



Starfall

Stephen Baxter

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From Stephen Baxter, an exciting new episode in his acclaimed Xeelee future history: Starfall, a tale of war between the Empire of Sol and its scattered stellar colonies, with sinister turns of fate waiting in the wings . . . For nine hundred years, a dynasty of Empresses all named Shira apparent descendants of a refugee from a nightmarish future epoch has governed Earth and all the new worlds of humankind. But now rebellion looms last. In Alpha Centauri System, a visionary named Flood has assembled a fleet, armed with ferocious weapons, its mission to attack the Empire and force its surrender. Flood is prepared to bombard Earth in submission if need be, smashing its cities, killing billions . . . Why? What is at the root of his singular fanaticism?

Starfall Details

Date : Published January 1st 2009 by PS Publishing

ISBN : 9781906301590

Author : Stephen Baxter

Format : Hardcover 90 pages

Genre : Science Fiction, Novella, Space, Space Opera, Speculative Fiction, Hard Science Fiction

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From Reader Review Starfall for online ebook

Andrew says

A nice novella set in the Xeelee universe.

Standback says

“Starfall” is a novella in Stephen Baxter’s Xeelee Sequence, a series of novels and stories laying out millenia of future history for mankind and for a variety of powerful alien races. “Starfall” itself sticks mostly to humans – Earth has established an empire among the stars, but Imperial rule is paranoid and tyrannical. The novella describes the colonists’ rebellion against Earth – a massive military operation that must be carried out in total stealth, and under relativistic speeds. For the rebellion to have any chance of success, the final preparations must be made 60 years before the first shot will be fired, and no one can be allowed to uncover it in the meantime...

This setup makes for an exciting tactical exercise, for building suspense as the day of open attack draws near, for exciting, unusual space battles, and for depicting the calculating minds necessary to wage war under such conditions – as well as the harsh circumstances that compel them to do so. In all these, Baxter does an excellent job, and any reader who likes space battles, tension, and scientific speculation should enjoy the book greatly.

However, somewhere along the way, the novella takes a turn I found less satisfying. I won’t spoil the surprises, but at some point, the novella ceases to be about the oppressed colonies striking back against the Earth-based Empire, and becomes all about a previously-concealed threat on Earth, which the rebellion is in fact aimed at stopping.

This shift has two significant drawbacks. The first is that much of the story’s early, compelling momentum is killed. The rebellion and strife between colonists and Empire are shunted aside. Questions of loyalty, morality and sacrifice are suddenly made obsolete by an overriding, catch-all evil. Quite simply, Baxter has swapped stories on us mid-way – and unsurprisingly, the second story doesn’t satisfy what the unfinished first got us excited about.

The second drawback is that the new plotline introduced in the later half of the novella just isn’t as well-executed as the first half. Instead of the mounting anticipation and squaring off we have in the rebellion plot thread, the threat-to-humanity plot thread is meant to gradually uncover the details of the threat, and defeat it. That’s a fair plot structure, and I have to say that a lot of those details are surprising and creative. The problem is that each of these details, brilliant as many of them may be, seem to serve only as thinly-veiled macguffins and plot coupons. The brilliant details are plot twists that have no discernible effect on the plot; at least in the eyes of this reviewer, they seem to be for decorative purposes only.

It is as though a hero is trying to stop a bomb, and then when he gets there he finds out it is not just any bomb. It is a special, quantum, hyperspatial bomb, and the author makes clear to the reader how interesting and original the idea of this bomb is. Then the hero cuts the blue wire, and the end credits roll. Why bother? What difference did all that make? Why treat the revelations as though they’re significant, and then do nothing to give them real significance?

This flaw doesn't ruin the book, nor even detract much from the enjoyment of the many other elements I noted. However, it certainly stands out, and I consider it particularly problematic for three reasons. Firstly, the dissonance I mentioned between this plot thread and that of the rebellion; this means the reader is predisposed to see this plot thread as secondary and less important, especially when the thread is structured as a slow buildup of revelations – it starts out slow, and we're looking somewhere else. Secondly, characters are not *Starfall*'s strong point – they're simple and fairly flat; not a problem with the broad, tactics-centered rebellion plotline, but the second plotline leans upon them much more heavily, and to poor effect. And thirdly, many of these details tie into the wider Xeelee Sequence, but the significance of "The Friends of Wigner" or various references to alien races were lost upon a newcomer such as myself – while most of the story up until the turning point was quite self-contained.

All in all, *Starfall* reads like the prose equivalent of a special-effects blockbuster. Not in the sense of lots of things blowing up; *Starfall*'s special effects are Baxter's inventions and his unusual, uniquely-constructed ideas. These are combined with suspense and action to achieve an exciting piece in which the right kind of reader frequently goes "Whoa." And yet even to him, it will be painfully obvious that plot, structure and character are not what they could be. A shame – since with just a bit more care for story construction, this could have been a novella I'd be able to recommend much more wholeheartedly.

This review originally published in The Fix Online.

Casey Robinson says

This book didn't do anything wrong to earn two stars, but it didn't do particularly much right either.

A fast read, but it spends too little time on any individual set of characters or plot points to really elicit feelings about any of them.

Andreas says

Rebels from distant colonies want to fight for their independence and plan an attack on earth. They come up with a clever plan, spanning multiple decades...

"*Starfall*" is an interesting far-future space-opera novella. Baxter has intriguing warfare ideas and embeds them in a plausible, realistic background. It would have been easy to expand the story into a novel and I think that the longer form would have worked better. Character development comes too short and some ideas would have deserved more elaboration.

Nevertheless, "*Starfall*" is an enjoyable, fast-paced piece of Hard SF and gets my recommendation. The book itself is very pretty and features a beautiful cover.

Stephen Theaker says

Other reviewers have commented on this being very short, and indeed it is, but I've got about a dozen Baxter

bricks on my shelves, all of them unread. I really appreciated the chance to read something of his without having to dedicate an entire month to it. I thought this was fantastic, a magnificent, epic story in a mere ninety pages.

José Monico says

I think it would do Baxter well to continue on with this novella structure. He is superb under this medium: the length is perfect for his vast imagination, and pace. Anything longer and we tend to get dullness due to his limited writing abilities. This one plays out like an action movie, so events are episodic and quickly processed. Nothing wrong in this instance; the story was incredibly enjoyable. I kept geeking out over the mentions of Leiserl and other Xeelee names like Michael Poole and the first alien contact. I am still very early in the entire series, but I would not mind reading more about the Xeelee series under this short-novel arrangement.

Raj says

I really rather enjoyed this novella, set in a future where Humanity has colonised nearby star systems and formed an empire under which the colonies are now chaffing. The novella tells the story of the first interstellar war, not just over imperial might, but something that the Empress has that could threaten the whole of Humanity.

Although I don't always get on that well with Baxter's work, he can definitely tell a good story, and this slower-than-light interstellar war is a great example. There's a lot of hard science in amongst the wormholes and quasi-sentient viruses and it's a lot of fun to read.

I get the impression that this is set in a wider universe (certainly the Xeelee were mentioned in passing) and would possibly like to read more of it.

Jonathan Discount says

Solid hard space opera by Stephen Baxter; fills a gap in the greater Xeelee Sequence; written as a novella, could easily have been expanded into full novel. Exciting & fast-paced, but almost no character development. Good to come back to this book after you've finished the other critical reading in the Xeelee Sequence. But I wouldn't start with it.

Ray says

This book filled a tiny gap in the story of the Xeelee and was really very very VERY good. But also a complete tease and left me hungry for a novel of this caliber...

Kelly says

This is a novella, something like 90 pages worth and my honest opinion is that it would have made a much better novel. I hope Baxter takes the idea and runs with it - a couple more plot threads and some more complex relationships and this could be an exciting book.
