



Books in Review

Murder, Meteorology, and Methane Seas

Michael Carroll

On the Shores of Titan's Farthest Sea: A Scientific Novel. New York, USA: Springer International Publishing Switzerland, 2015. 268 pp. \$19.99 sc. ISBN 978-3-319-17758-8.

Reviewed by: **Alexander Cendrowski**

There has long been a divide in science fiction between those who trace the genre's roots to fantastical works (most often citing the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, 2150-2000 BCE) and those who trace its roots the scientific revolution between the 17th and early 19th centuries. These two core arguments—science fiction as a derivative of the fantastic and science fiction as a derivative of contemporary scientific advances—similarly drive the distinctions between the types of writing in the genre published today. As far as the divide between the fantastic and the hard-scientific goes, Michael Carroll's *On the Shores of Titan's Farthest Sea* certainly falls to the latter.

Published as part of Springer's "Science and Fiction" series—a series with a primary goal of marrying good narrative with actual science—*On the Shores of Titan's Farthest Sea's* breakdown of existing scientific knowledge surrounding Saturn's moon (Titan) is often the true star of the show, sometimes even overshadowing the narrative. The story itself largely revolves around a fictional Mayda Research station located on the very real shore of Titan's Kraken Mare Sea. The main character, Abby, a self-proclaimed "gas girl" or meteorologist, is in the process of studying Titan's nitrogen-methane atmosphere, but the mysterious death of a colleague soon forces her away from her research. As the plot develops and complicates—

murder, liquid methane submarining, and no small amount of interspace terrorism included—a full cast of characters descends on Titan in what can only be described as a tour of realistic space travel in the future. The exotic environment of Titan encourages the reader to consider the implications of our study, environmental impacts, and greed, while simultaneously serving as a comprehensive description of life on Titan. Better yet, thanks to Springer's peer review process, this description maintains scientific accuracy.

It should come as little to no surprise that the environmental and scientific descriptions in *On the Shores of Titan's Farthest Sea* are among the best parts. Carroll's extensive career as a space illustrator—he created the book's beautiful cover himself—and science writer manifests in the book's descriptions and extrapolations on existing scientific knowledge of Titan. Scientifically-minded readers should rest easy knowing that an editorial board of 13 scientists from various fields, provided by Springer, verified all facts cited in the text. While there are a few questionable choices—an entire research station's worth of shared hallucinations being most prominent in the speculation side of speculative fiction—the majority of the science presented in Carroll's novel enjoys a solid foundation in real world physics, chemistry, and meteorology.

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On the Shores of Titan's Farthest Sea certainly succeeds in involving and interesting this reader in the marvels of the solar system's only non-Earth object with stable bodies of surface liquid, especially with its descriptions of Mayda station's research submarine. Where the book falters, then, is in the storytelling itself. While Carroll's marvelous descriptions and scientific backing are unquestionable, the murder mystery takes an often unfulfilling or predictable route. While the prose remains consistently decent—and Carroll miraculously avoids many of the clichés of the murder mystery genre—the plot is not the reason to read this book. Nor should readers with a feminist inclination hope for too much in that department (the female protagonist thinks and hears often

from others that she should put less effort into her work in order to find a man and start a family; and the book would not do well on the Bechdel test). If there is a didactic takeaway from Carroll's book, it's that the mechanics of greed and power so often fly in the face of good science and humanity—not a new lesson, by any means, but one that is good to hear again.

So stands *On the Shores of Titan's Farthest Sea*. An epic masterpiece of literature and storytelling, it is not. But for those looking to spend some time on Saturn's most renowned moon, to explore the life of an other-world meteorologist, and to discover the thrill of helming a submarine in a liquid methane sea, Michael Carroll's debut scientific novel should land firmly in the to-read pile.

Exploring Religion and Theology in Science Fiction

Paul J. Nahin

Holy Sci-Fi! Where Science Fiction and Religion Intersect. New York, USA: Springer International Publishing Switzerland, 2014. 224 pp. \$24.99 sc. ISBN 978-1-4939-0617-8.

Reviewed by: **Dr. Vivian Strotmann**

Holy Sci-Fi! Where Science Fiction and Religion Intersect is, as the author puts it, a "what-if book". With a well-balanced mixture of respect, humor, and insightful analysis, it approaches the different angles taken and questions raised regarding religion, God, and the divine in general in science fiction literature and movies.

This combination of well-founded and wide-ranging expertise is matched by a lively, easy-to-read style. Occasionally, the author switches to the colloquial, with which readers used to rather dry and down-to-

earth research tomes must accustom themselves. This stylistic choice, however, does not diminish the findings presented and works in the book's favor rather than to its detriment: it allows the author to explain physical phenomena lightly, clears the way for very funny afterthoughts in parenthesis, and gives the entire book a conversational tone that engages the reader in a lively dialogue that is both instructive and entertaining.

The reading experience is further enhanced by comic strips, both black-and white and color

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images, examples from poetry, and tables that illustrate or humorously underscore certain points. The author has also added five appendices with short stories by himself and by Gregory Benford, a bibliography of short stories cited (handy for further in-depth reading), and a basic index.

Through his ability to succinctly introduce and explain the plots, twists, and points of the various stories, as well as authors' concepts and physical phenomena, Nahin demonstrates the didactic skill and experience that come with years of teaching. It is therefore all the more regrettable that he did not take the opportunity to cover key terminology more extensively in his appendices. The book certainly offers sufficient material for a glossary—or even a more theory-centered chapter—and with his background in technical engineering, the author would certainly have been well-equipped to provide such additional content. Its absence stems from the book's overall design; as part of Springer's "Science and Fiction" series, Nahin's book is intended as light, rather than heavy, reading. There are occasional typos, but apart from that the work is thorough in contents and carefully prepared and edited. Also—and this is very important with sensitive topics such as faith and religion—it is refreshingly relaxed and undogmatic. This gives the reader space to take in and mull over the thoughts presented in the different chapters.

The book opens with an extensive "Introduction" chapter, in which the author addresses core questions of faith and skepticism, the statements which science can(not?) make about God, and the nature and outlook of science fiction. Here,

as in the other parts of the book, the point is not so much reaching one or the other conclusion, but rather presenting a wide range of thought and perspective on individual questions. To do so, the author draws on various philosophers and scholars of religion and analyses poems, novels, and short stories. Chapter 2, "Religious Science Fiction *Before* Science Fiction", is devoted to the history of the genre and succeeds in highlighting some quite surprising influences from other genres and different periods. While the blurry line between science fiction and fantasy literature is already addressed in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 adds considerations regarding the relationship of sci-fi and horror.

The remaining chapters treat different staple elements and topics of science fiction. These include "Religious Robots", "Computers as Gods", "Space, Travel, Radio and Alien Encounters", and "Time traveling to Jesus". The book also includes chapters devoted to the discussion of more abstract concepts and philosophical, as well as theological, questions. These include "Time, Space, God's Omniscience, and Free Will" and the final chapter, "What if God Revealed Himself?".

It is fitting that the book should end with a what-if chapter. After all, the author compiled this rich collection of thoughts and speculations saying, "In this book I care not a bit if you are a skeptic or a believer—only that you can imagine without dogmatic constraint" (p. 10).

The result is an entertaining, thought-provoking, highly-recommendable book.