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2312 by Kim Stanley Robinson

Orbit, 2012

Reviewed by Joe Epstein

Kim Stanley Robinson is among the best-regarded writers of modern science fiction. *2312* is his latest entry into the tradition, and a spiritual continuation of the acclaimed *Mars* trilogy. There are parallels that allow readers to view it as a direct sequel if they like, although most details do not match up with *Blue Mars*.

For readers unfamiliar with the writer's body of work, *2312* is a less daunting entry point than *Mars* or *The Years of Rice and Salt*, while still a hefty chunk of hard sci-fi with a system-wide stage. Set 300 years hence, we find the near future as history and the mid-future well established, with attendant progress in technology and society; the journey to a similar place in *Mars* represents most of three books and over 1500 pages. Those familiar with Robinson's writing will find more of the progressive, cautiously optimistic utopian themes present throughout his books. But they may be surprised to find a detective story, essentially, which follows a small cast of somewhat uncomfortable friends across a few years rather than across centuries. Having already crafted meticulous, long-term histories of humans leaving the cradle of Earth while shedding some harmful habits, now Robinson presents a shorter story in that sort of world.

And that world . . . *2312* is worth reading solely for Robinson's depiction of the mid-future. While humans are far from assured safety in space—only on the surfaces of Earth and Mars can people breath without high technology holding back death a hundred different ways—there are nevertheless settlements anywhere there are rocky bodies: the inner planets, the viable moons of the gas giants, and dwarf planet Pluto.

Strikingly, thousands of large asteroids have been hollowed out and sealed, turned into terrariums, affixed with propulsion systems, then sent on custom orbits or journeys. The biomes and cultures throughout the terrariums are just as varied as those found on Earth, Mars, and elsewhere. The terraria are so numerous and they

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travel to so many places that our protagonists frequently hitch months-long rides. While serving as little worlds (which are actually enormous—imagine standing on the interior wall of a hollow Mount Everest), terrariums are used as mass transit. A journey from planet to planet becomes a traveling sabbatical within an inside-out planetoid. The diversity of terraria is transfixing, as is their ultimate purpose, and Robinson's own eloquent affection for landscapes and life in all the chaotic interconnectedness shines through.

The resource production of asteroid habitats in aggregate rivals the moons and planets, and terrariums provide much of Earth's food, among other supplies. The effects of climate change have fully manifested, and although Earth houses most humans, the supra-organism of the planet has been strained beyond self-sustainability. Sea levels worldwide are dozens of meters above present day. Excessively arid conditions or irretrievable mud bowls have replaced much arable land, so those trapped in withering poverty subsist through stark squalor, without access to the wider solar system, or to future medicine.

Earth's taxed conditions create a conundrum spacers cannot avoid, because those living in space must return to Earth for one year out of seven, for reasons of long-term health. This is a flight of fancy, created both to force contact between spacers and Terrans for the story, and to stress how integrated we are with the planet on which we arose, which we tend to think of as a thing we're somehow separate from. Returning spacers who aren't careful where they go risk running afoul of embittered and desperate Terrans, and rule of law does not persist everywhere. But civilization has never collapsed, only mitigated losses and adapted. The Manhattan of *2312* is a triumphant recovery, not abandoned to ruin underwater, but reborn as a canal city. Skyscrapers remain in use, water traffic traveling between them as their lower floors descend into the Atlantic.

Governments are, as ever, balkanized and shorn apart by special interests, too vested in the now. But in many ways the challenge of stretching through the system has forced change. The economy in space is socialist, more or less, and distribution of resources is handled by accounting qubes. When the means of existence are so fragile and so blind to human hierarchy—a depressurized hull doesn't care if the humans inside are affluent, or lower-class—it can seem unavoidable that the old model would fall away. Tellingly, this is similar to how organizations like the military and some

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research outposts (such as the International Space Station, or those in Antarctica) operate right now.

But the world-building showstopper appears immediately. The focus of the opening chapters and one of the main settings is the domed city, Terminator, which rumbles around Mercury on planet-circling tracks, moving just ahead of the Mercurial sunrise. Robinson's depictions of Terminator, the eternally abated sunrise, and the proximity of the sun in all its unimaginable intensity are such arresting visions that they establish the tone for much of the book. The bleak beauty shown in even mindless and inhospitable natural features, like a seemingly furious sun filling the sky over a blasted iron rockscape, and the wonder of an engineering marvel like Terminator rolling forever away, underlines that the variety of nature comes largely at the expense of hospitality to life. The hospitable world seems endless to our intuition—why else would so many dismiss climate change flatly?—yet our home is only a gossamer sheet on Earth's surface, and even there only under specific conditions, and virtually the entire rest of the universe is unlivable without improbable technological feats. On a cosmic scale, our civilization is as fragile as the biofilm in a shower drain. Robinson manages, with Terminator, to convey awe at the fact that anything should exist in the first place, and the pleasure of exploration for its own sake.

The *Mars* trilogy drags in places, as well-researched and written but nonetheless uneventful passages go on for pages about local Martian sand, rocks, and flora. Here that kind of exposition is honed to a finer point and adapted in surprising ways, as in the vivid descriptions of music heard at a concert, or in the point/counterpoint whistling of space maroons in their shared solitude. Some interlude chapters convey a lot of information quickly (and sometimes poetically) through raw lists—a list of the craters of Mercury, named for masters in the humanities; ill-advised things done by our heroine Swan that she nonetheless survived; and terrariums not visited in the story, with descriptions. Other interlude chapters are incomplete extracts from literature produced *long after* the events of *2312*. One extract describes the method for building a terrarium in the same manner you might tell a friend how to prepare a casserole, while others seem to be samplings from history texts of the far future, which unsentimentally hint at the consequences of the novel's events. While the list and extract interludes contain plenty of nourishment and some surprises, they can also be a mild distraction, suspending the narrative while muddying the continuum. A

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more successful if even more experimental kind of interlude occurs a few times in the book's second half. These chapters imagine the world from the perspective of artificial intelligence.

In addition to his thorough stage setting, Robinson continues to celebrate—more than most sci-fi authors—the actual humanity of his characters. For this he is often compared to sci-fi laureate Ursula K. Le Guin, to whom he includes a winking reference. His characters do not tend to feel like cogs in a plot machine. See a great deal of Arthur C. Clarke for incredible stories which lack memorable human characters. In *2001*, the most affecting character is the ship's A.I., and the astronauts do essentially nothing that is not required of them by either orders or the extremity of the situation. But Robinson features characters that are neurotic, noble, impetuous, sexy, and inconsistent. Just like people.

Swan Er Hong, a 135-year-old former terrarium designer from Terminator, is exemplary of all these traits. Our primary vantage point, she is pulled into a secret cross-system web of conflicting interests when her grandmother Alex dies. During the investigation into Alex's death, Swan meets Inspector Genette, an exiled Martian turned Interpol-like agent, and Wahram, a diplomat from Saturn's moon Titan. These old accomplices of Alex seek out Swan to continue Alex's invisible political work, which is at a crucial stage with far-reaching consequences. Portions of the story follow each of these two—one diminutive and cheeky, the other bulky like a block and laconic to a fault.

An apparent natural disaster endangers some characters, then changes the color of the investigation dramatically when it's suspected as a terrorist attack. From here, protagonists are on a system-wide trek to seek out perpetrators and motives, while trying to keep Alex's work alive.

A fourth vantage is provided by Kiran, a surrogate for readers, who is the only character for whom space is bewildering. Swan, Wahram, and Genette are all space vets, and each has been genetically modified. But Kiran is just a young, poor man from Earth, literally whisked without warning into a furtive life on a howling, partially-tamed Venus.

The last character deserving mention is Pauline, Swan's personal quantum computer, or "qube." Pauline is implanted in Swan's neck, and constantly observes Swan's life, offering commentary and input. The function of a qube is something like an

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extremely advanced version of Siri on an iPhone, or analogous software—a reliable and tremendously well-informed artificial assistant, which still won't fool anyone into thinking it's human—quantum computers are powerful, but A.I. still can't pass a Turing Test after three hundred years. The intelligence is still very much artificial, and qubes are not thinking, conscious, or self-aware. Yet Swan over the years has altered Pauline to seem more snarky and spirited, more willful, more “itself”, and when is it indistinguishable to *seem* a way and to actually *be* that way?

Robinson's rich characterizations and excursions into the interior lives of his characters are on display, and if they aren't completely satisfying then perhaps it's the degree of difficulty. Once habitats are spread about like terrariums, we'll have societies too isolated to order each other with conviction, and then who knows what paths humans will follow. So here liberties are taken with quite what it is to be human, with entire new lines created via gene engineering, and longevity treatments affording an indefinite lifespan. Cultures are even more stratified than now. Those on Earth and Mars peer across a gulf of mutual uneasiness at the spacers crossing before the stars above.

Both physiological changes and the arrow of time have given rise to societal changes. Many humans are androgyns or gynandromorphs, and so in some cases the same individual is capable of both fathering children and giving birth, and this is presented as accepted by society by the time of the story. Marriage, like gender, is a less rigid construct, with adults moving in and out of marriage regularly over the epochs of their extended lives, and group marriages and temporary arrangements possible. Wahram was raised in a crèche of six lifelong lover-siblings, for example.

Of course, no one knows how mores of science and society will develop in the next three centuries, but your success in empathizing with these characters will partly depend on your acceptance of (or at least your suspension of disbelief at) these developments. There's also a Dickensian shrinking of space, which is only made more pronounced by a small cast of people running into each other regularly in places billions of miles apart. Seasoned readers will dutifully notice and then ignore this, as with most fiction.

One doesn't have to work very hard to see the present in *2312*, with half the world impoverished, the disparity between those with personal aircraft and those who dig their toilets unyielding, and so many denying we can ruin things for ourselves, even as libraries

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of evidence mount to the contrary. Recurrent in Robinson's writing is the idea that we don't really deal with problems until they're upon us and impossible to ignore, so we're down to contingencies and damage control. That is only fair, since that really is what we do. In reframing problems with the solar system of *2312*, Robinson is illustrating something important. We'll probably get off this planet whether we deal with our collective bad tendencies and lapses of perspective or not. But the stars are outside our grasp, or at least outside our conception, for the foreseeable future. If we treat the rest of system as we've treated Earth, carelessly and underestimating our effect, then eventually we won't be able to just kick the can down the road anymore. The universe is just too big, and we are too small, in the absence of the advent of new technologies so advanced they'd be, as Clarke famously said, indistinguishable from magic. We are stuck with what we have—one inartificially clement planet, and a system of other worlds to shape as we can, and as we see fit. That we'll at some point see the solar system as our playground, breadbasket, and shelter all is Robinson's hope. How wonderful it would be to expand beyond Earth, yet how tragic if shortsightedness stayed with us?

Ultimately, *2312* is an update, a continuation, and a condensation of Robinson's themes: the importance of sustainability and stewardship; the sheer difficulty of any space activity, an incredible challenge still not sufficient to dissuade human ingenuity; and the joy of mindful experience at all, of being a person who can feel, think, wonder, and love. Consider how often Robinson's characters, almost all inhabitants of futuristic science fiction, adjourn for coffee and pastries, or head to cook, dine, and clean at a communal kitchen, or relax by hiking, examining flowers, spotting birds. Robinson centers aggressive, progressive sci-fi stories, covering incomprehensible distances, on humans doing human things. In this way, Robinson is among the most humane of writers.

WALKING THE CLOUDS: AN ANTHOLOGY OF INDIGENOUS SCIENCE FICTION

Edited by L. Grace Dillon

University of Arizona Press, 2012

Reviewed by Sessily Watt

The frontier. First contact between groups with radically different beliefs and technologies. Cultural misunderstanding. Genocide. Apocalypse. Any science fiction

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reader will recognize these tropes and associate them with books they have loved or hated. So, too, will they be recognized by anyone familiar with the history of indigenous populations throughout the world, but particularly within the United States, where frontier and apocalypse were two sides of the same border. This collection of short stories and novel excerpts, edited by Grace L. Dillon of Portland State University, brings out the “Native presence” within these recognizable science fiction tropes.

The collection is organized into five categories: slipstream, which has to do with time travel and alternate histories; contact, which deals in contact between different groups of humans and aliens; science and sustainability; apocalypse; and “returning to ourselves,” an idea described in Dillon’s introduction as a process of decolonization, or working through the psychological and emotional effects of colonization. Her introduction claims this last idea as the purpose of the collection: “[to encourage] Native writers to write about Native conditions in Native-centered worlds liberated by the imagination” (11). In that sense, the stories here explore the implications of the Native past, both the time before contact and the violence that came after, and a Native future formed from the negotiations between that lost past and the consequences of the present. This future may be directly linked to the past, as in Sherman Alexie’s “Distance,” which describes a future in which a post-apocalyptic Native population (or post-post-apocalyptic, considering that colonization was an apocalypse of its own) eradicates, for good and ill, all remnants of the former white civilization that surrounded it. Or this future may shoot off in its own direction, as in the excerpt from Nalo Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber*, which takes Taino tales and geographical details of the Caribbean, Aboriginal Canada, and the Australian Aborigine bush and combines them into an alien contact story. And sometimes that future isn’t that different from our present, as in the excerpt from Leslie Marmon Silko’s *The Almanac of the Dead*, with its eco-warriors and new age spiritualists.

Many of the authors in this collection will be recognizable to readers of indigenous literature—Sherman Alexie, Gerald Vizenor, Leslie Marmon Silko, Simon Ortiz, and others—while some authors will be recognizable to readers of science fiction—both Nalo Hopkinson and William Sanders, for example, have won Hugo Awards from the World Science Fiction Society. Some of the works included in the collection were originally published as science fiction or have been identified as science fiction in previous collections; others have not. A brief introduction at the beginning of every

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selection places it within the context of this collection and of science fiction as a whole, occasionally offering a brief argument by Dillon for its science fictionality, or in a quote from the author. For readers who want to get right to the story, these introductions will be distracting, but the structure and design of the book require them. Since thirteen of the nineteen pieces are excerpts from novels and, in one case, an epic poem, they don't offer the satisfaction of completion like a standalone short story. The combination of novel excerpts and introductory notes gives the collection an academic or critical air—more of an introduction to the current and future possibilities of the field than a collection of fiction to be enjoyed. Which isn't to say that this collection can't be enjoyed; the excellent writing ensures it will be. But that same quality means that the reader runs the risk of wishing each story would continue past the end of the selection. In the long run this is all to the good: this anthology won't complete any personal libraries, but it will open readers to a world they may have missed, though it has been there all along.

THE WAY OF THORN AND THUNDER by Daniel Heath Justice
Kegedonce Press, 2005
Reviewed by Kelsie Hahn

The Way of Thorn and Thunder is the first volume to combine all three novels of Daniel Heath Justice's *The Kynship Chronicles*: *Kynship*, *Wyrdwood*, and *Dreyd*. The three novels relate the epic tale of fantastic races of fey creatures defending their ancestral homeland and way of life from the greed and corruption of an encroaching nation of humans. Though the cast is large, the main perspective follows Tarsa, a young Wielder of the ancient, natural magic of the world whose power can either save or destroy it. She is a Kyn, a unique race to this series with deep connections to the natural world, particularly characterized by sensitive stalks on their foreheads that allow them to sense both the pleasure and pain of the living things around them. The epic is a tale of utopia lost and how utopia can be re-made, even if it can never be as it once was. The three books that comprise this volume pace well as a single volume, and I'm not sure I could accurately pick out where one book ends and the next begins, making this a good way to experience the story as a whole.

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If the overall conflict of the book sounds familiar, it should – the book jacket itself says the book is set in a magical, early 19th century North America, where tension between the humans and the fantastical “Folk” have come to a head as a human tyrant of insatiable greed demands that Tarsa’s people give up their land to be re-located elsewhere. While some of the Folk fear the retribution of refusal, others unite to defend their home. You can probably guess where it goes from there.

On the one hand, the allegory serves an important purpose of remembering and exploring an influential, and dark, aspect of American history. Much, I am probably even safe to say most, fantasy is told from the human, and presumptively white, point of view, whereas this trilogy focuses on the perspective of characters who are othered in many ways, whether through their race, gender, or sexual orientation. This book has heroes who don’t fit the traditional mold of relationships and gender dynamics of fantasy literature and, specifically, they present a perspective rooted in American Indian experience, not in a European Caucasian one.

However, the problem with the allegory is the problem with any clear-cut allegory: the story loses much of its surprise, and some of its power, when part of the reading becomes figuring out who or what the different groups, characters, or incidents represent. In this case, I would often find myself distracted from the story thinking about “oh, this character is supposed to be Andrew Jackson” or “oh, I get it, the fey sensitivity to iron is a stand-in for small pox,” and so on, so the book would have been more enjoyable if I knew less about American History, but that’s not a good thing.

In some respects the novel also falls into the pit-fall of relying on the allegory to generate a kind of short-hand that the writer doesn’t need to (or perhaps want to) explain. The biggest example of this is the Celestial religion, which represents Christianity in the move to leave behind the “superstitions” of the old traditions and gods of the Kyn and instead follow a religion characterized by strict rituals, symbols, and belief in one god. The Celestial religion is only vaguely explained, yet the vagueness of my understanding of it does make parts, including the final climax of the trilogy, more difficult to follow. Any time I find myself saying, “Wait, what?” during the final showdown with the major villain, something has gone awry in the preparation for that moment. When allegory becomes shorthand, you risk losing your reader along the way.

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As a fantasy novel, the book has unique twists in terms of the identities of its heroes, but it follows a fairly traditional fantasy novel trajectory: the main hero awakens to immense power and must try to save the world with that power while navigating personal struggles and romantic entanglements. However, given the focus on characters who defy white, hegemonic expectations of race, gender, and sexual orientation, perhaps putting these characters in a familiar fantastical struggle is the point. The novel has an engaging voice, paces well, champions its message, and loves its characters, even as it shatters their world. Safety is never guaranteed, and it all comes down to saving the world, and that makes this an exciting read and an important exploration of how fantasy literature can embrace a wider spectrum of heroes.