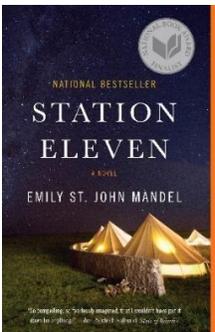
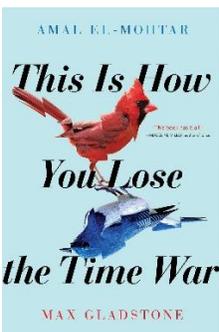


Science Fiction Book Reviews – Logan Thrasher Collins

Please enjoy my reviews of these science fiction novels! I plan to occasionally update this list with reviews of other books. Next on my list to review are *The Quantum Thief* by Hannu Rajaniemi, *The Illustrated Man* by Ray Bradbury, *Dawn* by Octavia Butler, *I, Robot* by Isaac Asimov, *Foundation* by Isaac Asimov, *The Word For World is Forest* by Ursula Le Guin, *Flowers for Algernon* by Daniel Keyes, *Bloodchild and Other Stories* by Octavia Butler, *Starfish* by Peter Watts, *Emily Eternal* by M. G. Wheaton, *Old Man's War* by John Scalzi, and *Exhalation* by Ted Chiang (still in the process of reading *Exhalation* as of December 6th, 2021). I look forward to continuing my autodidactic studies of science fiction and thereby deepening my understanding of the intersection between humanity, technology, and the future.



Station Eleven by Emily St. John Mandel: 98/100. Much of the essence of art is to reflect what makes us human, helping us better explain to ourselves what makes us tick. *Station Eleven* is a science fiction novel about a deadly flu pandemic which brings about the end of the world. Notably, it was written several years prior to the emergence of COVID-19. Emily St. John Mandel wields the premise masterfully to touch our souls and help us come to terms with human kindness, cruelty, hope, and vulnerability. Through its deep tragedy and heartfelt characters, the book manages to link questions of the individual and the global. We take a hard look at how the meaning of civilization connects to the meaning of life. Emily St. John Mandel's prose puts billions to death. Those who survive must find purpose against the backdrop of the visceral viciousness of the apocalypse. Some immerse themselves in art, traveling the postapocalyptic wilderness and performing Shakespeare plays for pockets of survivors. Some join a religious cult led by a violent prophet who resembles history's most monstrous men. Yet even this figure is skillfully humanized (though not exonerated) as having emerged from a frightened and damaged boy. Richly constructed character histories weave together in the end, creating a gorgeous tapestry which reveals both the inherent goodness and the intrinsic darkness of the human species. *Station Eleven* is lyrical, haunting, and intense. It immerses the reader in a realm which translates philosophy into the more brutally real language of emotion.

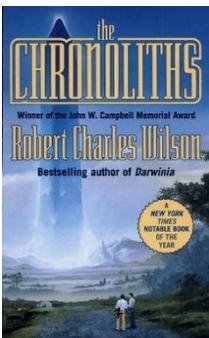


This Is How You Lose the Time War by Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladstone: 98/100. I have a special fondness for fiction which reads like poetry. *This Is How You Lose the Time War* by Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladstone represents a tour de force of far-future poetic science fiction which sparkles with imagination, intensity, and wonder. An epistolary novel, it is told through letters exchanged by a pair of time-traveling cyborg supersoldiers named Red and Blue respectively who start as mortal enemies on opposite sides of a war and gradually fall in love. Each letter is delivered through a distinct medium; powdered cod bone sprinkled over a biscuit, a code of mineral veins in lava, a pattern of a bee's flight and the venom of its sting, and many more. Red and Blue often spend decades in different pasts and futures, taking on the forms of various people and animals as part of their war. Though this conflict's degree of convolutedness is far beyond human comprehension, the authors expertly utilize lyrical language to transmit a tantalizing taste of its scope. The central characters are so far beyond human that they

should seem alien to the reader, yet their emotions come across as piercing and visceral. Beyond this, the beauty of the language gives the narrative a songlike quality which instills every passage with sensation, crispness, and vivacity. In terms of symbolism and metaphor, the book contains more than enough fractal complexity to fill the Library of Congress with multilayered literary analyses. This Is How You Lose The Time War furthermore incorporates a wealth of fascinating philosophical ideas involving love, war, peace, power, and freedom which are built on top of its spectacular wordsmithing. This book makes me feel like I am sipping liquid beauty during the cool of early morning while watching the stars of an alien sky slip beneath the horizon.

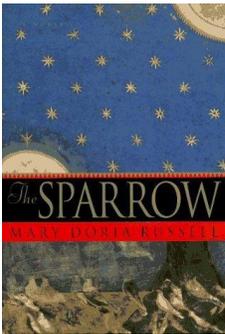


Blindsight by Peter Watts: 98/100. It is difficult to describe Blindsight. I could clumsily slap labels onto the novel and call it literary psychological sci-fi horror with an emphasis on the philosophy of neuroscience. I could vaguely refer to it as a boiling froth of darkness replete with nightmarish poetics. I could say that it manages incorporate both aliens and vampires in a terrifyingly believable fashion. I could pontificate on how the story oozes with malign hyperintelligence and conveys a sense of hurtling movement too fast to track with human eyes. Yet none of this can truly capture the frightening majesty of the narrative. More directly, Blindsight is a story about contact with aliens. After humanity first encounters the aliens, the governments of Earth send a group of cyborgs, freaks, and savants on a living spaceship to meet the aliens. The captain of this group is vampire, a technologically resurrected predator with intelligence vastly exceeding that of any human. The protagonist (Siri Keeton) had half his brain surgically removed when he was a child, rendering him incapable of empathy and forcing him to learn how to navigate social interactions through purely algorithmic techniques. Siri's unusual backstory and motivations are richly explored over the course of the story. The novel explores ideas surrounding radical neurodivergence, transhumanism, the effects of neurotechnology on society, intelligence, consciousness, artificial intelligence, empathy, the blurring of the human-machine divide, emotional abuse, ableism, and evolutionary biology. As the book progresses, numerous psychological and philosophical revelations accrue. The aliens are more truly alien than any other aliens I have encountered in fiction. It is through a certain aspect of these aliens that the book's most intensely frightening philosophical proposition is unveiled, but I will not spoil that for the reader. Prepare to be deeply disturbed in the most intellectually stimulating of ways.

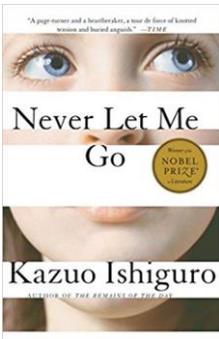


The Chronoliths by Robert Charles Wilson: 97/100. Science fiction is the literature of ideas. Quality science fiction links these ideas to our own lives in a meaningful fashion. The Chronoliths by Robert Charles Wilson is a novel which successfully weaves together big ideas with intensely personal trajectories of individual human lives. Through this style of writing, it allows us to see ourselves in the characters and reflect upon our roles in the epic drama of civilization and the universe. The Chronoliths blends several stories into a unified narrative. It tells the story of icy monuments which periodically materialize at various locations across the Earth, causing death and destruction where they appear.

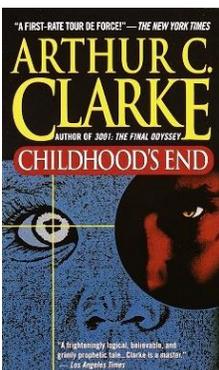
These Chronoliths have writing on them, text which proclaims future military victories by a warlord named Kuin. It tells the story of an ordinary man named Scott Warden, his efforts to protect his daughter, and how his destiny is inextricably linked to the Chronoliths by the physical forces of nature. It tells the story of a genius physicist named Sulamith Chopra who finds herself increasingly obsessed with the Chronoliths and how they influence the flow of history. It tells the story of a single mother named Ashlee and her difficult relationship with her sociopathic son Adam Mills. I am struck by the deeply human identities of all of the characters (even many of the minor characters). They feel so vividly real with their struggles, quirks, backstories, and traumas. I tangibly feel their hopes and fears as they search for purpose in the midst of troubled world. All of this is accentuated by the lovingly detailed global setting which glows with verisimilitude. I should mention that I am a longtime fan of Robert Charles Wilson's writings. His short piece *Utriusque Cosmi* is perhaps my favorite story of all time. Yet even with my high expectations going into *The Chronoliths*, I was nonetheless floored by its haunting beauty.



The Sparrow by Mary Doria Russell: 95/100. It is not easy to incorporate theology into science fiction without proselytizing the reader, yet *The Sparrow* does an elegant job of examining philosophy of religion through a first contact lens. At a deeper level, this book is about the human search for meaning and belonging in the universe, so even nonreligious readers can viscerally appreciate most of its ideas. Some other important themes the interplay between love, trauma, guilt, faith, anger, and healing. There are also some interesting (and reasonably balanced) forays into the psychology surrounding sexual abstinence of priests. *The Sparrow* charts the painful recovery of the sole survivor of a mission to make first contact with aliens through visiting them directly on their home planet. The survivor is Father Emilio Sandoz and he is physically disfigured and psychologically scarred by his experiences. The novel works backwards to explain what happened to him and the rest of the crew of the mission. This book includes some extremely disturbing occurrences. I believe that these occurrences were necessary for the story, but they might be triggering to some readers, so please be aware of this. On a lighter note, Mary Doria Russell's writing clearly demonstrates her exceptional skills as a historian. Part of what makes this story feel so real is that it contains a wealth of impeccably researched cultural depth. Latin American settings, the history of Turkey, the bureaucracy of the Roman Catholic Church, and more are covered in loving detail. Furthermore, the characters show thoroughly believable backstories, quirky personalities, and complex psychological evolution. I care about these people. *The Sparrow* represents one of the most philosophically rich and thought-provoking books that I have yet encountered.



Never Let Me Go by Kazuo Ishiguro: 95/100. For many, growing up is filled with both yearning and conflict. *Never Let Me Go* successfully captures the emotional intensity associated with the coming-of-age process while simultaneously investigating some dark concepts in bioethics. It is the story of Kathy, Tommy, Ruth, and a few others who grow up at an unusual English boarding school called Hailsham. The book chronicles the unfolding of their lives in a vividly believable and exquisitely detailed fashion as they hurtle towards an inevitable fate. They experience the familiar trials of growing up: navigating tricky social landscapes, falling in love, learning about the world, and forming their own identities. But there is a tragic context which overshadows these experiences. To reveal the specifics of this context would spoil some key aspects of the book, so I will only state that it explores some fascinating ideas in the area of medical science fiction. Despite the bioethics-related speculation which appears later in the novel, the narrative remains centered on the individual experiences of the characters, which fits well with its stylistic approach. Themes of mortality, love, friendship, and meaning are explored throughout. Perhaps most importantly, *Never Let Me Go* represents a deeply emotional story. By the end, I was weeping for the intricate characters who had decided to quietly accept something very sad indeed.



Childhood's End by Arthur C. Clarke: 92/100. It is not easy to capture the sheer sense of awe which comes from contemplating that which is beyond human comprehension. *Childhood's End* delivers a shockingly provocative glimpse into the sublime while forcing the reader to contemplate the place of humanity in the universe. As humans, many of us enjoy telling ourselves stories about loving gods. Those inclined towards Lovecraftian tales take the opposite approach, conjuring up nightmares of cosmic monsters. Arthur C. Clarke unflinchingly finds a middle ground between these extremes. At the staggering conclusion of *Childhood's End*, we experience both the cold realization of our own insignificance and a spiritually satisfying transcendence. Clarke proposes that to truly understand the divine, we may need to transform into something which is no longer even remotely human. Perhaps I am of the minority opinion that I am not repulsed by this notion, though I certainly do have some reservations about it. This is a spectacularly thought-provoking novel. My only complaint is that the first two sections of the book are significantly less compelling than its Earth-shattering conclusion, though they are necessary to set it up. Because the story was published in 1953, it includes some very outdated sexist assumptions and racist terminology. (As a person who has read some of Clarke's later novels, I can attest that he improved over time in this regard). The characters and plot in the initial two-thirds of the book feel too stiff and detached for my taste. Nonetheless, this is more than made up for with the final portion of the story. If you want to think about the big questions and experience both extreme alienness and spiritual wonderment at the same time, you should read this book.