then discover they have to take control of a scary AI to achieve their piracy dreams. In other words, I should have adored this. I should have eaten it up with a spoon.

I did not.

The thing is, there is a good book hiding in here, but it needed to be found, and it wasn't. The book that actually exists is a mess. There's a huge cast of characters, most of whom are barely introduced (and if they are introduced, there's a good chance they're about to die), let alone described. That is, except for one character (Vick), who is introduced four times in successive chapters, each time in exactly the same words. And, worse, because the cast is so unwieldy and Stearns struggles so much with making each of the characters real, she often goes for the cheap shot instead of the well-constructed emotional note. This means, for example, that she introduces a kid just so she can kill her off for the emotional impact. (Multiple child deaths in this one, by the way.) She only gives most characters meaningful dialogue in the pages before they die. It comes off as trite and cheap, and it makes it hard to care about any of them.

There's also a ton of continuity errors, including a point where a blind character reads text off a screen (and I don't really want to get into the Tragedy of Disability narrative that plays out with this character, except to say that as a disabled reader I was not a fan of it). The characters seem to forget crucial, basic pieces of information — like, a supposedly intelligent group of people fighting an unknown infectious agent just ... forgets to contact their doctor allies. For chapters. Because plot reasons, I guess? And there are minor problems, too. There's chunks of repeated text and sentences that are confusing because they're missing words. Midway through, I actually checked to see if this was a self-pubbed novel, since those sometimes don't get edited very well. (It's actually published by Saga Press, an imprint of Simon & Schuster. Clearly I need to stop thinking traditional publishing = any promise of quality editing.)

Or, to summarize this book by milestones: at 15%, I text my friend who was thinking of reading it that she should not do that thing. At 22%, I started texting her angry updates about the book. At 44%, I started making frustrated editorial comments in my ebook. By 60%, this was a straight-up grudgeread.

And this is all so sad, because I wanted to love this book. And I think I could have loved this book. It just ... needed a lot of help that it didn't get. I might read future novels by this author, but wow, I don't recommend anyone read this one.

Lindsay says

Adda and Iridian are a couple who have decided that the only way that they can be together in a severely depressed post-war Solar System is to join a group of space pirates. Adda is a gifted software engineer/hacker and Iridian is an ex-soldier who has trained as a mechanical engineer. Together they hatch a scheme to hijack a colony ship and get the spoils to Barbary Station, where Captain Sloane and her pirate crew (including Adda's brother) are based. Only when they get there the situation at the station is not as advertised, with the whole thing being under interdiction by a mad security AI and the small and varied populations of humans live under constant threat.

This book was highly recommended by both Liz Bourke and Ann Leckie which made it even more disappointing for me as these are people whose tastes I usually trust. Lesbian space pirates in a solar system space setting with a mad artificial intelligence should be everything I'd ever want in a book, but I bounced

off this hard with only the high recommendations stopping me from DNF at several points. (Thought process: Liz loved this, it must get better in the remaining ~~70%~~ ~~50%~~ ~~30%~~ ~~10%~~!? ... it's not going to get better is it).

So let's get into it. On a subjective note, I bounced off the writing style hard. I found it choppy, overly detailed in some places and incredibly blank in others. While the second half is action-packed, the first is a yawn-fest only rarely punctuated by random and unheralded action.

I personally found the way this book deals with exposition to be a major flaw. There's a modern fashion in fiction that says exposition is bad, which can be a huge problem for speculative fiction. This is typically handled in one of two ways, either by ignoring the fashion and bringing on exposition where needed, or by being clever about it and introducing exposition early in the book through dialogue and interaction with the world, often by starting the story with a bang.

This book chooses a third and frustrating path: ignore exposition almost completely. We don't need to know why Iridian has a high-tech shield, or what makes the shield high-tech or what makes it a valid choice for the sort of soldier she was. We don't even need descriptive text about it! Similarly, it's just a given that all AIs are either zombies or awake and that awakened AIs are inimical. Everyone knows that! We certainly don't need to know why someone just doesn't lob large-mass objects at the pirate base that everyone knows is there and that is such a hazard to space travel.

tl;dr version of the exposition rant: Fantastic world. Crappy communication of world-building.

Characterization is another area with some unrealized potential. While Iridian is engaging, she borders on being a Mary Sue. Adda is incredibly wooden, written to be a drugged-out ditherer and prone to analysis paralysis. The relationship between the two is sweet though, but if you think about it for even two minutes, it makes no sense whatsoever. The only other character that gets time in this book is Adda's brother Pel who is mostly blind, but manages to get around a ship infested by killer robots incredibly well (there's a spoilery reason for that, but even that's a problem - someone should have noticed).

Which brings me to my final gripe: so much of the action, plot and characterization makes no sense at all. Not the actions of the AI (low on drones, unable to produce more, so sends them in small groups against the pirates consistently at just-as-much-as-they-can-handle amounts). Not the insanity of the doctors: there are four of them and while they've been through a trauma, why are they *all* so weird? Not the way that the pirates actually pirate stuff (AegisSKADA won't let them leave the base!) Not the three ships around the station: the pirates' stories about pilots without a common language, or why the pirates tell that story, or why anyone would believe it. Not the character progression: for all the bulk of the book, so many characters move from A to C in their personal stories without passing through B making that progress feel unearned.

And just so much is taken for granted, when any logical person would ask why is that so, and then when a stupid explanation is given, challenge them on it. Of course though, we can't get actual answers for two reasons:

a) That would be exposition. Exposition bad.
b) The whole damn thing would be a novella.

The potential is there; this is an ambitious novel. It's an attempt to build a believable future history with interesting technology and inhabitants and a really interesting locale for all the action. It just fails in almost every category.

Crini says

This could have been SO good but the characters didn't do it for me at all. A+ for the plot and the diversity (lesbian space pirates for the win) but the characters where lacking depth and their interactions where sometimes cringe-worthy in their awkwardness (especially that "special" moment at the very end, what the hell was that? Where were the feels?). Not to mention the repetitiveness of the first half of the book where one of the MCs repeatedly misgenders another character and just wouldn't learn no matter how bad she felt about it.