



An Alien Light

Nancy Kress

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The human species is at war with the Ged, a collective species that is baffled by humankind's ability to turn violence upon itself & yet advance into space. In order to defeat the humans, the Ged must first understand them.

So they go to a world called Qom, where a lost Earth colony has forgotten its origins & regressed to pre-industrial society. They are split into two warring city-states: Delysia, town of merchants, & Jela of Spartan warriors. The Ged build a walled city out in the wilderness, promising riches & new weapons for anyone brave enough to stay in the city one year.

The offer attracts a diverse collection of outcasts & adventurers, Jelite warriors & Delysian artisans. Once inside, they're taught the secrets of science & technology. In watching them learn, the Ged hope to find out how humans think. But they don't anticipate the few humans who will cross feudal boundaries to unite against the Ged, deducing more than the Ged meant to teach about the nature of the universe & the origin of humans on Qom.

An Alien Light Details

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Author : Nancy Kress

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Linda says

This was the first book I read by Nancy Kress and still my favorite. I can't really say much about without introducing spoilers and this needs to be read without any pre-knowledge. All I can say was it grabbed me and didn't disappoint at any step along the journey.

Tay Cameron says

Wow! I thoroughly enjoyed this book. The characters are real and relatable, and many of them are round. There are several ethical problems (my favorite, and probably one of the bigger reasons I keep reading Kress' novels.) Kress' imagination always astounds me; in each book, she creates limitless narratives, cultures, relationships. The Ged (aliens) are simultaneously the antagonists and protagonists. This book will keep you on your toes and asking questions. The only realish issue I had was the ending. I would've liked this to have had a sequel. There's just so much more I want to know!

Stevelvis says

AN ALIEN LIGHT by NANCY KRESS -- An interesting book in which Humans on a distant planet have reverted to barbaric tribalism. Distrusting tribes come into contact with a highly advanced alien species who is studying them and the humans must decide if they can trust the aliens or the competing tribe. Emphasis of the book is on the social sciences but a lot of detail is paid toward the more technological sciences.

Leo Knight says

An alien race, the Ged, finds itself at war with humanity. They can't understand how a race as violent and unpredictable as humans avoided self destruction long enough to reach the stars. In order to unravel this paradox, they set up an experiment. On the planet Qom, humans, the descendants of a wrecked spaceship, have established two competing, warring cultures. Jela, a spartan, warrior society, bound by culture, and Delysia, dominated by merchants. "Honor for Jela, treachery for Delysia," so the saying goes. The Ged set up a walled city, R'frow, and offer gems for the Delysians, and weapons for the Jelites who agree to spend a year in the city. A disparate mix of outcasts and seekers meet at the gates of the city, thinking they will learn and gain, but the Ged have their own plans.

Nancy Kress again creates a cast of believable characters with strong motives. Even in this exotic environment, I could relate to the characters and empathise with them. She poses a central question: can people who differ widely in beliefs, attitudes, and practices bridge the gap between them? Can anyone overcome lifelong hatreds? if so, how? If not, why not?

I did find some of this book harrowing. In general, I don't like to read about bad thing happening to good people. Both societies are technologically and socially backward, at a preindustrial level. Both factions resort

to threats, rape, and killing as a matter of daily life. I didn't find this a light read.

Susan says

This book is one of Kress' earlier ones, but already it contains many of the things that have made her one of my favorite authors. On the planet Qom, two human groups, Delysians and Jelites, are enemies who are frequently engaged in devastating wars against each other. The Ged, a species for whom unity and togetherness are essential parts of their collective make-up, can't understand how human beings, willing to kill others of their own species, have survived long enough to develop the intelligence to discover space travel. They've come to Qom to study that, to help them in their inter-stellar war against humans. How their study is conducted and its results create a fascinating plot. But in typical Kress style, it's the characters who make the story so rich.

D.L. Morrese says

The premise of this book is that aliens, at war with humanity in space, find a lost colony of humans and study them to see what makes them tick. There are three groups of humans on this lost planet; survivors from the starship that brought them who flick in and out of stasis, a militaristic society, and a trader society. The latter two are almost constantly at war with one another. This is an interesting idea but probably beyond the ability of one novel to explore satisfactorily. There are gaps and unanswered questions. I would have liked more insights about the cultures, how they developed and why they are so antagonistic to one another. The ending also seems a bit abrupt. I won't give that away though. This might have made a great series but one book wasn't enough to handle the idea.

Peter says

On a distant planet, aliens conduct an experiment on the humans there, the descendants of a crashed ship that have forgotten their origins and lost their technology. The group is split into two major antagonistic societies, frequently but not always at war, but the alien Ged invite members of both to live in their city and learn, all in an attempt to figure out what makes humanity different... how they could possibly survive to become a spacefaring race when they are violent among their own species.

I read this long, long ago, but when I picked it up again casually glancing through my stacks I realized I remembered almost nothing of it. Which probably should have been a hint, that I didn't find it especially memorable, and though sometimes a reread helps me appreciate books that left me cold the first time, this isn't really one of those times.

It's not awful. The central "find out why humans are special" mystery may be a bit cliché and the answers figured out maybe not the most profound, but it's done reasonably well, and the Ged make an interesting set of aliens to explore. And on multiple times I do have to admit the story and personal relationships didn't go in the way I expected them to. Still, I had trouble connecting to many of the characters and I felt like some of the most interesting elements were just background and not explored as much as I wanted.

Part of the issue might be the whole "fallen colony" aspect, that most of the characters were, essentially, like characters in a fantasy novel, warriors using blades, merchants, etc. And while it's fun to see them (at least some of the characters, too many just had zero interest in anything beyond the weapons or gems that drew them there) encounter scientific concepts and technologies that's outside of their experiences... stories about such societies are just not usually my thing, particularly when I'm eager for SF.

As of this writing, it's been a couple weeks since I've reread it and I already find I remember the main characters and central mystery but find the rest, and much of the turns the plot took, starting to fade. I suspect in a few more years I might pick it up again and wonder what book it was.

Duane says

This was an interesting book in that it examines fundamentally opposing philosophies of the universe. Humans in the book are willing to kill other humans and the aliens are only willing to kill beings of another species. The aliens are trying to understand how humans can be successful as a species and not value all human life. The reason they need to understand the human way is because the aliens are at war with other humans. Kress does a fair job examining these philosophies but at times, it is difficult to sympathize with the aliens.

Lisa (Harmonybites) says

Kress became a favorite after I read her *Beggars in Spain*, which won both Nebula and Hugo awards. *Alien Light* wasn't as strong as that book, but I thought hung together better than her other early novel, *Brainrose*. That one was set in the near future, and had dated quite badly--this one is set in our far future, and still works. In that future an alien race, the Ged, are at war with humanity. The aliens discover a planet where a human colony had reverted to a primitive state, divided into the warrior Jelites and the mercantile Delysians. The aliens set up a sort of social experiment, luring members of both groups into a settlement they create to study and understand humans. Mostly the story gets told through the Delysian artisan Ayrys, and three Jelites, a "sister-warrior" Jehane, a warrior-priest Dahar and the young prostitute SuSu. The title turns out to be apt in more than one sense as Kress uses the alien perspective to examine what it means to be human. It's an engrossing story, with aliens that feel--well, alien, and characters I cared about.

Laura Gaelx says

Siendo objetiva, sería un 3 o 3,5. Pero subo la puntuación porque el libro me ha enganchado mucho y me ha hecho disfrutar.

Lo mejor es la mezcla de acción y científicismo con una reflexión antropológica bien interesante.

Lo peor, la traducción. ¿Cómo puede alguien que se dedica profesionalmente a eso escribir que "los cazadores no encontraban más juego"?

Paul says

Could not force myself to finish it. I think I ground to a halt about a third of the way in at chapter 23 or so. Didn't help that I was on a plane experiencing turbulence and was anxious, but really, this is a shitty book. I care about exactly two of the dozens of characters, and they are in this asininely contrived plot.

I *might* go back to it just to see how Kress resolves the "aliens experimenting on humans" plot, because she does take the unorthodox tack of having the aliens essentially tell the humans exactly what they're doing. Amusingly, yet painfully, the humans don't care. The book is essentially a screed about how 99.99% of the human population could care less about how the universe works or anything beyond the tight little box their society places them inside. Most of the action focuses on how the humans, who live outside in medieval technology and are intermittently at war with each other, are brought into this Museum of Science and Industry where the aliens are happy to show them most any kind of technology, and respond by keeping up their feuds, tearing up the items they are provided to continue their exterior economy as best they can, and start killing each other in violation of the one condition of their staying within this wonderland.

As with Probability Moon, the book focuses on this completely valueless microcosm while the intriguing Star Trek / 4X plot--these humans are the survivors of a downed human warship, and the war continues between the humans and the aliens down to today: the purpose of the experiment is for the aliens to understand how humans can continue to exist since they are so violent to each other, largely in hope of learning something that will help them end the war--looms in the background, untouched. I assume it will intervene to resolve the "experiment" plot somehow, and I would be rooting for it to happen sooner rather than later. Otherwise this book is kreedung (to steal a term from within it).

Kay Prell says

Tore through this book feeling, whoa - 4 stars; then arrived at the end, thinking, I must have missed something - go back and concentrate on the island of the dead. Sort of wish there was a sequel or two - but I suppose the point is to leave you thinking and wondering.

Denise says

I love Nancy kress and this story had some very interesting themes but it is clearly an early work. The story's underlying premise is too scantily described to make it feel part of the whole

Drew says

Overall I enjoyed the book, though sometimes I felt that I had a bit of a hard time getting into the story, and therefore it took quite a bit of patience to get through the first third or so of the book. Once I finally got into it, however, the characters became alive and I was glad to continue reading.

Jennifer Kleffner says

Picked this one up at random at the library, and was pleasantly surprised at how much I enjoyed it. I believe that truly good science fiction isn't about the cool rocket ships and space aliens, its about setting up a scenario, using scientific based fiction, to explore the human condition. And that's just what this book does. From clever insights into alien/human understanding (how long would it take an alien species with no facial expressions to understand that ours our conveying information?) to taking a hard look at where violence gets us as a species, the book was a very satisfying read. I really wanted there to be a sequel. But then I didn't. Because I hate authors who seem to write everything in trilogy at the behest of their publishers in order to increase book sales. A good story is a good story, and doesn't require a sequel. I'll be looking into other works by this author.
