



Stewards of the Flame

Sylvia Engdahl

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Crime is considered illness, untreated illness is crime; ambulance crews are the only police. Dead bodies stay on "life support" forever. Can anyone gain freedom?

When burned-out starship captain Jesse Sanders is seized by a dictatorial medical regime and detained on the colony planet Undine, he has no idea that he is about to be plunged into a bewildering new life that will involve ordeals and joys beyond anything he has ever imagined, as well as the love of a woman with powers that seem superhuman. Still less does he suspect that he must soon take responsibility for the lives of people he has come to care about and the preservation of their hopes for the future of humankind.

Winner of a bronze medal in the Independent Publisher (IPPY) Book Awards, this controversial novel deals with government-imposed health care, end-of-life issues, and the so-called paranormal powers of the human mind. Despite being set in the distant future on another world, it appeals not only to science fiction readers but to others who question the dominant medical philosophy of today's society, or who value personal freedom of choice.

This is the first book of the Hidden Flame series and is followed by *Promise of the Flame*. They precede the Rising Flame series, consisting of *Defender of the Flame* and *Herald of the Flame*. Unlike Sylvia Engdahl's previous novels, these two series are not Young Adult books and are not appropriate for middle-school readers.

Please note: The cover of this book was changed in 2015. It is not a new edition, as the book itself has not changed.

Stewards of the Flame Details

Date : Published August 24th 2009 by Ad Stellae Books (first published September 2007)

ISBN : 9780615314877

Author : Sylvia Engdahl

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Genre : Science Fiction, Adventure, Dystopia

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From Reader Review Stewards of the Flame for online ebook

Tami says

Undine is a planet not so very different from our own. People care about their health. Like us, they endeavor to extend the natural human lifespan by curing all types of disease (including mental and social illnesses). Undine has just taken the initiative to insure universal good health and long life.

Free health care, the annihilation of all forms of disease, virtual immortality, Undine might seem like a perfect world. However, Jesse Sanders, a starship captain, quickly finds out the hard way that looks can be deceiving. Jesse is arrested for alcoholism after having a few drinks while on leave. Part of his treatment involves extreme aversion therapy. Fortunately, he's one of the lucky ones, a secret faction of those who oppose the government's methods rescues him and bring him into their group.

Stewards of the Flame combines contemporary concerns about health, social issues, and privacy with science fiction and parapsychology to create a powerful story. Are we really headed towards a world like Undine? Are there better alternatives to medications and suspended animation? Both the questions and the potential answers are fascinating.

Julia says

This is a well-written, thought-provoking book that held my attention. Science fiction has often been defined as "what if..." and Stewards of the Flame fits that description: What if the government and the health care industry was the same entity? What if dying is a crime? What if health care providers find you because of potential health problems rather than you calling the doctor?

I look forward to reading the sequel.

Carol Miller says

This book begins the back-story behind Elana's civilization in The Far Side of Evil. It also lays out very clearly the author's concerns about current cultural and political trends. My only objection is that there is way more talk than action. The pace is sometimes sacrificed for the sake of explaining everything in detail (about problems with medicine, the potential for ESP, as well as the internal struggles of the characters).

Tiina Walsh says

Stunning... best book(s) I've read for a long time (and I read a lot).

Lindley Walter-smith says

If Ayn Rand was a Scientologist, this is the book you'd get. It's not so much a dystopian novel as an extended libertarian lecture on the evils of socialised health care, preventative medicine, medical treatment involving any form of drugs and, above all, psychiatry and psychoactive treatment. All illness, you see, is caused by stress, and if you so much as try to eat healthily or go to a doctor for a checkup, your body will kill you. People get sick because doctors and Big Pharma tell them to. And antidepressants and antipsychotic drugs cause brain damage.

All we need is the Power of the Mind. And our hero falls in with a beautiful cult who teach him so. The writing is so lacking in shades of grey that it is never in doubt that the cult is 100% right.

The book mostly consists of the hero being lectured by cult members and saying "I never thought of it that way, but you're right!" Truly abysmal.

Graznot says

It could have been so much better than it was. I read it mostly because it was free off kindle. The world the author created was interesting, but the characters and plot were weak. A lot of it reads more like an article on the problems with the medical industry and theories on evolution than a novel. Matters aren't helped by so many of the same things being explained to the lead over and over. I really wish the author had spent more time fleshing out the characters and plot.

George says

Good sci-fi story set in a distance future, but people are still people. Or at least some are different based on their beliefs against the medical establishment of their planet.

Kimberly says

I struggled to get through the first 1/2 of the book and almost quit a couple of times. There was way too much commentary on psi and health which did not advance the story. When the story finally started moving forward, it was good, and the reason for the 2 star rating. I was disappointed in the ending...I did not realize it was the first of a trilogy, and I will not be continuing on the journey.

Awesome Indies Reviewers says

ABOUT THE BOOK:

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When burned-out star-ship captain Jesse Sanders is seized by a dictatorial medical regime and detained on the colony planet Undine, he has no idea that he is about to be plunged into a bewildering new life that will involve ordeals and joys beyond anything he has ever imagined, as well as the love of a woman with powers that seem superhuman. Still less does he suspect that he must soon take responsibility for the lives of people he has come to care about and preservation of their hopes for the future of humankind.”

MY THOUGHTS:

This book is of the futuristic dystopian variety, yet with a situation that resonates strongly with where we might find our current technology taking us here in the 21st century on earth. The plot begins well, and is engaging and interesting. Unfortunately it peters out from the point at which the main character begins his mind training. There is a lot of dialogue, and it feels like sitting in a heavy duty psychology/parapsychology class. Everything else that happens later in the book is predictable, and the ending is very abrupt. Which rather than inspiring me to go on to purchase the next book in the trilogy, just leaves me feeling a bit cheated. Yes, we want to be lead into asking what happens next, but no – we don’t want to finish this story with so much unresolved.

THE STRUCTURE:

This book is approximately 460 pages in length, and is told from various points of view, usually indicated by a paragraph break and easy enough to follow. There is a lot of detailed dialogue for roughly 300 of the 460 pages, with bits of action interspersed briefly in between. The copy editing and proof reading has been done to a good standard, but the plot does suffer from pacing issues. The ending is abrupt and feels unfinished.

SUMMARY:

If you enjoy dystopian novels, or are interested in paranormal psychology then you might well enjoy this book. Although it is set in an off world location in the future, I would not really class it as Science Fiction, it has elements of that to be sure, but not enough to plant it firmly in that Genre. The narrative raises valid questions for where we find ourselves in this day and age with all of our medical and technological advances and abilities, and the many issues that are arising with regard to individual rights of privacy – especially in relation to the internet and all that that entails. However, the voice in the story is strongly one sided, and doesn’t furnish us with any alternative viewpoints at all. So in many ways, it can feel a bit like the reader is being told what to think. Whilst there are no major structural issues, or editing/proofing mistakes, I do feel that the plot pacing has problems. It is for this reason I do not feel able to give this book any more than 4 out of 5 stars.

Mitchell says

The first book I have ever read on the Kindle and an odd one it was. It was basically an explanation for how an interstellar society would start from a group aimed at psychic abilities. It was set in a dystopian world ruled by enforced medical care. It was at times hard to read to the point of almost being annoying and yet had some interesting ideas and a decent ending. I expect to get the sequel for kindle sometime soon.

Zech Hall says

Not the greatest book, but it was interesting story. The layout just had problems. It was very repetitive, and I felt like the author was trying too hard to get a point across.

Ben Johnson says

This is a recent release from an author I devoured as a middle schooler. This book had some great commentary on the progression of modern medicine into culture that gives up the freedom of death and personal choice in healthcare in exchange for all illnesses being treatable under government control (including some illnesses you'd like to think are in the realm of free will) .

The characters and story line aren't incredibly complex, with twists and conflict that, in hindsight, are entirely predictable. But mix in heavily with plenty of credible ESP training techniques, and it was a thought provoking read.

Chad Sayban says

Fleet Captain Jesse Saunders wakes up in a hospital without any memory of how or why he is there. So begins Sylvia Engdahl's science fiction novel, *Stewards of the Flame*, centered on a small colony world where everyone is wealthy and healthy...or else. Jesse quickly learns that the medical community on this planet is the only authority, acting as both judge and jury in the lives of everyone. Crimes and illness are considered one in the same and they are very aggressively diagnosed and treated with mind-altering drugs. Even death is illegal. Bodies are kept alive in stasis forever by a society that believes the body is the essence of existence. However, not everyone agrees, and Jesse's new friends – Peter and Carla – have dedicated themselves to creating a much different kind of life for their covert dissident group. When his new companions manage to engineer his 'legal' escape, Jesse is confronted with a life both frightening and intriguing – a life where the human mind's potential is revealed and relationships he has never experienced become possible. However, the future is uncertain, as discovery of any one member of the group could mean a certain end for them all.

The book begins well, building tension and providing plenty of twist and turns as Jesse tries to understand what is going on around him and who he can trust. When he becomes free of the Meds – Jesse begins to learn about the powers of his mind and the abilities of the people he has quickly come to trust, even while he recognizes that they are keeping something from him. This is where this clipper of a story – which had been zipping right along – suddenly lost all its wind and parked in the doldrums. The nature of the story required a certain amount of setup along the way, but the dialog felt like I was reading a transcript of a graduate school parapsychology class – for 300 hundred pages! It became a long-winded, back-and-forth conversation that laid out everything you could have ever wanted to know about what the mind may or may not be capable of. If there was anything left for the reader to figure out themselves, I don't know what it could have been. In the meantime, the plot languished. Even as the action picked up in the final scenes of the story, it still took a backseat to the ongoing moral and theoretical conversations of the characters.

However, the story is not all bad. Engdahl's writing is simple and engaging. The characters are well developed and the romance between Jesse and Carla feels real and is quite well done. Also, the question of

when medical decision-making should belong to the patient or to the state makes for an interesting and timely debate. Unfortunately, the story itself offers little tension and the ending is predictable long before the last page.

If you have a keen interest in parapsychology and medical ethics, you may find this an interesting addition to the discussion. But if you are looking for an engaging story from beginning to end, you will probably be disappointed.

Harmony Kent says

By Harmony Kent
4 out of 5 Stars

(I received a free copy of this book in exchange for an honest review on behalf of Awesome Indies)

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Beth Hudson says

I grew up with Sylvia Louise Engdahl's books, and I loved them, especially "The Far Side of Evil". which I came across at about eleven. They taught me a great deal, especially about the power of the human mind, and more importantly, about the power of the human spirit, that affects me even today.

That said, I had some serious problems with this book -- not with the world view, which to me is part of the story -- I don't expect to fully agree with any author's world view, and here I agree with some things and not with others -- but with something I would never have dreamed I would say about the author's books. I had some serious problems with characterization.

There are a number of things which put me off. Firstly, Jesse seems to react less strongly to what he describes (and I agree with him!) as almost literal rape than he does to the possibility of the paranormal, which he agonizes about for chapters while putting the first out of his mind almost immediately. That was a major flaw for me -- I didn't believe it. He also rather annoyingly kept flip-flopping his views, and while that was part of the process he went through in the story, there was little subtlety to how it was handled, leading me to read Jesse as inconsistent rather than slowly working his way through a process.

Despite that, Jesse read fairly well as a person to me. Almost no one else did. All of the members of the group seem to have perfect good will, never get short tempered, never really have a genuine argument about anything important (arguments are almost immediately overcome with logic), are perfectly compassionate and brave and so on, until they become caricatures rather than real human beings. What's more, Jesse's trust in them strikes me as less telepathically based than plot based -- I never believe it. He has no prior basis to trust them, he isn't the type of person who just trusts people, and there is absolutely no time between his meeting the group and trusting them. To be honest, I'd love it if the first half of the book contained less of philosophy (which is talked to death, and could have been abbreviated effectively and still gotten the same ideas across) and less training (ditto) and more of Jesse meeting the group and having a real conflict about his desire to trust them.

Peter becomes somewhat more human in the second half of the book, making him a more sympathetic character, but Carla never does. She is perfectly beautiful, perfectly competent (including being able to hack anything in the universe), is perfectly loving, perfectly supportive, perfectly understanding, and frankly, puts me off because she is perfectly perfect. She's not a human, she's an ideal, and as such, I can never actually empathize with her. To be honest, I would have thought this book was written by a man if I didn't know better -- Carla strikes me as the kind of flawless being that some men put into their stories, unaware that women are complex people. That surprised me a _lot_. Again, it's not really what I would ever have expected from Engdahl.

The book picked up during the last half, and it became a much more enjoyable read once the plot began to

advance. At that point I again became genuinely interested, and it again became engrossed in the story, and stayed interested through the end of the book. I've just picked up the second, and am hoping that, having essentially spent half the first book setting the scene, the second book will include more character-centered plot. On the whole, she's a better writer at her worst than many at their best, and I'm certainly willing to give more books a shot.
