



The Thing Itself

Adam Roberts

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Adam Roberts turns his attention to answering the Fermi Paradox with a taut and claustrophobic tale that echoes John Carpenters' *The Thing*. Two men while away the days in an Antarctic research station. Tensions between them build as they argue over a love-letter one of them has received. One is practical and open. The other surly, superior and obsessed with reading one book - by the philosopher Kant. As a storm brews and they lose contact with the outside world they debate Kant, reality and the emptiness of the universe. The come to hate each other, and they learn that they are not alone.

The Thing Itself Details

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From Reader Review *The Thing Itself* for online ebook

Scott says

Adam Roberts is the wielder of a megaton-range imagination, allied to a nano-sharp ability to fashion engaging stories populated with interesting characters - he is an author unafraid of taking a concept to the edge, of exploring genuinely challenging ideas.

The Thing Itself continues this conceptual exploration, and while it isn't as brilliant as Roberts' *Bete* or *Stone* it's still a damn fine novel, with some very interesting things to say. I love stories that explore the Fermi paradox (Cixin Liu's *The Dark Forest* and Alistair Reynolds' *Revelation Space* stories are particular standouts) and Roberts takes a different angle on this question, playing with the nature of reality and perception to reach some very interesting conclusions about the universe around us.

The Thing Itself begins with a Lovecraftian feel, in an ominous atmosphere ripe with hints of great and terrifying presences. Two men, Charles Garner and Roy Curtius, are working on a SETI project at a remote Antarctic base in the 1980s, when they encounter a terrifying force that derails their lives and scars them deeply, a force that suggests that the reality we experience every day is no more than a perception-generated façade over a seething mass of primal forces.

Of course any Antarctic base story with an alien angle can't help but be indebted to John Carpenter's classic 1982 film *the Thing* (a personal favourite of mine- I have the poster in my apartment), and Roberts is well aware of this. His characters reference the film, and even humorously mention that 'for obvious reasons' it was not among the VHS films they watched in the base to help pass the endless antarctic night.

Anyway, years later Charles, his once promising career now a series of dead end days bookended with sadness and failure, struggles to forget what he saw out on the ice, and to recover from the resulting mental and physical (from terrible frostbite) injuries. Decades after his experience, while working as a garbage collector, he is drawn into a group exploring what happened to him, a group that wants him to reconnect with Roy and revisit the painful memories he has long tried to write off as hallucinations.

From here Roberts tells an entertaining and compelling story with a hurt and flawed man (who reminded me a little of Graham Penhaglion in *Bete*) at its centre, a character beaten down by loneliness and the bottle who is given a chance to reclaim the life he might have had. We follow him as he enters into a very dangerous adventure where the rules of reality are more flexible than they seem.

As the story progresses we get glimpses of earlier and future eras where various individuals appear somehow connected to what Charles and Roy saw in Antarctica. These segments remind me of David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* in their varied and flavoursome evocations of past and future lives. Roberts has a gift for strange scenarios and interesting character voices and the contrasts between time periods and the mindsets of the players in them add a great deal of spice to his story.

I really enjoyed the Lovecraftian vibe at the beginning of *the Thing Itself*, however, unlike Lovecraft Roberts quickly gets to the point, so we get all the benefits of H.P.'s sinister style married to Roberts' deft conceptualization and pacy plotting. Roberts underpins his concepts with interesting theories and does so again here, with the threatening force in the book based on some fascinating philosophical and scientific theories – particularly those of Immanuel Kant. There are no cop-out mysterious dark tomes, eldritch rituals or indescribable (so horrible they are beyond description!) alien objects here. Once beyond Antarctica the

story zipped along, pulling me pell-mell in its slipstream.

As the story neared its conclusion, however, I found myself enjoying it a little less. The novel begins to veer too heavily into its own philosophical underpinnings for my liking, and my attention began to wander away from the thicket of Kantian weeds I found myself in. I still found the story engaging but Robert's strong beginning isn't, IMHO, paired with an equally strong finish. The journey to that finish is however, a trip you should take. Pack your curiosity, prepare to explore some very cool ideas and don't forget to dress warmly.

3.5 stars.

Liviu says

As the recent two Adam Roberts novels did not quite work for me for various reasons, I was a bit wary of this one though the general feeling from the description was positive as the book seemed to go on the "big philosophical" issues side and in most A. Roberts books, the thematic tends to determine my interest more than anything else (there are of course exceptions in his few adventure like novels).

The Thing Itself consists of a main narrative following Charles Gardner some decades after his traumatic Antarctic experience as his life went from promising astrophysicist at 25 to garbage collector at 50, when a mysterious Institute comes with a too good to refuse offer (for a price though), interspersed with side narratives from the past and future, with the ones from the past less interesting, but the AK Utopia one (Applied Kant) being superb

Whether dealing with the Fermi paradox, making a case for the existence of God or more generally dealing with the "real" nature of reality (after Kant) the novel veers between extreme ingenuity and jumping the shark into pseudo-solipsism nonsense where moving one's nose changes the reality for everyone except the one doing the nose moving so to speak (it's a bit more complicated here and with more jargon but it still comes down to that)

The main positive of the book (besides the always excellent prose which handles the multiple narrative voice shifts well in a "I can do this too, not only David Mitchell" way as most of said voices are superfluous imho) is the sfnal content which is quite far away from the usual (Earth doomed/the interstellar empire is at war/aliens are coming) of the current scene and makes the book worth reading for its sense of wonder (shark jumping on occasion and all)

Highly recommended

Ellie says

Wow, well I'll try and do The Thing Itself justice, but you're better off just reading it and marvelling in its mind-blowing awesomeness. The blurb would have you think it's a version of John Carpenter's The Thing (a film I love) but really only the first part deals with the isolation and ensuing madness of Antarctica. There's philosophy, a shady organisation, artificial intelligence, a shoeless man on the run and whole raft of stories throughout time.

At the heart of the book is the theme of how humans perceive reality. We can only experience things in a human way, describe things in a human way. The concepts of time and space are human constructs even if we perceive that we are measuring them scientifically.

Roy is obsessed with the works of Immanuel Kant, an 18th Century German philosopher, so much so that Charles blames Kant for driving his fellow researcher mad. Yet Roy is convinced the answers of the Fermi paradox can be explained by Kant, and perhaps so much more.

The Fermi paradox deals with the argument for the existence of extra-terrestrial life and the fact that there is no proof of said life. The chances of us being the only beings in the universe are slim but, if so, then where are they? Perhaps it's because we are looking for them in human terms, within the constraints of our perception of reality. Maybe aliens exist outside of what we can perceive, and taken further, this argument can give credence to the existence of a deity without proof too.

You would be mistaken in thinking this is going to be a hard read when in fact, despite all the philosophy, it was a surprisingly fast-paced page-turner, with a dash of humour and plenty of style. It just also happens to be a work out for the brain cells too. The book partly follows Charles in the modern day but it also has pieces from the past and future, a little bit reminiscent of *Cloud Atlas*, but unlike Mitchell's book, the connections of the different time periods all came together in the end.

Review copy provided by publisher.

BlackOxford says

Applied Kant

Immanuel Kant is known among philosophers as the All Destroyer. He undermined most of the philosophical systems which preceded him; and more or less set the agenda for those which followed - either to confirm, deny or modify what he had to say.

One of the things Kant had to say was that human intellect has a severe limitation. Because our physical make-up operates using certain 'categories' - space, time, cause/effect among others - we inevitably apply these to not just interpret what we see, hear and feel, but to see, hear and feel anything at all. We are therefore unable to distinguish what is in the world from what we bring to the world. Whatever we perceive is always in some way 'corrupted' by our sensual construction.

Thus things in themselves are, according to Kant, permanently beyond our comprehension. And the implication is that if we had different built-in categories of perception, the world would be a rather different thing than we perceive it to be. Einstein's conflation of space and time into an entirely new category of spacetime is an example of how altering a perceptual presumption has a profound on perceptions by scientists. Phenomena like black holes and quantum entanglement may appear paradoxical only because we're perceiving them within inadequate categories.

But Einstein's new category doesn't get us any closer to Kant's thing-in-itself. Spacetime is still a perceptual filter applied to whatever is actually 'there' in the universe. So Roberts's novel poses an interesting 'what if.' What if artificial intelligence had advanced sufficiently to get itself beyond the need for perceptual categories? Or at least the ones human beings need to exist in a comprehensible reality. Would such an

advance get us any closer to the thing-in-itself, if only by triangulating through various non-human perspectives?

Roberts suggests a number of possibilities brought about but such AI which are actually rather prosaic and tired (as well as unKantian): time travel, inter-galactic teleportation, the experience of additional dimensions, alien beings, inter-temporal quantum ghosts, etc. But he also alludes to one of Kant's most important conclusions: the existence of God as the ultimate and universal Thing-in-itself. This was important for Kant because one of the ideas he did not want his philosophy to destroy was the theological concept of God. By putting limits on the abilities of human reason, his intention was in a sense to insulate theology from science and vice versa.

In this Kant succeeded, but not in the way he imagined. Science and theology went their separate ways - science into the vanguard of 19th century human thought, and theology into the intellectual dustbin of sectarian preachers and neo-scholastics. And that status quo has prevailed since in various guises. Evolutionists vs. Creationists; materialists vs. spiritualists; rational thought vs. religious faith. Straw men become the norm in the antipathies of the resulting debate. Ultimately a Richard Dawkins becomes as unpalatable as a Billy Graham. Those of us with any taste at all prefer to avoid these conversations.

It is nonetheless crucial to remember that Kant's metaphysical point remains as valid as his scientific point: Intellectual investigation must not be impeded by religion; nevertheless the object of that investigation, what exists, is a permanent mystery - not merely where what exists comes from but what that which exists is at all. Kant's categories may have been incomplete or mistaken, but his assertion that there are such categories is irrefutable. That these are to some degree a matter of choice and not inherent in the universe was demonstrated by Einstein. This recognition has not and should not lead to intellectual despair; but it is most certainly a reason for intellectual humility - for everyone. Scientism and fideism are parallel evils.

"[A]ction and passion are the will and the soul, the two always in dialectical connection. Separate one from the other, and it is hardly surprising that science becomes disconnected from God," says one of Roberts's time-travelling ghosts. But what would happen if the will and soul are fully integrated in order to perceive the Thing-in-itself? What sort of God would be found, if God there be? A beneficent, empathetic protector? A self-obsessed demon? An androgynous, somewhat sex-obsessed deity? An ecstasy-producing light? Love? Madness? Given that the harder one looks, the more like oneself the universe appears, perhaps what is to be found is merely oneself writ large.

At one point Roberts's protagonist is admonished, *"... let's say, you've lived your life wearing space-and-time coloured spectacles, and this is a moment with the spectacles removed."* The moment in question could well be that instant before death, when the body - through age, or illness, or injury - gives up its dependence upon the categories of perception entirely and disappears into itself as the thing it always was. Perhaps, that is, only in death is the thing-in-itself attainable. So Roberts suggests. And who am I to disagree?

Andrea says

Well, I started this book very dubious because of some negative reviews, but I trust Tudor's assessments and plus I've loved all of Adam Robert's other works.

And I was immediately drawn in, dazzled and delighted at the scope of this ambitious, and in my eyes, successful work on the nature of reality according to Kant. The narrative is puzzling at times, but all becomes clear and relevant eventually after many twists and leaps backwards and forwards in what we

experience as time and space.

We start and end with two men in a frozen wasteland. Like ice cracks, so does their perception of their reality. The Antarctic and the Arctic are the boundaries of the events - but a sphere has no true boundaries, like the thing itself.

Unforgettable.

I couldn't put it down.

Bravo.

Chris Berko says

The cleverest most mind blowing novel I've ever read.

ashley c says

I love it. What a marvelous mash-up of things any reasonable person will probably enjoy. Okay, that may be a bit too presumptuous, but really, Roberts made this action-packed, cosmic horror take on the Fermi Paradox - with a hat-tip to our dearest Kant - work wonders. It all ties in together - Kant's rationalism and relativism (? I only took one introductory module in university so please excuse me) as a way to explore the Fermi Paradox. I don't want to go too much into what these two ideas are because it's a large part of the plot, but for those of you who understood... I hope it stirs some of your interest.

"Let us imagine that soul and mind are one and the same. Since space and time are structures of the mind, not of the thing itself, does the degradation of mind, through senescence or pathology, lead to an erosion of space and time?"

What I also love about speculative fiction is that it usually presents an alternative reality as a way of allowing us to reflect on what makes our reality, well, a reality. A lot of us firmly have our feet planted in our belief in objectivity - that our world is real, tangible, measurable, and here to stay regardless of humanity, the state of our science, our conflicting beliefs on the intangible and the unknown. What if it's not like that? How are we sure that changes to our fabric of reality will not happen randomly? Because it never happened before? What if there is a different reality "out there" from what we are perceiving through our limited human senses?

That's really all I can say, because it is much better to experience the book without knowing much about it. That, and because it's midnight and my thoughts aren't coherent anymore. It's fun, fast-paced, and Robert's imagination knows no bounds. This is just a really good book, people. Go read it.

Terry says

3.5 - 4 stars

At first glance this book seems easy to characterize with a catchy tag line, to wit: the philosophy of Kant meets the cosmology of Lovecraft in a story inspired by John Carpenter's 'The Thing'. Fun, no doubt, even if it was simply that, but once you've made the journey through the book you will find that Roberts is doing something a little more subtle than that tag line implies and even turns many of these tropes on their head.

The main story thread takes place in the present and details the eldritch experience of two SETI researchers stationed in the Antarctic in the 1980's that unhinged both of them in different ways and the aftermath which this trauma had on their subsequent lives. Interspersed with this narrative are chapters that take place in various eras (both past and future) which detail strange experiences with the transdimensional that have occurred, or will occur, throughout human history. This back-and-forth-ing through time element, and the way in which Roberts ties them all together in the end, reminded me somewhat of David Mitchell's Cloud Atlas and like that book I found this one to be compulsively readable.

To say that parts of the story are disorienting would be an understatement, but it adds a certain verisimilitude to the reading experience. Like the characters themselves we are often not quite sure what is going on and this ties in nicely with one of Roberts' main themes (derived from Kant) that reality as it truly is 'in itself' cannot be grasped by the mere human intellect and the lenses through which we view it: space, time, cause, and effect, are all merely constructs hard-wired into our brains. Seeing the 'truth' of reality might therefore simply drive us mad (hello, Mr. Lovecraft).

I don't want to go into too much detail about the story, as I think it's best left discovered by reading the book, but I would re-iterate that I thoroughly enjoyed my reading experience and often found it hard to put the book down. Roberts plays with various narrative techniques in all of the chapters that take place in other times than our own, as well as in some that occur in the here-and-now, and while not all of them are equally successful, they were certainly intriguing and made for a varied reading experience. I'd definitely recommend this book to anyone looking for some philosophically minded sci-fi.

Edward Goetz says

I wanted to like this book more because it has such a great premise (which I won't spoil), but it just didn't totally click with me. Finishing it was a struggle.

Brendon Schrodinger says

What a troll!

If you have read my reviews for a while, you'll know my hate of book blurbs and how they often spoil a book. Adam Roberts is not quite on my buy-it-without-reading-the-blurb list (not a real list, but I should make it), so I did read this blurb. And it completely spoils the first two pages! And it sets the book up to be an homage to 'The Thing' which it isn't at all!

Yes, it starts with two scientists doing a SETI project during the long Antarctic night. But that is soon left behind for the main story. It's all set up there in Antarctica, but you cannot fathom where this novel goes at that time.

To tell you more without spoilers? Well, that's a hard task. From my shelves, there's physics and I don't have a 'philosophy' shelf. The story is disjointed, with each alternative chapter a short story, which at first may seem random, but it does pay off.

Oh and a warning about sexual assault themes from one chapter. Very confronting, but within it fit well with the context and the story.

I think the most I can say is that if you are a fan of Adam Roberts read it. If you are a fan of SF that's different, read it. If you're a fan of SF and philosophy, read it. I don't think it's for everyone, but I enjoyed it greatly and it made me think. If you want a bit more info and don't mind a spoiler on the theme click below:

(view spoiler)

Thomas Wagner says

One might think of philosophy as a vital intellectual endeavor, or little more than fodder for rambling late-night conversations in a college dorm, enhanced by assorted chemical stimulants and some Pink Floyd dialed up on Spotify. But it has provided a dazzling fever dream of a foundation for *The Thing Itself*, a book in which Adam Roberts quite possibly achieves Peak Adam Roberts, mixing such elements as mad scientists and helicopter chases over Arctic wastes with the curious spectacle of a time-hopping AI having a Platonic dialogue about the existence of God with a physicist. If science fiction is meant to be a truly speculative fiction, where ideas have no limits and the imagination is free, it takes a book like this one to drive home just how rarely that kind of SF is written. Though *The Thing Itself* may not have changed my own views regarding metaphysics... (continued)

Gray says

5★ for me, and I don't hand these out often.

The Thing Itself is a science fiction thriller about two men working for SETI on an Antarctic research base in the 1980s. It tells the fascinating story of what happens to them one long south-polar night, and the repercussions of this event. It does this through the intertextual lens of Immanuel Kant's 'Critique of Pure Reason', the Fermi Paradox, a dash of James Joyce, some H.G. Wells, a sliver of John Carpenter, and more. (*A lot more references than I was able to pick out on a first reading.*)

There are seven separate narratives that comprise this story, with the focus being on Charles Gardner's tale of something unexplainable taking place at the polar research station thirty years ago. It begins when Charles's companion, Roy Curtius, claims to have solved the Fermi Paradox. We follow Charles' story as he attempts to make sense of what happened back then, while the shadows from his past begin to resurface in the present.

'What had happened to me in Antarctica was, I told myself, only hallucination. But it was a horribly vivid hallucination, and it kept returning to me,' (p.49)

Like a number of Adam Roberts's protagonists, Charles is not what you'd call a typical hero. He is a flawed leading character who will very likely leave some readers cold. Some of his actions are questionable to say the least, and his personality doesn't do him many favours. Yet I think he feels more realistic for his flaws. Plus, Roberts writes him so well that I found myself rooting for Charles after a while and laughing out loud at some of the situations he stumbles into.

The Thing Itself raises questions about reality, perception, sentience and what could be behind it all. Artificial intelligence is a major theme in the book, as is Kant's philosophical work the 'Critique of Pure Reason'. I am not going to pretend I understand what Kant was writing about, but this didn't detract from my enjoyment of this immensely readable book. In fact, Roberts does his best to make Kant's theory understandable within the context of the narrative - even to a philosophy dummy like me.

Later in the story, Charles is introduced to the mysterious Peta, an artificial intelligence that claims to be alive. In some entertaining conversations between these two characters, Roberts offers an interpretation of Kant's 'Critique' in relation to both Charles's experience in Antarctica and the concept of artificial intelligence becoming sentient. Does the mind create and shape its experiences or is there *something* behind it all? The thing itself, possibly?

'My question. When you examine the universe, with scrupulous attention and objectivity, what are you actually examining? By carefully exploring all things in space and time, you're actually exploring your own shaping categories of consciousness.' (p.268)

I have kept this review fairly brief for a couple of reasons. The first reason is that I don't wish to spoil the experience of reading this brilliant book by revealing too much. The second reason is that there is simply too much to cover in a simple blogger's review like this one.

As the numerous quotes from critics have testified over the years, Adam Roberts is an extremely literate and clever writer. He is also very funny and seems able to write laugh-out-loud moments with almost annoying ease. This is a key point. What could have been a very dry, heavy-going and over-ambitious story is in fact entertaining, addictive, witty, intelligent and funny. I loved it! And I am going to read it again, probably early next year when the days are short and the snow is heavy on the ground.

Very highly recommended!

Tudor Ciocarlie says

Another great Adam Roberts' novel. The first 100 pages will be a real surprise for the reader because *The Thing Itself* certainly defies expectations. Among others, this extremely clever novel, written by an atheist, tries to prove the existence of god. Let's say it partially succeeds, but in order to do this, Roberts uses some of the most crazy science-fictional ideas I have ever read. And I'd say that if you need to use extreme speculative ideas in order to prove the existence of god than certainly god is only another extreme speculative idea.

[illegible][illegible]

fromcouchtomoon says

I'm not sure anything will ever be as rich as the splendid and insightful Bete-- which is something completely different and one of my favorite SF novels ever-- but this satisfies that craving for something smart and funny and full of SF and literary love, which is what I've come to expect from Roberts.