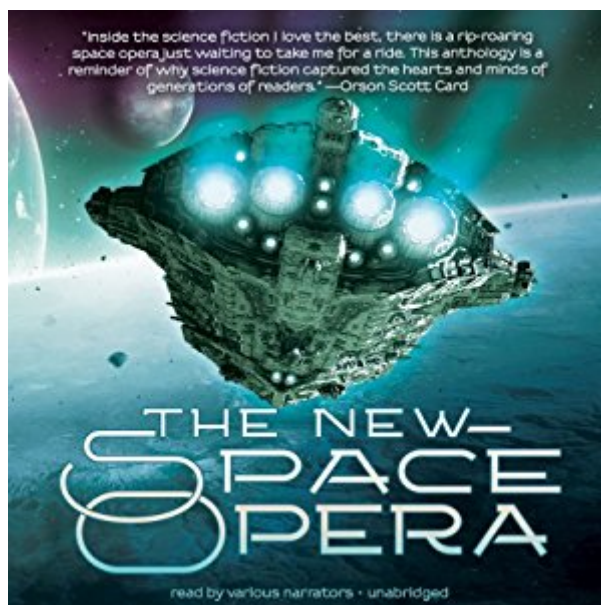


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The New Space Opera



Synopsis

This dazzling anthology includes epic interstellar adventures, tales of space and wonder, from some of the brightest names in science fiction. Authors include: Kage Baker Stephen Baxter Gregory Benford Tony Daniel Greg Egan Peter F. Hamilton Gwyneth Jones James Patrick Kelly Nancy Kress Ken Macleod Paul J. McAuley Ian McDonald Robert Reed Alastair Reynolds Mary Rosenblum Robert Silverberg Dan Simmons Walter Jon Williams

Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 23 hours and 34 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Blackstone Audio, Inc.

Audible.com Release Date: August 2, 2013

Language: English

ASIN: B00EAQHVK2

Best Sellers Rank: #112 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Science Fiction > Anthologies & Short Stories #1174 in Books > Science Fiction & Fantasy > Science Fiction > Anthologies #5878 in Books > Science Fiction & Fantasy > Science Fiction > Space Opera

Customer Reviews

Like all anthologies, some good some bad.

I bought this compilation for Muse of Fire. That story was all I'd hoped it would be and more. But then I started reading the other stories. Awesome collection. I will have to pick up the other Space Opera compilations. If you like sci-fi, you will love this. But if you like sci-fi, you've probably already read this book. I am late to the party.

Some stories were wonderful and others just lead ins to longer series, so I didn't appreciate spending the time to read a 80 page ad.

"New" space opera. I have to say I that I kind of liked the old space opera. I found these stories to be somewhat depressing and most seemed unresolved by the end of the story. I'm glad I read it however. I think my biggest complaint is that the ends of the stories weren't generally satisfying to

me. I guess the stories must have been sufficiently good in that I was anxious to see how they would turn out. However that is where I found myself disappointed. I would recommend this collection, but I wouldn't put it at the top of my list.

I wanted to like this much more than I did while reading it. In fact I left it unfinished at my mom's rather than pack it for the return flight. In fairness it is possible I expected too much from the title and my expectation of what the genre should be.

While this anthology may appear to be aimed at newcomers to the genre (or subgenre), I doubt that newcomers will get as much out of it as fans who have already read a good deal of the material referred to here as "the new space opera." Why? Many of the stories take place in universes already visited by the authors. The degree of integration with earlier work varies; Gwyneth Jones' so-so story "Saving Tiaamat," takes place in the same universe as her WHITE QUEEN novel and its sequels, but does not involve the "Aleutians" or any earlier characters. Peter F. Hamilton's barely-readable "Blessed by an Angel" takes place in the same universe as PANDORA'S STAR and requires some knowledge of that universe but doesn't seem to add much. (It does, however, strengthen my opinion that Hamilton is a dreadful writer.) In contrast, Robert Reed's adventure-packed "Hatch" takes place on the surface of the "Great Ship" introduced in his novel MARROW (which I haven't read) and appears to shed new light on what goes on inside the ship. Although most of the stories stand on their own--I think Hamilton's is the only exception--I think newcomers would still get a better introduction to today's space opera by starting with a novel or two, like Reynolds' REVELATION SPACE (on the heavier side), Stross' SINGULARITY SKY, or Scalzi's OLD MAN'S WAR (on the lighter side). (Note that Stross and Scalzi do not have stories in this volume.) The book has a number of highlights. Walter Jon Williams' yarn "Send Them Flowers," features a couple of not-quite-on-the-level pals who flit around in a space yacht. Williams' irresponsible and irresistible (to women) character Tonio is a humorous wonder. Tony Daniel's "The Valley of the Gardens" is a weird, charming, and melancholy tale about a man and a woman who sacrifice themselves to save the world. Dan Simmons' "Muse of Fire" may overstate the cosmic importance of Shakespeare, but it is nonetheless surprising and engaging. While the book also has low points, none of the stories, aside from Hamilton's contribution, are truly bad. Baker's "Maelstrom" is silly and patronizing to its characters, Rosenblum's "Splinters of Glass," is awkwardly written (but clearly superior to Hamilton in execution if not imagination), and McDonald's "Verthandi's Ring," is artsy but empty. In sum, this collection is not going to blow anybody away, but

it's a worthwhile addition to the library of any fan of contemporary space opera.

What is "space opera"? The introduction succinctly and accurately calls it romantic adventure science fiction told on a grand scale. It then traces the history of the sub-genre from its stirrings in the 1890s to its full-fledged birth in the 1920s to its nadir in the 1960s and 1970s, when the New Wave made it unfashionable, to its rebirth, while American authors were developing cyberpunk, at the hands of the British in the 1980s and 1990s. For that grand scale, I'd specify vast scales of time and space and weaponry. The fate of species - their lives or at least their sanity and cultural viability - should be at stake and not some mere individual's happiness or survival. Some of the stories in this collection are good but not space opera. Some are both. But there aren't enough good stories of any type to give this collection a higher rating. The following stories fall in the unsuccessful and not even space opera category. The setup for Gwyneth Jones "Saving Timaat", the narrator helping in the negotiations between representatives of two warring groups, the one cannibalistic predators on the other, is good but the emotional connection of the narrator to the cannibal chief and her motivations are too oblique. James Patrick Kelly's "Dividing the Sustain" is a would-be comedy of manners about a courier aboard a ship of communist colonists and the steps he takes to get close to the captain's estranged wife, subject of an unaccountable infatuation, and to avoid getting "stale", a consequence of longevity treatments. Not at all interesting. Nancy Kress has put out some wonderful work, particularly when she engages in speculating about the consequences of biotech. However, her "Art of War" seems just a writerly exercise in developing the title phrase into a story and playing around with the cliché of stern military father (here a stern military mom) and a disappointing son. The story's war between alien Teli and humans and the place each species' art plays in the struggle just didn't have the grand feel of space opera. In the good but not space opera category are several works. Paul J. McAuley's "Winning Peace" has the flavor if not the plot of Sergio Leone's *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* or a film noir. Its protagonist, sold into slavery after being taken prisoner in humanity's civil war, is offered freedom in exchange for aiding in the quest for an alien artifact. He, however, has other plans - as do all the human and alien principals in this story. Mary's Rosenblum's "Splinters of Glass" is a chase story initiated when the protagonist's old girlfriend, from whom he's been hiding, shows up with assassins in tow. He and the woman head out into the fissures of an ice world. Walter Jon Williams' "Sends Them Flowers" has an interesting background - alternate universes differentiated not by divergences from some historical point but slightly different physical laws - and a couple of interesting characters tramping about in their inherited spaceship. However, the problems of the duo, most of them caused by the

womanizing of the ex-con, don't have the grandiosity required by space opera. In the not very engaging but still space opera category are several stories. Kage Baker's "Maelstrom" gets in here solely because its Martian setting, with a group of misfits trying, in an unsuccessfully humorous plot, to stage Edgar Poe's "Descent into the Maelstrom" evokes the spirit of the American West, one of the spiritual ancestors of the space opera. Gregory Benford's "The Worm Turns", sequel to his "A Worm in the Well", has lots of hard science with a cometary prospector and her artificial intelligence heading through a wormhole. But I found the story, even with its encounters with aliens on the other side of the wormhole - they're not at all happy about seeing humans, the resulting conversations between the aliens and AI, and the banter between machine and prospector uninvolved. Robert Reed's "Hatch" has a promising set up: survivors of the Polypond War live on the outside of the Great Ship (setting for several Reed stories) and scavenge materials castoff by the cloud-like biomech Polypond. However, the ending is too obscure and wrecks an interesting story. Tony Daniel's "The Valley of the Gardens" has a key ingredient of space opera: a vast war between aliens from another universe and humans, a war humans are losing, And the plot, alternating between the unexpected human victory in that war and its consequences on a young man's world, was intriguing. The payoff, though, seems another writerly exercise in contrived symmetry between the two halves of the story, and the relation between a soldier and his weapon a badly literalized metaphor. Another story marred by a too neat plot contrivance is Ian McDonald's "Verthandi's Ring". However, it's not marred enough to keep it out of the good and space opera category. Like some of the best stories in this collection, it brings the red in tooth and claw Darwinian struggle for existence into the ecosystem of the whole universe. When two species with superscience compete, there can be no peaceful co-existence because each wants and needs all the material and energy resources of the universe. Here it is not a simple version of humanity struggling with the aliens but the many clades man has evolved into. Alien mathematical archaeology and how advanced cultures find the will to survive - as well as an opening of diamond hard science fiction describing an unusual alien probe - are in Greg Egan's excellent "Glory". Peter F. Hamilton's "Blessed by an Angel" is set in the universe of his Commonwealth. It shows that civil wars may be fought over how to control humanity's impulse to go into the box and embrace a life of lotus-eating in virtual reality. Here the conflict is not overt, doesn't involve fleets of ships, is fought with subversion and espionage but the stakes are still for the race's future. Ken Macleod is a socialist whose fiction is loved by libertarians. Here he brings his wry, cynical take on the futility of all political systems and combines it with evolutionary design strategy to show how the unfortunate inhabitants of Wolf 359 are part of an experiment to solve some old political problems. The title asks "Who's Afraid of Wolf 359?" It turns

out that a lot of people should be. Alastair Reynold's "Minla's Flowers", part of his Husker sequence and direct prequel to "Merlin's Gun", has Merlin stumbling across a human world threatened with extinction, in 70 years, by a breakdown of the alien Waynet transportation network. In and out of stasis as he tries to help them develop the tech to migrate offworld, he watches a little girl develop into an unpleasant, Stalinesque leader. Stephen Baxter was one of the British revivers of space opera. His Xeelee story "Remembrance" features man's first encounter with alien invaders and the resulting bitter conflict, for which Baxter pulls out three nifty bits of diverse and credible science, teaches the hard lesson that peaceful co-existence between man and alien is a doomed and foolish notion. The redoubtable Robert Silverberg has a human woman from the backwater of an alien empire confront the Emperor and, reminiscent of Scherezade in the Arabian Nights, use her wiles to effect her purposes. "The Emperor and the Maula" doesn't really have the science and technology of new space opera, but it's definitely still space opera. One of the longest stories in the book, it's enthralling all the time. Also long and enthralling is Dan Simmon's "Muse of Fire". In a world of god-like aliens where humans are merely slaves, a troupe of Shakespearean actors is compelled to put on performances for their masters with the fate of humanity hanging in the balance. It manages to touch on the effects of art in a harsh world without engaging in easy pieties about art's power and benefits.

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