



Finches of Mars

Brian W. Aldiss

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‘My final Science Fiction novel’ - Brian Aldiss

Brian Aldiss has announced that this book, Finches of Mars, will be his final science fiction novel. And what a way to end one of the most illustrious careers in the genres.

Set on the Red Planet, it follows the stories of a group of colonists and the problems they have in setting up a new society. Life can be sustained by new life will not prosper - the women on the planet only ever give birth to stillborn children.

Exploring many of the author’s classic themes, this is a landmark novel in any genre.

Finches of Mars Details

Date : Published August 4th 2015 by Open Road Integrated Media (first published 2012)

ISBN : 9781504002134

Author : Brian W. Aldiss

Format : Paperback 187 pages

Genre : Science Fiction, Fiction

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From Reader Review Finches of Mars for online ebook

Andreas says

Synopsis: Omnipresent war, resource depletion, and overpopulation rule a dystopian 22nd century vision of our Earth. Universities set out to rescue humanity. They found six colonies on Mars, their colonists chosen from the best, severe restrictions like no religion and no pets at all imposed upon them, and they know that it is a one-way trip. All hope seems to be lost when they find that all children are stillborn. But then, they find life-forms on Mars.

Analysis: SF Grandmaster Brian W. Aldiss is one of my favourite authors with his works spreading from the 1950s to now, reaching from experimental Barefoot in the Head to space opera like Helliconia Trilogy, and non-fiction like his invaluable Trillion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction. When he announced at the age of 87 that Finches of Mars will be his last novel, it was a very melancholic message for me, and I can't set this aside when reading the novel.

It is not the first time that Aldiss covers Mars - he reacted to Kim Stanley Robinson's 1990s Mars trilogy (starting with Red Mars) with White Mars. Finches of Mars stands in this tradition.

It has no coherent storyline, no linear plot at all: like in his New Wave times, Aldiss heavily interleaves vignettes of dialogues spreading different timelines. This reflects one central topic of this novel, namely timelessness. The title reflects Darwinian theory of separating species which would biological problems of humanity on Mars. It is a dystopian view on our future, but never falls into complete despair. There is always hope, as the unpredictable ending demonstrates.

I'm sorry to say that this work isn't written at the height of the author's skills - he throws in lots of commonplaces, loses focus with a couple of characters, and loses himself in topics like the meaning of life.

I fully understand readers who don't like this novel at all, who can't cope with literary SF. For me it was a fond farewell. I was tempted to give the novel only one or two stars because some parts are very hard to digest. In the end I couldn't, I had to like it, because it remembered me enough of the author's glorious days, and it is short enough to be worth the time.

Cross-posted from my Blog

Lis Carey says

This is not an easy book.

Humans have established a colony on Mars. It's driven and funded by an international consortium of universities--the United Universities, or UU. The colony consists of six towers, of which the West, Chinese, and Sud-Am towers figure most prominently in the story. The colonists have been chosen for atheism and emotional stability. It's not altogether clear that they succeeded on the second point. Among the odd choices made is that the colonists get assigned computer-generated names, meaning nothing, to symbolize having cut their ties to Earth. It's as if they've established a sixties commune, more than a colony on Mars, in some respects.

The big problem haunting the colonists is that, ten years in, they've had a long series of miscarriages and stillbirths and horribly deformed babies that didn't live even five minutes, but no successful live births. The colony seems doomed.

Most of the action, which mostly consists of conversation and interior thoughts, is on Mars, but we also get interludes on Earth, where we learn that the colonists are probably in even more trouble than they realize. Earth is sinking into a growing series of wars--which include a successful invasion of eastern North America. The UU is getting tired of supporting a colony that seems doomed anyway.

It isn't just the tough subject matter that makes this book hard to enjoy. It's clear that Mr. Aldiss dislikes, if not the human race, at least the 21st century. There are items called "screamers" which, in context, appear to most likely be cell phones. Some other items are called "shriekers," which might be tvs, or maybe something else. It appears that "partners" has completely displaced "husband/wife," which might imply an adoption of gender-neutral terminology, but no. The man in a couple is called the "partner," while the woman is the "partness." There is not one single likable, admirable, compelling, or even especially interesting character in the book. All the interest comes from their circumstances--though it can't be denied that a colony striving to survive on Mars is a pretty interesting circumstance.

I do want to be clear that none, or at least very little, of this is a failure of writing. Aldiss hasn't lost it. This book surely has an audience, and audience that will think I am a nut with low tastes.

I'm just not that audience.

I received a free electronic galley of this book from the publisher via NetGalley.

Ron says

Great premise--stranded colony on Mars faces existential threat--but clunky writing and technical errors discourage reading.

Examples:

“... high-kneed gait the lesser gravity of Mars encouraged.” No, look at the moon walkers.

“Such water as there was flowed...” No, such water as is on Mars is frozen. Unlike the Earth, Mars does not have a warm core.

“...left leg enclosed in plaster...” Plaster? For a broken leg on Mars? When everything else is so high-tech?

“It was Rooy who spoke next. ‘...?’ he said. No need to a tag when you identified the speaker.

“Guardianship was considered to be an important post.” Then goes on to tell us how the critical functions are automated. If the Mars colony is near subsistence level, why waste manpower on ceremonial, at best, functionaries?

Bea Pires says

Despite Brian W. Aldiss' huge presence in sci-fi, I came into Finches of Mars not knowing his work and with no expectations whatsoever so, while I can't say I was disappointed, like other reviewers, I will say I disliked the book.

Finches had a good premise and several good ideas which is what, I think, ended up shooting this book in the foot. My impression was that most of the time the author was trying so hard to express every single thought and idea, that the story itself completely lost its fluidity, becoming instead very chunky, with too much unrelated characters, plotlines and scenes. Right from the start, there's a clear difficulty in making all the narrative jumps between what's happening in Mars and on Earth but, even when all the action shifts to the red planet, later on, it still remains a complicated read, with loads of different characters that are often mentioned in a chapter or two but not developed any further beyond the small allusion to their possibilities of development. All of what could be a great setting with several flawed characters in the most extreme peak of society, in space, is lost in the middle of all the preaching that ends up being done about how flawed the author feels that our society is and how much we need to evolve away from who we are.

Putting it simply, to me, Aldiss seemed so focused on using this book as his last stand against what he considers the downfalls of our society that he himself ended up creating several horrid characters, all firmly attempting to keep their moral high ground, while continuously behaving in ridiculously obnoxious and reprehensible ways, with no development whatsoever to justify them.

Reading the whole thing felt like a chore and I definitely took nothing from all this forced moralizing lesson.

Artur Coelho says

A acreditar no que se lê sobre este livro, é com esta vénia que Brian Aldiss despede-se da ficção científica. E que vénia. Finches of Mars é FC depurada, mais próxima do experimentalismo literário legado ao género pela New Wave do que da rígida estrutura narrativa entre aventura e infodump que caracteriza a maior parte desta literatura. O enredo é traçado com grandes pinceladas, sem mergulhar em pormenorizações. Se este livro fosse um quadro, seria uma obra impressionista. Ou uma paisagem abstracta de De Stael. O todo está lá, mas quando nos aproximamos para contemplar os pormenores esfumam-se nas pinceladas largas.

Fugindo aos pressupostos do que deve ser um romance de FC, assemelha-se a um rascunho estrutural que, nas mãos de outros escritores, daria material para uma infinidade de múltiplos livros que explorariam até à exaustão os inúmeros caminho que Aldiss expressa. A tentação de escrever escritores menores que Aldiss é grande, mas seria incorrecto. Grandes escritores de FC também fariam o mesmo. Mas é bom ler esta capacidade sintética, pegar num livro com o seu quê de épico e saber que não se vai espraiar ao longo de milhares de páginas em diversos volumes.

O título não nos prepara para o romance, embora o defina na perfeição. É algo que só nos apercebemos ao terminar o livro, demonstrando a escrita de um mestre como Aldiss, que nos vai levando pela mão através dos caminhos íntimos da sua mente até a um destino certo. Os tentilhões do título, referência directa à Origem das Espécies de Darwin, são a chave da obra.

Não esperemos um futuro risonho. O futurismo, aqui, é desolador. Estamos num futuro próximo, com a

humanidade a começar a dar os primeiros passos no sistema solar. A Lua é habitada continuamente, apesar de haver uma restrição de noventa dias de permanência por razões de saúde. As primeiras bases marcianas, financiadas por uma improvável coligação de universidades, estabelecem a primeira colónia humana no planeta vermelho. Quem para lá vai sabe que não há possibilidade de regresso. Aldiss não é um optimista, sublinhando os efeitos nocivos das viagens pelo espaço sobre o corpo.

Abrigados em torres, os colonos marcianos vivem uma vida regrada na nova fronteira. São assolados por um trágico mistério, que coloca em perigo a viabilidade da colónia. É impossível levar a cabo uma gravidez bem sucedida no planeta, e as tentativas dos colonos traduzem-se numa desolação de fetos nado-mortos. Talvez, intuem, sejam necessárias adaptações biológicas evolucionárias para que os ventres humanos possam parir noutra planeta.

Aldiss não escapa à tentação de povoar o planeta com formas de vida alienígena. Fá-lo com uma espécie de lagartos mamíferos que sobrevive nas profundezas marcianas, onde há água em abundância, e talvez o ecossistema que permite a sua existência. Estranha-se este uso do artifício da criatura isolada encontrada num planeta desprovido de vida, esquecendo que formas de vida complexas não existem por si só mas dependem de ecossistemas, mas as pinceladas amplas do romance abrem espaço a esta ideia.

Sabendo que não há regresso possível, que a vida é difícil num planeta inóspito, que não parece haver esperança numa primeira geração de colonos nascidos em Marte, o que é que os leva a fazer a viagem? Aldiss, claramente influenciado pelos tempos contemporâneos, traça um retrato de um planeta à beira da extinção. As guerras violentas sucedem-se, os mais poderosos países são invadidos e os conflitos envolvem o uso desregrado de armas nucleares. Mesmo no final do livro, Marte perde o contacto com a Terra, e se não nos é dito o porquê, não é difícil intuir.

Para romance de FC, este é especialmente desolador. Mas haverá um bizarro, quase surreal mas também nostálgico, toque de esperança. Os sobreviventes em Marte serão visitados pelo que a princípio parecem ser alienígenas, mas se revelam humanos vindos do futuro, seres cuja biologia evoluiu para se adaptar à vida fora do planeta Terra. E os colonos marcianos, que se julgam à beira da extinção pela incapacidade orgânica de levar a gravidez a cabo, são os antepassados directos desta futura humanidade que aos nossos olhos parece alienígena. É aqui que entram os tentilhões de Darwin, referência erudita à teoria da evolução. O momento do primeiro contacto é uma homenagem de Aldiss à FC clássica, com um casal a ser surpreendido por uma nave que aterra e de onde saem três estranhas criaturas que os saúdam. É um momento tão filme de série B que é impossível não sorrir.

Finches of Mars é um romance inquietante. Desolador, longe do optimismo da FC mais actual, mas também a não se meter no campo das distopias. É... diferente. Essa diferença é sublinhada pelo forte lado experimental na técnica narrativa. Não há longos infodumps a enquadrar aventuras bem gizadas. Este romance constrói-se em fragmentos, por vezes dispersos, sem um grande esforço em aprofundar as personagens nem em definir os momentos da história. Este carácter fragmentário, em mãos menos experientes do que as de Aldiss, condenaria o livro. Não é o caso. Lê-se como se contempla um quadro impressionista. São manchas fragmentadas o que vemos de perto, e é quando nos afastamos que nos apercebemos da beleza do conjunto.

Kassi says

It's been a long, LONG time since I have abandoned a book part-way through (1998 'The Two Towers' -

Tolkien) but I have admitted defeat with this one. I had great hopes for it, but I found it extremely dull. The premise is interesting, and having loved 'The Martian Chronicles', I looked forward to a new take on the colonisation of Mars, but the characters were 2 dimensional, there's no hint of a plotline that I can see, and it reads as flat and tedious as a blandly written science paper by someone who is academically brilliant but lacks the fire to put it into words.

My first attempt at reading Brian Aldiss, and definitely my last.

Bradley says

I am thoroughly disappointed.

There are a few parts of the novel that I can latch onto and say, "Yes, this snippet seems fairly interesting," but they are too few and far between, suffering from either a lack of imagination or a serious review of what good authors have already accomplished over the last two decades when dealing with the familiar topic of Mars colonization.

Even that might have been forgivable if the common thread tying each snippet had been strong enough to make me want to keep reading. It could have been anything; perhaps a strong or interesting protagonist, maybe a triggering and unusual idea or possibly a striking image, or failing that, a few better poems beyond those that were painstakingly reproduced in the novel. (I strongly suspect is Mr. Aldiss's own, but I haven't made any attempt to confirm this supposition.)

Unfortunately, I came to a very, very late conclusion that yes, indeed, this novel's point was that we need to get our brightest off the damn planet and start again elsewhere. Unfortunately, this was told to me explicitly in the appendix, and I didn't have the pleasure to come to this conclusion on my own during the main reading. Instead, I was subjected to a sub-par Darwin's Radio by Greg Bear, but only including the population of Mars, a sub-par Mars only slightly as interesting as Greg Bear's Moving Mars and far, far behind Kim Stanley Robinson. There are other examples I could have made, but make up your own mind: How interesting is a colony of six towers representing different parts of Earth, fully dependent on supplies coming from Earth, and watching them be forced to flounder as all the Earth falls apart from its own inadequacies? Does it sound like a pared-down version of everything else you might have read? It does to me.

As for characters, the most interesting, and I am loathe to admit that they are anything like interesting, is a snot-nosed punk who got his mother pregnant, and the mother was prematurely praised for having produced the first viable child born on Mars. I thought to myself, "Is this going to be the thread that keeps this disjointed and rambling narrative going?" The answer is, fortunately or unfortunately, "No."

The people are varied and variously semi-likeable or not at all likeable, and few of them have much time on the stage, and almost none of them have anything very important to contribute to the narrative.

If I had come into this hoping just to read a book of pessimistic slice-of-life vignettes that watched humanity's eventual implosion, even that could have been accomplished with a great more aplomb. I wouldn't, therefore, have wanted or expected (view spoiler)

(view spoiler)

I don't generally give out reviews for books that I haven't liked, because I generally do a lot of research before I pick up a book. This case was a bit different for one reason. I was given the opportunity to read it through Netgalley, and the other novel I had recently reviewed for Mr. Aldiss kicked serious ass and I want to praise it to the moon. Literally. On a spiderweb.

This novel simply felt like there was no love driving it, or that it was produced like a bunch of scraps thrown together in hopes that the reader would see something brilliant in it that doesn't really exist. And perhaps there might have been, assuming that strong thread I mentioned had kept a hot and burning fire running through it, and a decent editor to quash that freaking ending and demand a rewrite.

According to the author, this is his last novel. He has been writing for a long time, and many people have praised him. I've praised him with my limited knowledge of his works, and I was perfectly willing to give this novel the benefit of the doubt because he earned a great deal of leeway with *Hothouse*.

This novel hasn't squandered all my goodwill, either. I'm most definitely going to read some of his other earlier works and be sure I have a truly decent sample to judge the author by. After all, I am one of those people who absolutely adored the movie *A.I.*, and it was only recently that I finally grokked the fact that Mr. Aldiss wrote the short story on which it was based. I can go by the fact that two out of three is still a winner, and this novel is probably an outlier.

That being said, I've got to be honest: I did not like *Finches of Mars*, but I'm also not assuming this is a truly characteristic sample of his work. At least, not yet. If you're new to him and want to read his stuff, just please, please don't read this one. There's simply too little to recommend it.

Ray Ellis says

I hate the idea of giving a one star review to a Brian Aldiss book, but this was truly awful. If it had been written in the 1950s, I would say it had aged badly. But it was written in 2012. Not a great note for such a great writer to end on. Four hours of my life that I won't get back. And yes, I know, I should have just stopped reading when it became very obvious that it wouldn't get better (about 1 or 2 very short chapters in).

The premise is a Mars colony set up by the brightest and best from the "United Universities". Unfortunately the nod at diversity fails completely due to some clumsy ethnic stereotyping. And by "brightest and best", he means "atheist and agnostic" only. I did wonder whether Aldiss meant this ironically. Like maybe this was the "new atheism" taken to its ultimate and absurdist conclusion, with the Mars colony as a logical positivist Hell. But no, apparently not.

There was a glimmer of a clever twist in the penultimate chapter, before it descended into B-Movie hokum as the colony's enlightened descendants travel back in a time ship for no obvious reason. Sorry did I give away the end? Just be amazed that I got that far.

Time to blow the dust off the *Helliconia* trilogy and remember happier days.

Text Addict says

I would like to be able to say something nice about what is (according to his own statement) to be Mr. Aldiss' last work of science fiction, but this present year is still 2015, and I expect quite a lot more of my SF than I found here. The book contains no plot, only a series of incidents culminating in what I will gently call a "classic" *deus ex machina* cop-out. The book contains no characters, only paper dolls draped in quirks and pushed about by impulses that neither they nor we have a chance of understanding. There is some poetic language here and there, but for the most part the narrative is as dry and airless as the Martian landscape.

The book is tired. There is no striving here, except perhaps by the man whose explorations of the Martian surface are ultimately futile. The six towers were built off-screen. There is no frantic analysis and experimentation to try to figure out why fetal development goes awry on Mars, meaning zero population growth and a very short future for the colony; only vague hopes that the "wombs" involved will "adjust." The intense and unceasing work that must be required of all the colonists just to survive on Mars is invisible, and few of these people seem to be qualified to do anything useful anyway.

This is not my kind of science fiction.

But it gets worse. While I was musing over this book and this review, parts of the Internet exploded all over Michael Moritz and his problems with hiring women, and Jessica Nordell pointed out that "It's Not Foot in Mouth Disease" when what it reveals is a deeply-embedded assumption that "women → lower standards." (See the full article for the details.)

And I remembered the part of *Finches* that truly ticked me off, that revealed a mindset still lodged firmly in 1945. The colonists, Aldiss notes, are thoroughly and unsupersitious modern people, but they nonetheless feel the "mystery" of life, which humans have been pondering since they invented thinking. "See," he says,

here's a man. It's night and he sits by a small fire in a forest. The seasons are turning; it grows colder. His woman lies by his side, not asleep but with no speech or movement. The man has a dog, part wolf, on a leash, made restless by the crackle of burning sticks.

These three beings are in a continent almost uninhabited. It is full of trees. The trees grow straight, in silent competition, one with another. The man tears branches off the trees to burn, to keep him warm. He sits there, hands out to the blaze. He thinks. He is attempting to think about the mystery.

He can't even name it, but he feels its presence.

Did you even see what was there? Go back and read it again.

Fine, I'll help. The synaptic pathway revealed here is: "woman → passive." There are not two people whose constant daily efforts are bent toward joint survival, one by hunting and guarding, and the other by seeking out, gathering, and preparing at least half of the food that keeps them both from starving. There is one thinker and one inert object, one owner and one property, one fucker and one fuckee, one active force and one passive thing, one human and two animals. They could *both* have been staring into the fire contemplating the meaning of life, both *being* fully human, but as Nordell pointed out, inculcated reflex will have its way.

It doesn't matter that many of the book's "characters" are female, and theoretically accomplished. Almost everybody is neurotically disabled to some degree, women and men alike. Among the male characters is a

gatekeeper impotently enraged by his cuckolding; a literally impotent astronomer; the WTF Oedipal thing that I can't even, seriously; and a man who only finds fulfillment with the exotic, sexualized Other in the Chinese tower. The lot of them drift along through a story with no tension, occasionally making gestures toward doing something about their situations. It is thus a deeply *feminized* world. The angry man rages but his only acts are mindless flailing; the one happy man moves out of West tower to the Chinese one, where a large majority of the population is female. Most of the women in West live in a dormitory whose door is guarded (à la the fascinating seraglio of old) by a man who is easily bribed.

Life on Earth will end, the book implies, because nobody is left with the balls to stop it.

It manages this despite the fact that warfare, that quintessentially masculine activity, is reported to be widespread down on the planet. Civilization itself lies helpless before the onslaught, legs spread wide for the deadly screwing-over.

Earth goes dark, and Mars is left on its own.

(view spoiler)

Bugger that for a lark, as Sir Terry taught me to say. I'm sorry I ever read this book.

Jonathan says

When I look back over the legendary Brian Aldiss' Science Fiction works, it will be with fond memories; as I'm sure it will be for many others, who have had the pleasure of reading them. It also pleases me to think that there are still many that I am yet to read. It then becomes all the more unfortunate, that Finches of Mars will be his last. It provides a good piece of trivia for future pub quizzes, but sadly this book falls short in many ways.

At around two hundred pages in length, it's rather a short read, but that is not the main problem here, in fact it's a plus. Reading this book felt very much like eating a sandwich without any filling. There's the bread and the butter, but when it comes to sinking your teeth into the tasty part, it is chronically lacking.

The main premise is very clever and should make for a gripping read, and a real celebration of Aldiss' career. However, those ideas are never fully explored. Finches of Mars is in fact brim full of ideas, which echo the great mans' previous novels, but many are mentioned fleetingly or in conversation between characters. In many ways it feels more like you are reading an outline for a novel, rather than a complete story.

It was very kind of Brian Aldiss to try and leave us with a parting gift, but I sincerely mean it when I say, "Really Brian, you shouldn't have!"

Koeur says

<https://koeur.wordpress.com/2015/04/0...>

Publisher: Open Road

Publishing Date: August 2015

ISBN: 9781504005890

Genre: SciFi

Rating: DNF

Publisher Description: Doomed by overpopulation, irreversible environmental degradation, and never-ending war, Earth has become a fetid swamp. For many, Mars represents humankind's last hope. In six tightly clustered towers on the red planet's surface, the colonists who have escaped their dying home world are attempting to make a new life unencumbered by the corrupting influences of politics, art, and religion.

Review: I jumped at the chance to read a new work from Brian Aldiss coupled with my favorite publishing house. This was sadly disappointing. Akin to one big jumbled literary dump, Finches Of Mars is often times a schizophrenic foray into the memoirs of a depleted mind. It was so scrambled and heaped with non-relevant story line information that I quickly lost interest in the characters, world building and the plot.

Jon Mountjoy says

Purportedly the last book by this great author, which is perhaps why I expected it to be an outstanding book. If you know you're writing your last book, you may want to put everything into it. It must be a tricky situation, and I don't envy the author.

Sadly, this will not be a book I would remember him by. There are far better ones by this author.

It wasn't a convincing book at all. The speculation of life on Mars just couldn't be believed. He may have stood a chance if he selected a different planet, but really, in 2013, it was unbelievable.

So I tried to read it with my okay-this-is-SF-from-the-70's-with-rockets-and-Mars-and stuff hat on.

That didn't help either.

There's some darn weird stuff going on: the notions of evolution are really weird and wrong, there's this thin and undeveloped sexual theme, strings of half-developed characters, unbelievable reactions (to the fire), there's a vaguely explored (and again unbelievable) normon whizzing around, there's weird stuff going on down on earth (none of which you could believe), there's

Look, I read science fiction - I'm all for stuff that's unbelievable - but it has to be coherently unbelievable. I didn't find that here. Sorry.

Casey Wheeler says

I received a republication copy of this book (August 4, 2015) through NetGalley with the understanding that

I would publish a review on my blog, LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter and Google + pages along with NetGalley, Amazon and Goodreads.

I requested this book because I am interested in science fiction and I have never read any of the books by Brian Aldiss. This is to be his final book and I thought that I would give it a try based on the ratings of several of his other novels.

I must confess that this book was a major disappointment. After forcing myself to finish it I was pleased to see from other reviews that this is not indicative of his other works. The writing style and lack of character development was borderline amateurish and not what I expected from a long-time successful author.

My recommendation, based on what others who have read his prior works have stated, is to not waste your time on this book, but read his earlier books for a truly engaging read.

Metaphorosis says

reviews.metaphorosis.com

1.5 stars

A set of six vaguely nationalist colonies have been established on Mars, reliant on precarious assistance from a coalition of universities on a fractious, threatened Earth. Despite extensive social planning, life on Mars is difficult. Reproduction has so far proven impossible.

I've read a number of Brian Aldiss' books over the years. While I've never really been taken with any of them, they've left behind a memory of intellectual musing - of a submerged quality of writing that should come out on closer examination. Actually reading the books, unfortunately, doesn't bring it out. To steal inspiration from Aldiss, it's a bit like reading *Origin of Species*, to find that while convincing and intellectually stimulating in overall concept, the individual passages are extremely dry. *Finches of Mars* is said to be Aldiss' last SF book, and I'm afraid it submerges his good qualities even further than usual.

The finches of the title refer to Darwin's findings in the Galapagos - finches with widely differing beaks that proved a catalyst for his thinking about natural selection and evolution. The finches in Aldiss' book are the humans of a small Martian colony, who have, in part, consciously evolved beyond religion, at least. That's about as far as the metaphor goes before descending into muddle. The human reaction to a series of still births, a constant topic, is not so much evolution as application of technology.

There's a subsidiary theme about 'an intensity of regret and delight' in considering what is and what could have been and what is missing, especially in the context of failed reproduction and the personal costs to colonists of their travel. While touched on repeatedly, and a frequent topic of character dialogue, Aldiss' message never really goes beyond 'humans feel this'.

Beyond those intellectual elements, the story offers remarkably little of interest. The structure and sequencing are not terribly coherent. The dialogue is wooden and unnatural. The setup and many other aspects are far from credible. Most of the book reads like a (dull) historical study followed by one non-

sequitur after another. The ending is jolting. The science is thin, inconsistent, and partly nonsensical, the human motivations even thinner. There are traces of sexism and bigotry. The characters claim that 'important questions engage' them, but they don't, really. I searched for subtle, clever connections, allusions, allegories. They're just not there, and the whole book is so thickly wrapped in mumbled philosophical fragments that it's difficult to make much of.

In some ways, this book is the antithesis of Andy Weir's *The Martian*. Where that book was all about optimistic, can-do pragmatism, this one is all about pessimistic despair and ennui. Weir's book observes an individual in a situation that could actually happen. Aldiss describes the entire species through events that never could. Where Weir's book succeeded at simple, matter of fact narrative, this one reaches for intellectual, philosophical complexity and fails. If you're looking for a book about Mars, read *The Martian*; pass this one up.

I can't recommend this book to anyone but serious Aldiss completionists. His message is good - humanity is screwing up badly. Aside from that, *Finches* is simply not a good book, and not the memory you want to have of a writer considered one of SFF's masters.

NB: Received free copy from Net Galley.

Ray Palen says

Aldiss provides a mostly speculative vision of what life on Mars would all be about.

Earth has become mostly uninhabitable due to a number of reasons ---over-population, constant warfare and lack of natural resources. A small grouping of humans is sent to begin colonizing Mars. They live in 6 separate towers and face the challenges of life on a new planet --- breathing, no above-ground oceans, climate, etc.

Of course, life on Mars brings its own woes --- the most puzzling is the fact that every baby born in the ten years on the planet is either still-born or deformed. An intelligent and thrilling read for real sci-fi fans only!
