



The Luminous Dead

Caitlin Starling

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A thrilling, atmospheric debut with the intensive drive of *The Martian* and *Gravity* and the creeping dread of *Annihilation*, in which a caver on a foreign planet finds herself on a terrifying psychological and emotional journey for survival.

When Gyre Price lied her way into this expedition, she thought she'd be mapping mineral deposits, and that her biggest problems would be cave collapses and gear malfunctions. She also thought that the fat paycheck—enough to get her off-planet and on the trail of her mother—meant she'd get a skilled surface team, monitoring her suit and environment, keeping her safe. Keeping her sane.

Instead, she got Em.

Em sees nothing wrong with controlling Gyre's body with drugs or withholding critical information to “ensure the smooth operation” of her expedition. Em knows all about Gyre's falsified credentials, and has no qualms using them as a leash—and a lash. And Em has secrets, too . . .

As Gyre descends, little inconsistencies—missing supplies, unexpected changes in the route, and, worst of all, shifts in Em's motivations—drive her out of her depths. Lost and disoriented, Gyre finds her sense of control giving way to paranoia and anger. On her own in this mysterious, deadly place, surrounded by darkness and the unknown, Gyre must overcome more than just the dangerous terrain and the Tunneler which calls underground its home if she wants to make it out alive—she must confront the ghosts in her own head.

But how come she can't shake the feeling she's being followed?

The Luminous Dead Details

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Author : Caitlin Starling

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From Reader Review The Luminous Dead for online ebook

carol. says

Totally Unauthorized Review*

It was very good, just the sort of read I wanted. Read it if you enjoy survival stories, or caving, or psychological mysteries where people are unreliable, conflicted, and determined.

I read for three reasons:

--A certain unnamed good friend strongly suggested it after reading it. Here's how she sold it: "It takes stones of steel to write a full novel with only two characters and a cave for the setting. So far, it's done very, very well."

--I confused Caitlin Starling with Caitlin Kiernan, who also has a effed up book I want to read (*The Drowning Girl*).

--The darker, the better.

Like *The Children of Time*, it could have played on fundamental fears--in this case, claustrophobia--but somehow, through the writing, I was only riveted. Except for the water scenes. Those were scary. In some ways, it is like *The Martian*, only with a main character who is far less well-adjusted and funny. I'd say character-building is the clear strength of this book.

Do not read the GR book blurb, as it does give far too much away, including one plot point that happens two-thirds of the way in. I read an early copy--hopefully very early--so I look forward to re-reading a print copy that might have even more polish. Just for me--for heaven's sake, do not read the spoilers if you intend to read--

(view spoiler)

That said, the end result was a one-two gut punch. Absolutely wow.

"She hadn't planned, because her goal hadn't been in the future. It had always been behind her, pulling her back, pulling her down."

*Black market ARC. Oh, you didn't know there was such a thing? There is, my friend, and the stories around them are sordid.**

(view spoiler)*

***On the up side, I don't have to put anything in about thanks to the publisher, or totally honest review, or unbiased opinions, or any of that other legalese baloney.

Jessica Woodbury says

THE DESCENT meets GRAVITY, a high-concept claustrophobic adventure with a dynamic relationship at its center.

There isn't much on Gyre's planet and she intends to get off of it as soon as she can. But the only way to do that is taking the huge risk of working as a caver for a mining company. The caves are perilous and the pay is high but you may not get out with your life. Cave-ins, equipment failures, monsters, and even more dangers lie ahead. Gyre has a plan to get in, get out, and track down the mother who left her when she was small.

But Gyre's first mission isn't exactly what she expected. She finds herself working for a mysterious employer and instead of having an entire team working to support her, she's alone in the cave and has just Em's voice in her helmet, her only lifeline. The longer Gyre goes the more she thinks Em can't be trusted, but Em is the only one who can get her out.

The central relationship between Gyre and Em is a constant series of ups and downs as they grow to trust one another than repel one another, with everything from attraction to pure hatred and everything in between. This is what really drives the book forward, even more than the twisty-turny plot.

The book is a bit too long for me, and there are times when it's hard to fully visualize Gyre's surroundings, which is pretty important in a book where there are long stretches where all that happens is Gyre navigating the cave. But it still manages to be really cinematic and exciting, it was real fun to read.

Emily says

like if the martian and annihilation got freaky in a cave with queer women!!!

Sana says

Professional woman caver on a solo caving expedition '*to map an unexplored cave system on a foreign planet*' where things get creepyyyyy. I just want to know why isn't it 2019 yet

Aleksandra says

book twitter says "this is spooky and f/f" so I gotta add the book

Emily A. Duncan says

I'm never going into a cave EVER IN MY LIFE.

Nadine says

The Luminous Dead is an atmospheric novel that follows two women as they dive deep into the earth and even deeper into their own psyches.

I love these types of novels, exploring unexplored lands/planets. So, I requested this one immediately after reading its synopsis. Unfortunately, I didn't enjoy The Luminous Dead as much as I wanted. The comparison to The Martian and Annihilation are apt, though The Luminous Dead is missing that spark and it factor that make those novels memorable.

The atmosphere throughout the novel is creepy with an unrelenting sense of dread. Starling excels flawlessly with this aspect of the novel. From the beginning of the novel until the end, it feels as if there's a weight slowly settling on your chest as you explore the cave with the characters and discover the many unsettling decisions that led to the characters' current situation.

The synopsis paints The Luminous Dead as a very different novel than the one you get. Instead of a horror science fiction novel, readers get a creepy character driven story. The best way to describe the novel would be to compare it to the television The Walking Dead. The apocalypse and zombies are the catalyst to the character driven story as opposed to exploring the cause of apocalypse and zombies. The Luminous Dead functions in the same way. The exploration of the cave is the catalyst for the story being told about the two women. So, the world building is not expanded upon or explored since the story is ultimately about these two women and their journey.

My three star rating mostly reflects my disappointment with what the synopsis paints versus what I ultimately got from the novel. I wish Starling had focused a little more on the world building and given more context as opposed to focusing solely on the two of them.

Overall, despite my more negative review The Luminous Dead is definitely worth reading for Starling's excellent atmospheric writing and character development.

** I was provided an ARC via Edelweiss for an honest review.

John Jacobs says

It took about five pages of reading to fall irrevocably into the hole The Luminous Dead offered. It's a frightening book. It's a fascinating book. It's a very intimate book. There are really just two characters, but it never gets boring or old, and by the end all you want – all I wanted – was to get to the point where the characters finally meet.

Very impressive debut.

Ricky says

Well, thank you, Harry, for bringing this ARC to my attention.

Harry told me today that he was really amazed by the level of talent displayed by Caitlin Starling in this, her debut novel, and I have to say he's very well on the mark. I can see the comparison to *Annihilation* from the back-cover copy pretty easily, though it manages to be more minimalist - driven mostly by two characters, one of whom is predominantly offscreen in a mission-control role whom Harry compared to GLaDOS, and whom I compare to Sally from *Oblivion* - as well as more straightforward - though not without a certain level of mind-screw - and more creepy. Dear sweet Jesus, Em.

Oh, and it's got canon f/f, which I'm sure a lot of peeps Harry and I both know would really appreciate.

What really makes this book stand out, though, is how truly weird and actually twisted it is - twisted in that I actually found myself loving a character I really didn't like, one I felt made too many choices from the outset that were barely morally defensible at best. But there's precedent for me coming around to loving a well-rounded anti-villain eventually. Warner, anyone? And now Em. And what would Em be without her anti-heroic counterpart in Gyre? Both of them are strongly written, captivating, and constantly keeping me as a reader guessing.

It's hard to believe this book isn't even out for another five months or so - but when it comes out, if I'm still working the bookstore by then, you know I'll be happily helping to sell it! :D

Nick T. Borrelli says

I want to begin this review by pointing out the fact that I'm a sucker for books with this kind of theme. The plot of THE LUMINOUS DEAD is one that takes place on a planet rich in mineral deposits and a "caver" is exploring one such location while also possibly being stalked deep within the bowels of said cave. Anything that involves some sort of exploration on a distant planet or an archaeological angle and I'm usually all in. So when I had the opportunity to receive an advance reader copy of the book from the publisher, I couldn't download it fast enough. I hadn't previously heard of the author Caitlin Starling before and this is apparently her first novel, so I was excited to see how this story would unfold. I had seen the comparisons to The Martian in that the story is told mainly through internal dialogue and conversation with only one other main character who serves as "mission control" of the expedition. You don't see too many books use this type of narrative device, so I was intrigued to get started. Now on to the book and my subsequent thoughts about it.

The main character in THE LUMINOUS DEAD is Gyre, a caver who signs a contract with a private mining company for what she believes is just another expedition to gather valuable ore deposits. Gyre is not totally forthcoming about her background and motive when she signs on with the company, which is to score a quick payday so that she can keep looking for her mother who abandoned her years ago. Gyre has been obsessed with finding out what happened to her mother and she sees this job as nothing more than a means to fund her continuing efforts going forward. What Gyre doesn't know yet is that her contractor and only lifeline to the outside world Em has motivations of her own that aren't simply mining for ore. Gyre and Em are connected via a communication device located inside Gyre's suit where Em can also monitor every aspect of Gyre's physical health. Their relationship starts out as a combative one as Gyre suspects that Em may be hiding something from her and not being completely honest about the job that she has been asked to do. It

turns out that Gyre's suspicions are not entirely unfounded when she is able to access a video from her suit that shows a previous mining party who experience an incredible tragedy while exploring the same cave that Gyre is now embedded deep within. When Gyre lashes out at Em and threatens to quit and turn back, Em is forced to reveal that her parents were the ones in the video along with a few others. Something terrible happened to the party that Em has been struggling to discover the answer to. It turns out that she has sent dozens of other cavers on the same mission as Gyre with most of them dying in the treacherous tunnels trying vainly to reach the area where Em's parents were last documented to be alive. As Em continues to open up about what happened to her parents and their family business, her relationship with Gyre starts to change. It begins to become one of mutual understanding as they both are in similar situations: trying to find answers to missing family members. It also becomes a borderline romantic relationship of sorts. Eventually things really start to change as Gyre both sees and hears signs that she may not be alone inside the cave. Could it possibly be someone from the original doomed crew? Em's mother? Or could it be something far far worse that is now stalking Gyre as she tries to survive and find a way out of what could be her ultimate resting place?

My first feeling about **THE LUMINOUS DEAD** was that the story is of a style that I like based on similar novels that I've previously read, one being *The Descent* by Jeff Long. Admittedly that one didn't take place on another planet, but the feel of it was much the same initially and the cave exploration aspect was as well. There were a few things that I really liked about this book. One being the mystery behind what happened to Em's parents and also Gyre's mother. I thought that was handled deftly as well as the additional mystery of whether what was also present in the cave was a person or a monster of some kind. The suspense of these two questions kept me wanting to read further. The characters of Gyre and Em were well done with both of them having their own demons driving them to find out what happened to lost loved ones. I didn't mind the fact that there was only a two-person dialogue for the entire book either, but at times it did get a little draggy for long stretches as the dialogues were quite frequent and went off on some lengthy tangents. This is ultimately where I found myself not being as into the book as I could have otherwise. For me the book seemed to take a long time to develop and for about the first 70% of it all we really get are conversations that sometimes are relevant to the story and sometimes not. I definitely enjoy when a story builds slowly to a crescendo, but I thought that this one took a little more time than most to get going. When the climax happens, it does so with a bang and it is very satisfying, but unfortunately the journey to get there is fraught with long periods of not much happening. So I have to say that I liked **THE LUMINOUS DEAD**, but fell just short of loving it. That being said, others may have a vastly different opinion and you should give this one a try if you enjoy books with cave exploration and mysterious things that go bump in the dark. In the end it was a solid book that I think offers a good enough amount for readers to enjoy. But you'll have to wait until April of next year to purchase it as that is when it is slated for release in the U.S.

Kameron Hurley says

My blurb: "A masterful, nail-biting thriller from an extraordinary talent. Meticulously researched, expertly paced, with yearning, self-destructive heroines whose incredible physical and emotional journeys will leave you breathless."

This book was exactly what I hoped it would be!

The Bookavid says

I'll be honest. I have a hard time with books that have very limited settings and work a lot with internal monologue to establish setting and mood rather than action. *THE LUMINOUS DEAD* is pretty much the prose version of a chamber play. In space. With aliens. And corpses. And gay girls.

Even though this is really not the kind of book I usually go for, there's just something about *THE LUMINOUS DEAD* that made me long to keep going, to keep following cave explorer Gyre on her mysterious quest through that cave in space while getting instructions from this girl Em, who definitely is up to something. *THE LUMINOUS DEAD* just forces you to keep going. I couldn't think of anything else every time I put this down because I just needed to know what this awful-fascinating girl was up to. Why Em hired Gyre to travel deep into this cave for such an exorbitant compensation. It's so fascinating. Infuriatingly so, honestly.

Em and Gyre have an interesting dynamic. It's a little bit enemies-to-lovers, and Em does a lot of questionable things to keep Gyre going, especially in the beginning, but I think it's resolved quite fairly. *THE LUMINOUS DEAD* takes place in such a high-tension environment that just naturally brings out the worst in people, and I feel like Starling really captured that.

I loved the way she built in technology as well, with Gyre's high tech suit that seems to take care of pretty much everything. It's fun. It's easy to forget that this is a book in space when you're just dealing with this girl being trapped in a cave for 300 pages that could've just as well been in a contemporary setting. The execution really works. It's very atmospheric and creepy as hell.

THE LUMINOUS DEAD is definitely a slow book and a pretty graphic one, too, by the way. So if you struggle with anything related to corpses, this is probably not a good pick.

It really reminded me of that movie *The Descent*, with the alien spin on top. Terrifying, fun, unputdownable. I'm a little bit mad actually because I don't think I even had a choice here but to finish this.

Caidyn (SEMI-HIATUS; BW Reviews; he/him/his) says

This review can also be found on my blog!

CW: parental death, death, parental abandonment, claustrophobia and some violence

I legit ended this book thinking that

Like I said a while ago, sci-fi isn't always a genre I gravitate towards. I typically enjoy it, but I don't automatically reach for it and want to read it all the time. But, I saw this on Edelweiss and immediately realized that I would love it.

Not only is it sci-fi, but it has heavy threads of horror running through it. Horror to the point that I was tense and reading with rapt attention, wide-eyed and horrified. Because, damn Starling can write. (And, this is a debut. Like damn.)

The book is, in a nutshell, the story of a cave and what has happened in it.

Gyre picks up a contract to go into a cave. But, things aren't what they seem. The contract she signed. The woman leading her. The cave itself. It's all mixed and insane.

Honestly, I don't want to get too much into the plot because I feel like it would give a lot away since the story organically unfolded and every reveal didn't feel quite like a reveal, yet it certainly was one. If that makes sense.

This story is led by strong women, though. Gyre is complex and gloriously flawed. She's a fantastic lead to bring you through the cave. I got worried at some points that she would annoy me or piss me off — aka, be a Lila Bard character — but while I was annoyed, I felt endeared to her. I understood her.

The other main character is Em, the one leading Gyre through the cave system. Just like Gyre, she's incredibly complex and a deeply flawed individual, yet one that is so beautiful. I'm all for these amazing female characters who aren't perfect, yet you just can understand them so well.

It made me so happy to read these strong women in roles that would have usually been occupied by men. One woman exploring a cave and getting sucked deeper and deeper into the weird world that it is. Another woman who is leading it and having to help make tough decisions, along with handle someone who isn't always cooperative. I loved the blend of traditional feminine and masculine energy in this book. Seriously, it gave me life.

Since this is sci-fi, there is an attached world to it. I don't think I ever got a big handle on the surrounding world. In this book, that's not a big deal since it's a bottle episode of a cave. But, there are some mentions of things that made me go "...what?" even if it never impacted my enjoyment of the story.

Oh, and also, it's queer. I saw one review mention it in a one-sentence review, but I kind of want to talk about it more. You don't get an overall hint that these are queer women for most of the book, but it's there and keeps growing stronger and stronger until the end of the story when it's really confirmed. I got a bit worried about queerbaiting, but there is a payoff with it. And, that made me happier than anything. Their sexualities were never defined, but it was very clear they were queer the whole time.

I was absolutely entranced by this book. It was amazing to read. I loved it and preordered the book when I wasn't even halfway through because I knew that it was going to be a favorite of mine.

In short, I'm very impressed by this new author and I can't wait to read what else she writes!

Cillian says

The synopsis is great, but there's a huge fucking spoiler tucked in.
When you give away something that happens after the 50% mark, you're spoiling.

Make that a rule.

Unseen Library says

For this week's Waiting on Wednesday, I have my eye on an intriguing-sounding science fiction/horror debut, *The Luminous Dead* by Caitlin Starling.

The Luminous Dead is an interesting upcoming novel from first-time author Caitlin Starling. Set to be released in April 2019, *The Luminous Dead* caught my eye just last night and it is definitely one I am keen to review. I really loved the cool-sounding synopsis for this book and think that this one has some excellent potential. I am not the biggest fan of the horror genre, but the idea of a dark physiologic thriller in space really appealed to me for some reason.

I am deeply intrigued to see how the science fiction, horror and psychological thriller elements will come together in this story. From the synopsis, it sounds like the plot will be mostly focused on the interactions between the two main characters, Gyre and Em, and become a bit of a psychological battle between them. It further sounds like both characters are going to have some mental issues, and both are slowly going to break down. This plot basis will hopefully lead to some great storytelling and a deep dive into both of these main characters' psyches. I am also very curious to see what's on the planet with Gyre and I am eager for some sort of epic reveal.

Overall, I am curious to see how *The Luminous Dead* will turn out and I will be very interested to see if Caitlin Starling's writing will live up to the awesome-sounding plot synopsis attached to the book. I will hopefully get a hard copy of the book from the publisher before its release date, but I am also tempted to check out the book's audiobook format, as I find that audiobooks with the right narrator are an amazing way to enhance the experience of a book's horror element. Check back here in a couple of months to see what I thought of Starling's intriguing idea, although I am sure I will have some fun with it.

For more great reviews, visit my blog at:

<https://unseenlibrary.com/>
