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The debut novel from a exciting new voice in SF—about what happens after ninety percent of humanity leaves Earth

There is an artificial ring around the Earth and it is empty after the Singularity. Either all the millions of inhabitants are dead, or they have been transformed into energy beings beyond human perception. Earth's population was reduced by ninety percent. Human civilization on Earth is now recovering from this trauma and even has a vigorous space program.

Apollo Papadopoulos is in training to become the captain of the starship *Consensus*. Apollo is a unique individual in that he/she/it is not an individual at all, but five separate teenagers who form a new entity. Strom, Meda, Quant, Manuel, and Moira are a pod, as these kinds of personalities are called, genetically engineered to work as one and to be able to communicate non-verbally. As a rare quintet, much relies on the successful training of Apollo, but as more accidents occur, the pod members struggle just to survive.

Singularity's Ring Details

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Author : Paul Melko

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From Reader Review Singularity's Ring for online ebook

Elze says

I really wanted to like this book. I'm a sucker for everything Singularity-related. But it failed to draw me in. By the way -- maybe it's just me, but by stating the protagonist was a starship-pilot-to-be, the cover blurb lead me to believe that this is a space adventure. I was mistaken: the book takes place almost entirely on Earth.

To quote Amazon.com synopsis of the book, "Various factions struggle for control of the Ring, a colossal space station built around Earth by engineers who turned most of humankind into a group mind called the Community, which promptly figured out how to access other realities and vanished from this one. The few remaining humans genetically engineer their children to form pods of individuals so closely bonded that they function as one person. After stumbling on secret research during a training exercise, the teenage pod called Apollo Papadopoulos soon find themselves on the run from shadowy forces who want to seduce or kill them." That's a fair description of the plot. However, the devil is, as always, in the details.

The first few chapters: like watching a bored child

The beginning of the story, where the pod wonders around the countryside, undergoes training and occasionally gets into trouble, did not hold my interest. There's something about the idea of young, physically perfect, superhuman characters roaming around and feeling vaguely bored, that turns me off. To make it worse, some chapters are written in the present and others in the past tense, but that doesn't mean the past-tense chapters happened before the present-tense ones. The timeline of the first few chapters is unclear.

For a book about Singularity, the first few chapters are oddly low-tech. Even though there are offhand mentions of the Community (consisting of humans that disappeared in the recent Singularity), the Ring (a structure around the Earth where they lived just before they disappeared), the Exodus (disappearance of the said Community), and even something called the Rift (of which nothing more is said), those remarks are so scarce and non-specific they don't provide interesting clues as to what exactly this Ring and Community is / was and what happened to them. Basically, you don't immediately get a picture that there's something interesting going on; rather, reading about the teens' capers they filled me with ennui similar to that which comes from watching a bored child. :-)

The bear storyline is disconnected from the rest of the plot

The pace picks up with the accident in the space station. (Yes, there is a chapter or two that take place in space station, and then it's back to Earth.) At that point I finally felt things were starting to move along, and the characters were taking charge of their own story. Alas, then they go back to Earth, and more aimless roaming ensues. Well, it's not entirely aimless. The pod has a goal of finding a family of genetically engineered bears they suspect of holding clues to certain secrets they've stumbled upon. Ultimately, though, the bear storyline turns out to be nothing more than a digression. Yes, the teens get a certain clue that explains some things, but that whole episode (and it makes a good third of the book) is so dissociated from the rest of the plot that it does not feel like a part of the same story.

Interesting concepts not integrated into the plot

Overall, there are some interesting concepts there, but they are only revealed at the end, instead of being

integrated into the story. Reading this book you don't get that satisfaction a reader can get when separate clues add up to the big picture and a realization slowly dawns. Maybe this was the aim in this book, but it just didn't happen. The most interesting concepts of the book are not woven seamlessly into the plot. That's actually a common flaw in many science fiction books. It's hard to do it right. Well, this is Paul Melko's first novel, so maybe there's still hope.

Rebecca says

Clever SF conceit in which groups of people are permanently mentally bonded together--especially clever since it's from multiple viewpoints within the same cluster, who consider themselves a single person. The actual plot, involving a cryogenic defroster trying to restart the Singularity and take over the world, is somewhat less compelling, to be honest. And some of the paranoia-inducing "they're trying to get you" stuff doesn't really work in hindsight. But entertaining overall.

Andreas says

Ein bisschen "Ein Feuer auf der Tiefe" von Vernor Vinge, ein bisschen "Ringwelt" von Larry Niven, ein paar von John Irvings Bären – sagen wir mal so: Ich war anfangs skeptisch.

Die Mischung war ziemlich nach meinem Geschmack, bot aber jede Menge Möglichkeit, es zu versauen.

Grundsätzlich bin ich von "Der Ring" jedoch begeistert. Melko schreibt seine Geschichte genial. Und Melko beschreibt auch seine Figuren genial. Die Erzählung aus den Blickwinkeln eines Gruppenverständes gelingt ihm bestens.

Ein bisschen weniger Weltreise, ein bisschen weniger Welt retten hätte der Handlung gut getan. Wirklich hervorragend ist die Geschichte nämlich immer dann, wenn die Hauptfigur(en) miteinander agieren und dabei mit ihren eigenen Schwächen konfrontiert werden. Die Wandlung zum Superhelden, der auf der ganzen Erde immer größere Abenteuer besteht, hätte es nicht gebraucht.

Auf der Strecke bleibt beim überflüssigen Umherschweifen außerdem der Ring selbst. Ein mal kurz reingeschaut, einmal als Waffe gegen übermächtige Feinde genutzt – das war mir zu beliebig. Entweder ganz (richtige Entdeckungstour) oder gar nicht (Rätselhaftes Relikt). Beides hätte dem ansonsten hervorragenden Roman besser zu Gesicht gestanden.

Trotz der Kritikpunkte absolut lesenswert.

Susan says

I'll definitely be keeping my eye on this new author.

The storyline was new and interesting. "Regular" people have disappeared, and most of those who are left are pods -- groups of two to five people who can share thoughts and feelings and work together as a unit. This particular story is about a quintet.

I think one of the greatest strengths of the story is the method of storytelling -- each chapter is told from the perspective of one of the quint, with their particular view and their particular strength foremost.

The problem with the story? No emotional depth. In the first chapter, one member believes the rest of the quintet is dead. It's earthshattering, and leaves him nearly despondent. In the second chapter, another member of the quint leaves her pod for "love," something she's only read about but is drawn to. In that brief relationship, she's raped, assaulted, and brainwashed (while remaining aware of this). But her emotional reaction is described even less than the guy's response in the first chapter. Sorry, but that's pathetic. It doesn't have to be a "chick" book to have emotional depth, and would be greatly enriched for some additional inner lives.

Scott found this book to be a page-turner, with always enough going on that he had a terrible time putting it down, and lost a lot of sleep when this was at the top of his reading pile. It wasn't that for me, but I thought I'd pass that on, as well.

So definitely an author to watch. I'll certainly try his second novel, presuming there is one someday.

Kae Cheatham says

When reading the blurbs on the book jacket of Singularity's Ring, I'm struck with the recurrent use of the term "posthuman" and that this book is written of that time. I found the characters quite believably human and never thought of the "pod" Apollo Papadopoulos as not being human. They (it) are five genetically engineered (is this the posthuman aspect?) people who have been trained since the cradle to work as one entity: sharing thoughts, making decisions, etc. Melko, however has presented them most strongly as individuals Strom, Meda, Manuel, Quant and Moira. He shows their personal strengths and weaknesses, and their humanity. The five very different personalities are what make Apollo Papadopoulos unique, even in a culture where pods (usually only collectives of 3 or 4 people) are the norm.

The story, presented almost as an odyssey, was how someone with a narrow, but vastly intellectual focus (the AP pod) reacts when faced with circumstances and realities from which it had been sheltered. The five of AP pod, even while mentally bonded, are continually challenging each other as they are challenged to survive in world that is more multidimensional than they imagined. They are living in an era five or six decades after four-fifths of humanity died in a cataclysmic disaster of their own making (not nuclear weapons or environmental disasters, but an electronic catastrophe affecting the billions who were "wired"—they were wasted simultaneously by a cyber virus); those remaining were early pods and "singletons" (those who weren't bred for collective thinking).

For me, the "wired" ones who died were posthuman—locked into a single mindset by an off-world Artificial Intelligence. This AI was a human construct, and continues a non-intrusive existence in the space Ring which encircles the earth. AP pod and others of their pod culture believe that the humans left the Ring for another realm, or to travel space. AP pod learns differently as various attempts to destroy it put the members outside their comfort zones; they see parts of the world they barely knew existed and learn truths of which they were ignorant. Several times, they must function as individuals, without the "comfort" and collective decision-making of the pod. They do quite well.

So the point of the story? A rogue and sociopath human who survived the devastation is attempting to wire

up humans and reconstitute the Ring AI. It takes human thought to get it to a fully functioning level. But since the wired human thought is being driven by only one person who controls their thinking, the future looks grim. The Ring has all kinds of devastating weapons which he would use to threaten the whole world to his control. Only the AP pod have the ability to stop the megalomaniac from his goal.

I'm not sure the story works. I was interested in the concepts Melko presented; he's a very good writer. Each adventure of AP pod was rich in action and character development. The science of gene engineering was without detail but believable, and so was the space portion of the book. The "save the world" concept showed up late in the book and it seemed Melko was scrambling to get all the whys and wherefores in place. Without this aspect of the story, however, I don't know where it would have lead. Something was necessary to give AP pod a focus.

TOR Books published Singularity's Ring, and they tag it "a Sci Fi essential book." I consider it an intriguing "future thought" book.

Ben Babcock says

I know the line between science fiction and fantasy, if one exists at all, is tenuous, as is any genre brinksmanship one cares to play. I do try, however foolishly, to draw one, if only for my own personal cataloguing efforts. And I could go more into how I agree with the camp that views science fiction as a *setting* rather than a *genre*, but that's not pertinent to my point. In science fiction, what happens is a result of science—albeit science that doesn't quite work in our world—and, hence, is reproducible and reliable. There is no *willpower* or *faith* involved. In contrast, fantasy usually means magic of some kind, which is science if science played favourites, required innate ability (other than intelligence), and changed the rules when you weren't looking.

But there are times, as the venerable Sir Arthur C. Clarke noted, when the science depicted becomes *so* "advanced" that it starts to look an awful lot like magic. Few subgenres embody this as well as posthumanism, with machines altering us on a cellular level and artificial intelligences helping us to upload our minds to a computer—or into a nice, new body. So posthumanism is like fantasy, and the more I think about it, posthumanism most resembles *urban* fantasy. Both involve "magic" in an environment that resembles, at least in some fashion, the urban-oriented civilization of today. Both have characters who are transhuman, either because of technological advances or because of mutations, magic, and mythology. Finally, I feel like the most common tone and pacing in urban fantasy—slightly gritty, fast-paced—translates well to posthumanism. Posthumanism is *thrilling* when done well.

Singularity's Ring made me think about this correlation. It feels a little like a fantasy thriller. Our protagonist, Apollo, is actually five individuals who can share memories and thoughts chemically, to function as a single "pod". After attempts on Apollo's life, he becomes a fugitive, returning to the fold only to learn he has to help hunt down a psychopath. So, not your ordinary protagonist, and not exactly a great day to be the protagonist! Aside from a brief by enjoyable jaunt into orbit, the action in this book is confined to the surface of the Earth, which is a refreshing change from most posthuman fiction. Apollo even spends some time trekking up the Amazon, as well as several days in the woods with semi-sentient bears.

Yeah, it's *that* sort of book.

Paul Melko demonstrates the successful recipe to good science fiction. Take one or two Big Ideas and drop them front-and-centre. In this case, it's the pod humans like Apollo. They are now the dominant life-form on Earth after the departure of the Community, with *singleton* humans relegated to ghetto-like enclaves where they can't cause as much trouble. So, the Big Idea is the first ingredient. Next, take several additional science-fiction concepts and scatter them through the background, midground, and foreground. That's the setting I was talking about—science fiction makes it happen. Here, we have the eponymous Ring, the concept of a Singularity and a Nerd Rapture, and the Community.

At first the Community sounded like some kind of weird alien species that befriended humanity, then left. But no: the Community was a group of humans who joined together by “jacking in” with neural interfaces. They planned a technological ascension to a higher stage of being—a Nerd Rapture!—and subsequently disappeared. Well, their consciousnesses did. Their bodies just died. No one really knows what happened to the Community, whether they did ascend or just died or whatnot. Only one member of the Community is left; he missed the Exodus because his body was in suspended animation aboard the Ring, being repaired, and he becomes *Singularity's Ring*'s principal antagonist.

So there is a lot going on here, but it never becomes overwhelming. As much as Melko mentions Singularity-type events, it's not the principal focus. Any other book, any other day, and that might disappoint me. But the main plot of *Singularity's Ring* is more than enough to make up for that. This is a story of survival, but it has a very unique protagonist. I suspect that one's enjoyment of the book hangs almost entirely on how much one likes the multiple-persons persona of Apollo Papadopoulos: Strom, Meda, Quant, Manuel, and Moira. Melko tells the story in chapters from the point of view of each of these constituents of Apollo, and while the concept seems confusing at first, you get used to it.

Then there are the bears. The bears are *delightful*. After escaping certain death a few times, Apollo winds up back in the same area where they had some near-fatal survival training. Strom, the tactically-oriented member of the pod, rescued the rest of the pod with the help of some very intelligent bears, whom he believed had been a pod themselves. Of course, the idea of a pod of bears was dismissed. But Apollo decides that if he is going to be a fugitive, he might as well look for these bears—and he finds them. It's just a great part of the book, and like most of the book, so very fun.

Singularity's Ring was *almost* five stars for me. Sometimes the pacing seemed to get bogged down in certain details—or maybe I just wasn't paying enough attention to what was happening. Similarly, there are times when Melko departs from his convention of narrative to delve into memories or play with who is narrating. He always does this for a reason, but it is another way in which he interrupts the coherence of the writing. So while *Singularity's Ring* had a great story, there is definite room for improvement in how it was put down on the page.

That's a bagatelle, though. Really, I could see the argument for giving this book five stars, because the ending is amazing. **It is utterly predictable yet so poignant and emotional.** Somehow, Melko manages to turn a moment that should have been trite into something that made me shed tears—probably because of the strength of his characterization of Apollo's pod members. Moreover, the ending truly exceeds the otherwise intimate scope of the novel to become *epic*. Although tragic for Apollo—and thus for the reader—it is also extremely hopeful. It leaves an opening for more novels in this universe, and I want them. I will pay good money for them. Or, you know, use gift cards people give me when they realize I like books. Or borrow them from the library. Or steal them from tiny, science-fiction reading babies in lieu of candy theft. (I am a terrible person, yes, but what is a baby doing reading science fiction in the first place? Huh? Think about it!)

Phil Kozel says

Surprisingly good read. I did not expect much, and it took a little to get into, but hard to put down once you do.

Pete Young says

In the not too distant future, circling 10,000 kilometres above Earth is the massive post-Singularity 'Ring', now empty after an unexpected rapture that took billions of people. Those that are left on Earth are divided between the unconnected singletons and the group minds, genetically engineered post-humans preparing their own exploration of the far reaches of the solar system. Apollo Papadopoulos is a five-person group who is training to pilot the starship Consensus to the mysterious Rift beyond Neptune, except that someone is out to kill Apollo for far-reaching reasons that must be learned the hard way. Paul Melko's debut novel is something of an understated winner. The post-human future he imagines is original and complex but not too far-fetched, and the story more often than not goes where you don't expect. Some inevitable linguistic complexities are tackled directly, and the mêlée of themes that are present right from the beginning all discreetly disentangle then reassemble with clarity. In Apollo we have five well-drawn personalities who not only each carry their weight in driving the plot forward but also, to Melko's credit, allow you to get under the collective skin of their group mind experience. Melko has a straightforward but intellectually engaging style; give him the seventy-or-so pages he uses to get the story going and he rewards you very well. This certainly deserves a sequel.

Odo says

2.5/5.0

reherrma says

Im Zentrum seines Erstlings (in Deutschland ist es sein 2. Buch) steht das Konzepts der Quintette. Damit ist ein sog. Pod gemeint, eine Gruppe künstlich gezüchteter Menschen, dazu entworfen, sich zu einer Art Überperson zusammenzusetzen. In dem Buch heißt sie Apollo Papadopoulos und ist dafür bestimmt, Raumschiffe durch die Weiten des Alls zu manövrieren. Apollo setzt sich aus den fünf Individuen Strom, Meda, Moira, Quant und Manuel zusammen; jeder für sich ist auf einem Spezialgebiet hoch spezialisiert und trainiert, zusammen sind sie ein schier unschlagbares Team.

Melko konzentriert sich in seinem Buch auf die Beschreibung einer nicht genau datierten fernen Zukunft, in welcher die Erde von solchen Pods bevölkert wird. Es gibt zwar noch immer „Einzelwesen“, die sogenannten „Singletons“, aber diese gelten als minderwertig und beschränkt. Die Zukunft gehört den Pods, die wie einer denken und fühlen können – nur effizienter. Diese Idee beschreibt er sehr gut, allerdings bleibt die Handlung unausgegrenzt und bleibt im episodenhaften stecken, zumal begonnene Handlungsstränge wie eine rätselhafte militärische Verschwörung gegen „Apollo Papadopoulos“ immer wieder fallen gelassen oder nur halbherzig verfolgt werden.

Die zwei Gegenspieler bleiben seltsam gesichtslos und nebelhaft. Der wahnsinnige „Singleton“ Malcolm Leto strebt zwar die Weltherrschaft an, bleibt aber eine schattenhafte Randfigur, genauso wie der Attentäter Andrew McCorkle, der es aus undurchsichtigen Gründen auf unseren Pod abgesehen hat.
Das Buch ist wieder mal ein ambitioniertes Beispiel, das die Erwartungen nicht erfüllen konnte...

Bria says

I think I put this on my to-read list because it was referred to somewhere, talking about the idea of having multi-unit entities (pods). Maybe it wasn't from there, but certainly it brings to mind Hofstadter's twin world, where everyone is a double unit, and people made up of only one physical individual are considered weird, incomplete. It's all a matter of what's normal. So definitely an interesting concept to pursue, touching on all manner of ideas about identity, self, consciousness, blah-de-blah.

But as the book went on, I found myself not particularly intrigued or impressed. Yes, people in this world are pods - made up of 2-5 individuals. Singletons, individual humans not a part of a pod, are seen as weird and incomplete. Yes there's even a larger community, where millions of people are all connecting into one, along with an AI as a backbone. These are all potentially very interesting and exciting notions, yet I didn't feel like nearly as much was done with them as could have been. We didn't get a lot about the nature of the Ring community - there can be deliberate literary reasons for that, but it kind of made the entire thing unsatisfactory. I grant that as a stepping ground between our current singleton nature, and a possible future where people merge into pods, it seems relatively workable - the existence of pods is still somewhat new, singletons still exist and are not a distant memory, or gone from memory entirely. But maybe this is either too early or too late in the timeline of such a change to set the story - earlier on when pods are brand new might be exciting, to see how they develop, although some amount of that is referred to throughout the book. Or later when the existence of singletons is much more exotic or unthinkable and a society of pods has had much longer to develop and stabilize, then we can get into very interesting speculation. But it didn't feel so fundamentally different here. Maybe because the story treated each member of Apollo individually - so it came off as a story about five people. Sure, much was said about how they're a pod, certainly there were cool aspects of how they think together, and a few changes in language and behavior around how to interact with and talk to pods. But as a large, qualitative change into a structure of identity, society, and humanity into something completely different than what we are now - it didn't quite get that far. Maybe I just didn't absorb the nuances correctly or deeply enough, but I guess I was left wanting the idea to be taken so much further.

I think with that alone, I would have given it 3 stars. It's still interesting, nicely written, has enough to go on for a decent science fiction novel. Yet, perhaps driven by my disappointment in the extent of the novelty, I started to find myself judging more about it as kind of stupid. The need for a villain in Leto - his motivation and pathological tendencies very poorly supported. The luck and skill of the protagonists along with the misfortune and poor choice of the villains. The repeated prop of the pod being captured, separated into different rooms - all in the same building, along the same hallway, and then left minimally guarded so that as soon as one breaks out, it's no problem to get all the others. The somehow ad hoc and shallow existence and role of the AIs, the tired old knee-jerk reactions of everyone to the terrible fear of becoming a ZOMBIE by being absorbed into the community. I suppose there was just a hint at the end of something like the community actually being a positive development, but again, I would have been happier if it had gone farther in this direction. I don't need to read science fiction to have my pre-existing notions about self and individuality and how horrible it is to be absorbed into a greater whole reinforced. I read science fiction to have those notions challenged.

Eastendleo says

This one gets 3 stars, but if I could go with another rating system, I'd give it 4 or 5 potato chips. Yum! I ate the whole bag in one sitting and enjoyed every bite. Of course, afterwards, I groaned with the realization of what I'd done. But by then the pleasure and the damage were done.

First off, Paul Melko has undeniable abilities. Foremost is the hook of "what happens next?" But artful use of language is not one of those abilities. It was sufficient to task.

And the ideas are interesting but often don't hold up to thought. One such was the reestablishment of the Congo River from a desalination plant at the mouth of the river back into what had become a desert. hmmm. There is a reason the Congo flows from the interior TO the ocean. My main criticism would be the pod vs singleton experience. Certainly an author can set up a story any way they like, but the weight of the importance of the pod experience was undermined by the seeming ease with which the pod members cope when separated. The other bother was the sexism. It was jarring having one of the young women basically throw the pod under the bus to hook up with some hot guy she'd just met. And then to have an alone podder want to hook up with her rescuer. Because sex is of course what she would be missing most, or what she would first think of to use for connection. Then there is the nurturing female pod becoming the surrogate mother. Too much seemed either plot driven or just picked from the shelf without sufficient thought.

On the other hand, look for the bears! I kept thinking there was more of a story there that I would have been glad to explore. So, yes! to Papa, Sleepy and Roam.

Chris Jackson says

An interesting story, great characters, wonderful concept of a very strange future. I enjoyed the book but found a few plot holes and other glitches that left me shaking my head. All in all, I'd recommend this for anyone who likes character driven hard SF with interesting elements of what the future might bring. Don't dwell on the details, and don't get worried about the seemingly wandering plot. A fun read if you don't take your SF too seriously.

Kerry says

The more I think about it, the more I am still enjoying this book. I will admit that the title put me off. I'm beginning to dislike the term 'singularity' as much as I used to dislike the 'cyberpunk.' I like my fiction to make sense, and lately whenever someone uses the term singularity it is because they don't have a logical reason for doing what they want to do in their novel. I am happy to report that there are no toasters raining from the sky in this novel. I believed Melko's world from the very beginning, including the strangeness of the multiple-person pods. As the story progressed, I started asking questions. Why? Where is this going? Am I going to be annoyed? The answer to the last question is unequivocally "No!" Through many twists and turns, the novel ends with satisfactory answers. A great ride through an imaginative future world. Why is this

novel not winning a bunch of awards? I found it reminiscent of Arthur C. Clarke's 'Childhood's End,' with the difference that I LIKED this book.

Julia says

The book had an interesting plot and I was really excited about the unusual division of narrator into 5 people. Overall well written, however sometimes a particular quick shifts in story made me a little bit confused.
