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In Old Earth's clandestine world of ambassador-spies, Michelangelo Kusanagi-Jones and Vincent Katherinessen were once a starring team. But ever since a disastrous mission, they have been living separate lives in a universe dominated by a ruthless Coalition - one that is about to reunite them.

The pair are dispatched to New Amazonia as diplomatic agents. Allegedly, they are to return priceless art. Covertly, they seek to tap its energy supply. But in reality, one has his mind set on treason. And among the extraordinary women of New Amazonia, in a season of festival, betrayal, and disguise, he will find a new ally - and a force beyond any that humans have known....

Carnival Details

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From Reader Review Carnival for online ebook

Mimi says

Between 4 and 5 stars, and easily one of the best books I've read this year.

at once familiar and alien, like coming home to a place where you used to live.

It must seem like all I do these days is like or fall in love with every book I read. Not so. I read sample chapters all the time and abandon lots of books. I just don't record them. The ones I do record are usually the memorable ones, many just happen to be favorites. This book is one of them, and wholly unexpected too. The title and cover just don't convey what's actually in the book. I mean, could anyone guess what this book is about based on that?

Anyhow. This book is the most fun I've had with a political intrigue space opera that's written in the style of the novel-of-manners in a while. There are depths and layers and it's a sort of culmination of all the issues we face today, presented in exact strokes, except the story is set in a distant future on an Earth-like planet. But all the things plaguing our world today is still very much present in the distant future, a future in which we colonize planets yet still have time to persecute queer people and have a stranglehold on reproduction rights. It looks as though we did not learn from the past or reconcile with it, and so these problems rear their heads once more, with force, in the future. I think Elizabeth Bear is trying to say something... I just figure out what exactly...

There's a lot to unpack here, and this book is very hard to sum up because there are too many moving parts and so many layers, and there are just so many things to talk about. But simply, the beauty of reading this is letting the world (and universe) and all its loaded political predicaments reveal themselves to you gradually as you read.

At the start, we have a pair of male agents from the Colonial Coalition (hegemony) entering a foreign planet called New Amazonia. Their official purpose is opening trade talks and placating the planet's leaders, but their unofficial purpose is finding and stealing the planet's mysterious, much sought after energy source. Since the Coalition has already tried to take the planet once, although unsuccessfully, the agents expect negotiations to be tense, if not outright hostile from the start.

The agents themselves are controversial figures in this already dicey situation. Old lovers, working for an intensely homophobic organization, separated for over 20 years after their affair was outed; it was a high-profile scandal that strained their careers. One of them was sent back to his planet; the other was put through the equivalent of conversion therapy. Now the agents are reunited once again for this mission, which they are expected not only to fail but to fail spectacularly. To add more layers to an already layered problem, each agent has his own agenda and secret mission to carry out once on the planet, unbeknownst to the other.

New Amazonia is ruled by a matriarchal system, and it's very much what you might imagine if you were to imagine the exact opposite of a patriarchal system. Saying any more would... spoil the fun, but hopefully some of the choice quotes below will give you a glimpse of the matriarchy at work. In short, there's a lot of tension here and a lot of planet-side factions reacting to the agents' presence; some are in support of, while most seem to be against.

Of course, not all is harmonious in New Amazonia. There is dissent among the population in the form of fringe groups, and many of them are men's rights groups to advocate for men's rights under the strictly matriarchal leadership. There is literally "a radical male-rights movement called Parity," pronounced "parody," and I just... This book was published in 2006. Once again, I think Ms. Bear is trying to tell us something, but I just can't figure out what...

Every player in this game has hidden agendas, and they all are working against each other. So there's a lot of sparring, scheming, duplicity, and intrigue. The dialogue is easily my favorite thing about this book. Every scene in which the characters discuss a matter of state or business, usually over a banquet, the interaction is heady and charged with a delicious, electric current. The whole book is politically delicious, and I enjoyed the hell out of it.

There are some instances and moments that I think were a bit too exacting, too obvious, with the messages conveyed and I thought they could have benefited from some subtlety, but overall, I like this book. I like what it is and what it's meant to be.

“Now that we’ve established that we think each other monsters, do you suppose we can get back to business?”

[...]

The Coalition was a typical example of what men did to women when given half an excuse: petty restrictions, self-congratulatory patronization, and a slew of justifications that amounted to men asserting their property rights.

[...]

“Not only will whoever’s on top fight to stay there, but if you reset everyone to equality, whoever wins the scramble for power will design the rules to stay there.”

[...]

“Just because we’ve disavowed Old Earth history doesn’t mean we fail to study it. You can file that one with *sense of humor*, if you like.”

[...]

“Traditionally, the responsibility for safety falls on the victim. Women are expected to defend themselves from predators. To act like responsible prey. Limit risks, not take chances. Not to go out alone at night. Not talk to strange men. Rely on their own, presumably domesticated men for protection from other feral men—in exchange for granting them property rights over the women in question.”

“And the New Amazonian system is superior in what way?”

“Punishes the potential predator and arms the potential victim. If men cannot control themselves, control will be instituted. Potential predators are caged, regulated.”

[...]

This is what we are when we're left to our own devices—savage, selfish, short-sighted. [...] But free. Any government founded on a political or religious agenda more elaborate than “protect the weak, temper the strong” is doomed to tyranny.

[...]

“So slavery is more moral than engineering out aggression.”

“It’s not chattel slavery.”

“No,” Kusanagi-Jones said. “An extreme sort of second-class citizenship.”

“Not much worse than women in the Coalition.”

“Women in the Coalition can vote, can work—”

“Can be elected to the government.”

“Theoretically.”

“Practically?”

“Doesn’t happen.”

[...]

There were a lot of weird worlds, a lot of political structures based on points of philosophy. Not all the ships of the Diaspora had been faster than light, even; humanity had scrambled off Earth in any rowboat or leaky bucket that might hold them, and dead ships were still found floating between the stars, full of frozen corpses.

Vincent found it alternately creepy and reassuring when he considered that no matter how strange the culture might be, every single world out there, every instance of intelligent life that he had encountered, claimed common descent from Earth.

[...]

Strike two for utopia. The problem with the damned things always comes when you try to introduce actual people into your philosophical constructs.

Another excellent buddy with Beth and the Sci-fi and Fantasy Book Club.

Cross-posted at <https://covers2covers.wordpress.com/2...>

Ayanna says

I had the benefit of having little-to-no preconceptions about what this would be about or what to expect in the universe construction.

I thought it was an interesting look into gender constructions and interactions. Each side has their set of prejudices and it's interesting to observe where they intersect.

The whole political machinations was beyond me. I'll admit to being more of a character/atmosphere reader, and this did indeed have that, but towards the mid-end/end, it got heavier and heavier on the machinations, and at some point, I somehow completely lost track of what was going on. Like, literally, I somehow managed to completely miss a major plot point and only found out about it when it was referenced, and I sort of sat there staring dumbfounded like "...what. what the what. are you sure...? what?"

The ending completely lost me. I don't know if that's on me or on the writing, but I think another thing is, Bear "created" a lot of terminology based on pre-existing words, so I'm reading things thinking it's one thing, when it's something else completely. Sometimes, the things are explained, or at least sorta explained, like the whole Consent thing. But then sometimes, it's like I tripped and fell into a different world where certain words have different understood meanings than the one I was used to, but since it's their world, they didn't realize that might be a problem and no one really bothered to clue me in.

Actually, I lost interest in the characters at some point. It was interesting at first, and the whole world and dynamics of it, but somewhere along the way, the two MCs became...banal, somehow. So by the time they rolled out the whole (view spoiler), I found that I wasn't invested enough to actually care. It all felt somewhat flat for me by the end.

You know what I was actually interested in finding out about?
(view spoiler)

Kim says

This is my first Elizabeth Bear book, and I'm now afraid I'll be forever disappointed, because this is one ambitious, brilliantly done book.

I've read sci fi with matriarchal cultures before, but not one like this. This planetary culture is driven by deep-seated misandry / androphobia and it pervades the culture. For instance: women wear guns, men are not allowed weapons.

The world-building is fantastic; from the description of the carpetplant that covers the surface of the ground in the cities and buildings to the detailed exploration of this misandrist matriarchal colony planet's culture and institutionalized androphobia.

It took me a little while to get into the plot, but I fell in love with several of the characters, most especially Vincent. Vincent is a super-perceiver. I'm sensitive to subtle body language and facial expressions, and I

really appreciated the show-don't-tell of Vincent's super-perception and how leveraged it as a diplomat.

Interesting plot, interesting conflict, interesting characters, great world-building and some decent speculative technology. Highly recommend!

Djrmel says

I liked the canon that Bear created for this long bit of science fiction, and that's what kept me reading despite the too obvious attempts to write an epic. (When the first line of a writer's bio proclaimed that she shares a birth-date with Sam and Frodo, I smiled and rolled my eyes.) This is the world of New Amazonia, a matriarchal society of unexplained resources that other survivors of Old Earth would like to partner with, if not conquer. Gender roles play an important part when two "gentle" males are sent as diplomats to negotiate some sort of alliance, but their real motivation is something different. The men are long separated lovers that pick up where they left off, when they're not disagreeing with each other. It took me a couple weeks to get through this book because it's so overwritten, but I did always come back to it.

Snail in Danger (Sid) Nicolaides says

Yes, again/still with the Elizabeth Bear. This ... will ask you to think too much. And yeah, it is distinctly yaoi-ish, at least as the term is (somewhat mis)used in the US, or at least seems as if it was intended to appeal to that segment of the population. (Even if Mme. Bear thought one reviewer was way off in bringing it up.)

Where to start. Okay, there's backstory in this one that could probably have been its own book, or at least its own novella. It doesn't help that there are questions about the cultural attitudes of this universe raised by the nature of the characters that don't get answered until much later in the book than they should. And the ending itself is just weird, and, argh, deus ex machina. (Oh, and the names? There's a tradition of weird-seeming names in SF, but Michelangelo Kusanagi-Jones is about at the limit. Especially since the full version is Michelangelo Osiris Leary Kusanagi-Jones. And it seems weird that the people on the colony planet where most of the action takes place have the surnames of Earth cities but have lost/forgotten the names of the continents.) It may be that I was deliberately choosing not to think enough, but this book made my brain hurt a little. And the male protagonists believing that omnivorism (Omnivory? I've always liked the sound of that better.) and pet ownership were tyranny was irritating, and reminded me of Kage Baker's Company series, which probably didn't help. Frankly, I seriously hope that's not where humanity is actually headed. I am a vegetarian, but ... it should be by choice, and really, the arguments that it's morally superior have never made sense to me.

Sarah says

Holy hell this book was confusing. It didn't even get better as the book went on. It just got more complex.

I won't spoil anything plot related, a couple spoilers for in book technology but that's it. I'm giving it four stars for the world building, the characters, and the sheer creativity involved in writing this book. If I was rating the incredibly complex plot which I don't understand, I'd give it a two. Sometimes I don't understand

and I'm okay with it. In an espionage novel- I feel like comprehension is sort of necessary. I get some readers love lack of info dumps but seriously- all it would have taken was a diagram. A glossary would have been nice too.

First of all- I want me a House. I need one like yesterday. Is Elon Musk working on it yet? Somebody give him this book. I'm sure he could do it. Don't forget the carpetplant. This is vital.

Secondly- I want a khir. No reason, just because.

Third- I want a wardrobe for all the reasons. (Just imagine- that guy that bumped into you in a crowd and didn't apologize- Zap! That person that cut you in line. Zap!)

Okay so seriously- this is a great book for discussions. There are lots of ethical and moral questions asked/illustrated (which I always love). The characters are absolutely fantastic. Lesa is my favorite. Antonia Kyoto, though she isn't present for a large portion of the book is a close second. This must be tough to manage for a writer- to make a character with like two scenes in the whole book as wonderful as she did but there it is.

The writing was okay. I found some parts overly descriptive but otherwise it was okay. Zero infodumps, if I haven't made that clear.

The M/M romance between older characters was beautiful and well told. It starts off with the characters being hesitant to interact at all (though they had been together a very long time) (view spoiler)

The ending. Dear God. If anyone gets it please explain it to me. I almost threw the book across the room in a "WTF does that mean?" type rage.

I would recommend to sci-fi fans looking for something different that explores different cultures.

Brownbetty says

First, shameful confession: I couldn't remember which one of the guys was Vincent, and which one was Angelo. They both have a lot of names, they're both determined, resourceful, embittered, hiding things, and madly in love with each other. If one of them could have had a speech impediment, or been a vampire, that would have helped me a *lot*. This isn't a reflection on the book, though: I just have a massive name-thing.

Carnival isn't quite the novel on Matriarchy I've been waiting for all my life, but it's damned close. No sentimentality about women (or men,) no utopia, a recognition that the lifestyle we choose comes at a price that is often paid by someone else, and a recognition how gender is constructed (and how it isn't.)

Bear is paying particular attention to taboos in this book, and result is a bit like being hit over the head with a millimetre thick sheet of ice: it doesn't hurt, but something shatters. Vincent and Angelo are both vegans, not particularly for ethical reasons, although they both explain themselves that way, but simply because they've been raised in a culture where exploitation of animals is unthinkable. They find the Amazonian keeping of animals as pets abhorrent, and are rather dismayed by how well the khir (a native animal) fits into the social fabric of Amazonian family and public life.

(You notice how I keep saying 'they'? Yeah, I can't remember which one did what at any given point. I promise, I plan to reread and make notes as I go in some sort of attempt to figure out who is who.)

I think I can argue that the central theme being explored in the book is freedom: who has it, what they pay for it, and who is denied it. Vincent and Angelo have a certain amount of freedom as (secret-ish) agents for their government(s), but they are denied a certain amount of freedom given the quasi-illegal state of being homosexual. The Earth government tightly controls its citizens' economic and reproductive lives, and Vincent and Angelo both resent this, and to some extent, regard it as sensible and necessary.

On New Amazonia, homosexual men enjoy slightly more freedom: they're regarded as less threatening, less savage, almost woman-like in their ability to be civilized. "Stud" males are kept much more closely confined.

I keep on wanting to give more little clever details and grand rearrangements of status quo, but the book is too densely packed and I'd end up rewriting it. Let it be taken as read that the world-building, or rather, universe-building, is marvelous.

The book is full of men and women who are willing to make personal sacrifices for a better world: the tragedy comes when people who love each other sacrifice each other for a better world they can't agree on.

I was in agony for most of the book as Vincent and Angelo got closer and closer, since I know Bear delights in tearing apart happy couples. I'm not telling you how it ends, though: you can suffer too.

Kaje Harper says

One of my favorite M/M Sci Fi books - this one is really a mainstream book with gay characters, more than a romance, but the relationship between the two protagonists is the emotional heart of the fascinating story about a very uniquely written far-future society.

Nicholas Whyte says

http://www.strangehorizons.com/reviews/2007/04/the_2007_philip.shtml[return][return]This is a superb tale of two galactic diplomatic agents sent to liaise with the matriarchal society of a formerly isolated planet; they are both men, former lovers reconstructing their relationship; each of the two has his own secret agenda, and so does each of the women (and occasional men) they must deal with on the planet, and the revelation and casting aside of their various masks both meshes with the Carnival theme and keeps up the tension of the narrative. I found this a brilliantly realised future environment at every level - the physical description of the planet (urban, alien ruins and wilderness), the societal background of the human characters (with both the war-weary galactic milieu and the matriachy of New Amazonia having clear plus and minus points) and the future technology imagined (yer basic galactic empire stuff, but with a few interesting wrinkles thrown in). Add to that an intriguing and cryptic alien intelligence (or is it an artificial intelligence? or both?), and you are set for a great ride.[return][return]It's also notable that this book seriously addresses gender issues. There are discernable homages here to Joanna Russ and Ursula Le Guin, and yet Bear has taken us into a somewhat new territory - not prescribing how society ought to be, but looking at the damage that people can do to each other under any circumstances. Carnival takes us to another world from which we can look back more critically at our own.

Maggie K says

I wanted to like this more than I did, and my main gripe about it is something kind of silly, but here goes: One of the main characters here is named Michaelangelo Osiris Leary Kusangi-Jones. Then throughout the story he is referred to alternately as Michaelangelo, or Angelo, or Kusangi-Jones, for almost no reason (and sometimes even by the whole moniker). This would be bad enough, but the other character's is also referred to by his first and last name alternating (he has the label of Vincent Katherinessen). I kept getting confused which one was which and kept having to go back and look, which made the first half of the story really hard going for me.

Also, there was a HUGE amount of detail. It really set the scene, and the world building was great, but all the wardrobe talk was VERY distracting from the story.

Although these two things distracted me enough that I kept putting the book down, and made for a long time to finish, but the premise was interesting enough that I kept with it.

ambyr says

[It didn't help that th

Stephen says

3.5 stars. Highly original debut novel with some terrific ideas and concepts along with pretty good world-building. Plot was a bit convoluted and difficult to follow and may benefit from a second read through.

Nominee: Philip K. Dick Award for Best Novel (2007)

Nominee: Locus Award for Best Science Fiction Novel (2007)

Robert Corbett says

A marvelous playing out of the dynamics of colonization in the shadow of an environmental apocalypse on Earth -- though what brings about the apocalypse is actually radical engineers who create a program to Assess humans on the basis of their practices of sustainability. The Assessment that lies behind Carnival is draconian -- essentially no resident of Europe or the US survives -- but only alluded to. Carnival is rather a novel of intrigue, involving a pair of double agents who were once were lovers (and are both men), an Amazonian planet, and a "transcended" intelligence. Bear places perhaps too much on her plate for this not to be a sometimes murky novel as there are at least three conspiracies at work on the planet, not to mention other wheels within wheels. But incrementally it holds up, in part because of sharp character development as well as the interest of the the dizzying mirror she holds up to postmodernity. The theme of the book is that no matter how fancy tech gets, certain aspects of humanity will lag, some for good reasons, but not all.

Beth says

The story in *Carnival* revolves around a couple of Earth agents in late middle age, Michelangelo and Vincent, who are sent to the planet New Amazonia to obtain their impossible-seeming energy source for the planetary Coalition based on Earth. Earth offers to return some artwork, stolen in a previous confrontation, to sweeten the deal.

There are powerful women on New Amazonia who are reluctant to give up the power source, and there are also factions in and around the capital acting against the current government, at least one of them willing to go to war for equal rights for the men living in this extremely matriarchal society.

Carnival reminded me of Ann Leckie's *Ancillary* series in a lot of ways. There's political wrangling between multiple factions, cool scene-setting, and a terrifying hegemony that acts "rationally" on the surface. There are scenes that feel like a novel of manners, and situations that encourage the reader to ponder on gender.

Each of these things is handled differently in each work, and my reading Bear's book after Leckie's trilogy in no way diminishes it. Thematically, they're very different. Where the *Ancillary* series has several characters who struggle with identity, *Carnival* opens questions about eugenics. Is it ethical to breed and own pets? To breed out undesirable traits in humans, such as aggression? (In males, in particular.) To eliminate seven billion people on a planet to preserve the integrity of the environment?

The plot of the novel is fairly straightforward, although it tries to pretend it isn't by having the characters be coy about their intentions and rarely bring them right out into the open, even when thinking to themselves. Despite that, it wasn't too confusing or difficult to follow.

Angelo's and Vincent's plight was easy to empathize with. They're subject to prejudice both in Earth's society, and New Amazonia's, for different reasons. Despite their evident love for each other, their work for the Coalition has torn them apart more than once, and could again on this mission. A few of the New Amazonian characters were good, too, especially the Pretoria family that included Lesa, Katya, and Elena, whose family bonds are strained, to say the least, as all the political wrangling and dueling-with-guns goes on.

I get a little grouchy when every single SF or fantasy novel's climax hinges around a violent, large-scale confrontation. *Carnival*'s, refreshingly, was small in scale and relatively peaceful, and made me question the characters' ethics in a thought-provoking way. Well done.

Carnival was a buddy read with Mimi and The SF and Fantasy Book Club, and was an excellent choice!

Allison Hurd says

[misogyny, actual misandry, homophobia, gay conversion "therapy"/torture (of
