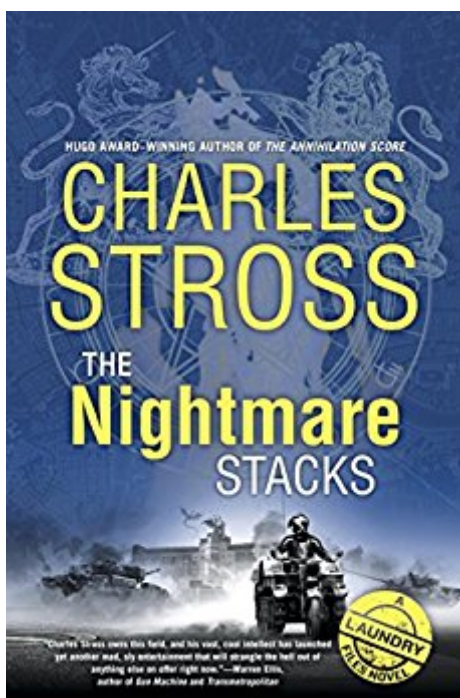


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The Nightmare Stacks (A Laundry Files Novel)



Synopsis

The Laundry Files is a “fast-paced blend of espionage thrills, mundane office comedy and Lovecraftian horror” (SFX) continues as Hugo Award-winning author Charles Stross assigns a day trader to a permanent position on the night shift...After stumbling upon the algorithm that turned him and his fellow merchant bankers into vampires, Alex Schwartz was drafted by the Laundry, Britain’s secret counter-occult agency that’s humanity’s first line of defense against the forces of darkness. Dependent on his new employers for his continued existence as Alex has no stomach for predatory blood-sucking he has little choice but to accept his new role as an operative-in-training. For his first assignment, Alex is dispatched to Leeds to help assess the costs of renovating a 1950s Cold War bunker for use as the Laundry’s new headquarters. Unfortunately, Leeds is Alex’s hometown, and the thought of breaking the news to his parents that he’s left banking for the Civil Service, while hiding his undead condition, is causing him more anxiety than learning how to live as a vampire secret agent preparing to confront multiple apocalypses. Alex’s only saving grace is Cassie Brewer, a drama student appearing in the local goth festival who is inexplicably attracted to him despite his awkward personality and massive amounts of sunblock. But Cassie has secrets of her own secrets that make Alex’s nightlife behaviors seem positively normal...From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

Stross' latest Laundry is an interesting ride. As with the previous we've moved away from Howard as the protagonist to one of the other characters in the universe. In this case a PHANG. The timing is interesting, for the first time there is a date to hang things on but in the chronology this novel happens within months of the "Score". While the book is well written and hangs together nicely I miss Howard. This is an obvious segue book, it tells a big story in the universe but serves as a transition to other, bigger things to come. This isn't to say it is bad. Just that it is part of a piece and shouldn't be your first look at The Laundry. It seems as if he's bring in some tropes from The Merchant Princes series (for clarity, I am not a fan of that series).

This Laundry Files story is told from the perspective of a minor character from The Rhesus Chart. Our usual hero, Bob Howard, is mentioned in passing but never makes an appearance in this book. The result felt more disjointed and less coherent than the previous Laundry Files books. Plus, this one suffered from some really obvious plot holes. (Spoiler Alerts) For example, the 'vampires and compulsive counting' seemed at first to be a cute Sesame Street reference, even though there was no mention of it in the previous book. Then partway through, the compulsion switches from anything (like matches) to just grains of salt. Then later it changes again to only salt when it's in a circle and inexplicably, breaking the circle breaks the compulsion. For another example, the basic ending (the evil king dies and magical succession passes to the friendly princess) was obvious from almost the beginning of the story but the exact mechanism came from nowhere. Drones targetting a cell phone - okay. But why would the evil king want a cell phone and why would he take that particular one at that exact time? It was entirely too convenient. It's an okay read but I liked the earlier books in this series much better.

One of the reviews is entitled "back to form" and that says it all. Stross' Laundry novels are a delight, but he had found some difficulty in the last two novels in keeping the superfast, can't-put-it-down, pace of action, innovation, and surprise in an increasingly complex web of interactions revolving around Bob Howard and Dr. O'Brien. By focusing this time on a newbie to the Laundry, and a shy and inexperienced vampire to boot, he brings back the delightful sense of

discovery of his first 3-4 Laundry novels. His writing is outstanding as always (except for irritating non-grammatical gerunds, but that may be the fault of his copyeditor and the world, alas, seems to be forgetting grammar more and more) and he brings it down to an ivory-tower type in his first girl encounter with a light touch, friendly, slightly ironic, but never condescending. And for all of us devoted LOTR fans, the entire novel is a bonus surprise, even if perhaps not the one we would have expected... It also clearly presages at least a couple of new novels developing themes around the new characters introduced in this book. A must read, but not until you have read at least a couple of of the earlier Laundry series -- it stands well enough alone, but its very rich context from the previous novels would be a shame to miss. I'd add two more comments to my original review. One is to stress the rekindled energy and especially humor in the series: like some of the first in the series, this novel is full of very entertaining and sometimes outright hilarious moments. The other is to regret that the author did not do his homework on CS theory -- P-complete is nothing hard (unlike, at least in today's view, NP-complete), and there is a gigantic difference between computability (Church-Turing thesis etc.) and complexity (PSPACE, NP, etc.) For a second printing, I would recommend to the author that he contact a CS theoretician (any university CS dept) to clarify the terminology.

After the horrid book that was the last Laundry files novel -- *The Annihilation Score* (A Laundry Files Novel), I bought *Nightmare Stacks* with certain wariness, mitigated by the thumbs up given by a friend who had already read it. The change of main heroes is welcome; the main protagonist of this novel is Alex the vampire who was introduced in *The Rhesus Chart* (A Laundry Files Novel), just a couple of books ago, and here he does quite well. Stross does touch a bit on the old tired cliché of a (sexually) virgin vampire, however, Alex's somewhat ludicrous fears and bashfulness about women (which one could expect from a 14-17 year old rather than a decent mathematician with a PhD in his mid 20ies, virgin or no virgin) is thankfully not overly developed before it comes to an end in a sort of a nerd's paradise with a twist. It does, however, remind of Bob Howard's (main protagonist for previous novels) meekness -- which as the series progressed, got increasingly intolerable. *Nightmare Stacks*, however, seems to show that the main character can, in fact, develop, rather than unrealistically stay the same all the time even after mind-staggering events. I liked the development of elvish theme, which is tied quite neatly into the Laundry universe. While the elves of Stross very strongly remind one of Pratchett's ones (as depicted mostly in *Lords And Ladies: (Discworld Novel 14) (Discworld series)*), there are some interesting twists and exposition of what their race is all about, which make sense to me. All in all, my main complaint is

only that the book could be a bit longer with more development of secondary characters. The battle theme made things a bit rushed, and the ending was, to me, quite too abrupt. Nevertheless a good read.

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