



The Long Sunset

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From Nebula Award winner Jack McDevitt comes the eighth installment in the popular The Academy series—Priscilla “Hutch” Hutchins discovers an interstellar message from a highly advanced race that could be her last chance for a mission before the program is shut down for good.

Hutch has been the Academy’s best pilot for decades. She’s had numerous first contact encounters and even became a minor celebrity. But world politics have shifted from exploration to a growing fear that the program will run into an extraterrestrial race more advanced than humanity and war.

Despite taking part in the recent scientific breakthrough that rejuvenates the human body and expands one’s lifespan, Hutch finds herself as a famous interstellar pilot with little to do, until a message from an alien race arrives.

The message is a piece of music from an unexplored area. Despite the fact that this alien race could pose a great danger and that this message could have taken several thousand years to travel, the program prepares the last interstellar ship for the journey. As the paranoia grows, Hutch and her crew make an early escape—but what they find at the other end of the galaxy is completely unexpected.

The Long Sunset Details

Date : Published April 17th 2018 by Saga Press (first published April 2018)

ISBN :

Author : Jack McDevitt

Format : Kindle Edition 432 pages

Genre : Science Fiction, Fiction, Space, Space Opera

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From Reader Review The Long Sunset for online ebook

Clay Brown says

I've been reading Jack McDevitt for sometime but I must admit I gave up on him these last few years. I missed his last Priscilla Hutch book but I decided to give him another try. McDevitt's earlier work was of more substance as to what Priscilla was doing and how it was being explained. In The Long Sunset there is a clear meaning in the book as to the state of Earth and the cosmos, it seems that everyone on the planet is terrified of space and what other planets and aliens might mean to our ordered ways of life.

Leaders like the President and so forth demand that aliens never be encountered as a more advanced alien race is seen as a major threat to our existence. I think that the fear is a religious one, never to know too much, never to read too much, stay only to your own, is definitely of the ancient religions. Problem is there may be some validity to the premise. At least in McDevitt's view of space, as many planets seem to be rather like Earth. Regardless of the aliens odd looks they to have religion, and here McDevitt makes no sense at all, plainly stating that everything in the Universe must have a religion. I think McDevitt is showing some signs of age.

The aliens, the ones we meet the most are like dolphins but they appear to have 'emotions' like man and woman, a very unlikely occurrence on an alien planet. Fact is a tree on another planet is not a tree. Not Physics but Creativity may be at work. McDevitt is on a limb for most of the book as he finally sends his crew out to space to see what a transmission to earth of a waterfall meant.

Everything on McDevitt's earth is frighteningly like today, except for the cowardly warnings about not exploring space because of dangerous aliens etc, etc. I can only laugh at this, it's truly funny that man and woman don't want to encounter other beings. Don't use the stupid 'life' word, it sure isn't that! Fact is I wouldn't use that word to much down here either. It's all pat thinking in this book of McDevitt. He seems to have lost some passion and perhaps he could just let 'Hutch' go next time, she needs a real challenge, not taking orders from the ground and in space by know it alls and loose cannons.

No there isn't anything here for Hutch to sink her teeth into. McDevitt knows Hutch very well but this isn't the way to present her, he maybe should have skipped this story and waited for a more powerful one up ahead.

Maybe McDevitt should himself read more Military Science Fiction, Neil Asher perhaps... might give a few ideas...

Justin Perdue says

Acciently jumped into the middle of this series, and even lacking character context it was great.

MadProfessah says

I was very excited to receive an ARC of the latest book in The Academy series by Jack McDevitt called THE

LONG SUNSET.

The main character in the series is Patricia "Hutch" Hutchins. She is a spaceship pilot who has been through various adventures as the latest ship technology has advanced as the series progresses.

THE LONG SUNSET is set in 2256 (an election year!) and civilization's attention and interest in space exploration is waning. The United States is now part of the North American Union (NAU) and one key issue in the 2256 presidential election is the Centauri Initiative, which would essentially ban any human exploration of the Galaxy further than Alpha Centauri using interstellar (faster than light) space ships. The main reason for this idea is the notion that the Universe is a dangerous place, with aliens who could potentially be thousands of years ahead of humans and unfriendly or genocidal. This, despite the fact that dozens of star systems have been explored and the vast majority have been completely devoid of life. One of the interesting features of The Academy series has been the discovery of the remains and relics of ancient alien civilizations on various planets. A few planets have been found with aliens who are in period of civilizations hundreds or thousands of years behind humanity. But back on Earth several scientists warn that it is only a matter of time before humans stumble upon aliens that are ahead of humanity, which could be a species-ending event.

This is a fascinating philosophical question and the debate's importance becomes heightened when an alien video transmission is received on Earth originating from a very distant (but accessible) star system which demonstrates that aliens exist (or existed a few thousands of years ago when the signal originated) with comparable technology to the contemporary human level.

Of course an interstellar expedition is planned to explore the transmission source and Hutch is asked to be the captain. The President becomes involved and the segment of the population which feels that interstellar exploration is dangerous takes extraordinary measures to try and prevent Hutch and her companions to leave.

Happily, they do leave (or else it would be a short book!) and what they discover when they finally reach the transmission star system is surprising and leads to new dilemmas and philosophical questions.

I don't want to spoil that aspect of the book so I'll just say it is very compelling and provides commentary on the philosophical question(s) they left roiling on Earth.

Overall, I wouldn't say that THE LONG SUNSET is one of the best entries in The Academy series but it does raise some compelling philosophical questions. And the good news is that it may be the beginning of a new arc of The Academy books featuring Hutch.

Some of these questions are not exactly original (the dangerous universe notion is one of the central ideas in Cixin Liu's THE DARK FOREST). Just because the questions aren't original doesn't mean that they aren't effectively deployed in the book. I found THE LONG SUNSET so interesting I started and finished it in one sitting (on a transcontinental flight)!

Easily 4+ Stars.

Ryl says

This pains me, as I've been reading McDevitt for most of my adult life. He fills a very obscure niche in Science Fiction - indeed he's pretty much the only author to write what I'd call "Xeno-archaeological

Adventures", where the alien ruins stand alone and as somber as our own, rather than serving as the usual world-ending plot mcguffin or somesuch, and he writes them well. Usually.

Now, Cauldron was short, and seemed like an attempt to wrap up loose ends in his fictions universe before age took him out or something. It wasn't the best, the answers weren't what we expected, but I appreciated the gesture since too many authors craft a great mystery and leave it hanging forever.

Long Sunset is just thin, though. The dialogue is forced, and in places just plain...bad... and the characters are cardboard. Even Hutch, unfortunately. The plot is there, and I can see the explanation he wanted to send about his long-mysterious "Monument Makers" without explicitly laying it out as he did with things in Cauldron, but it's still thin as rice paper.

It's...it's hard to explain, it's just not a well written novel. Both the plot depth and narrative craft displayed in Deep Six or Seeker is completely absent here. It's the kind of work I'd expect to read from a junior unpublished novelist, and I have to question who edited it, or indeed if McDevitt wrote this at all vs. a ghost writer. :/

Jan130 says

4 to 4.5 stars. A very entertaining, and ultimately uplifting addition to the 'Academy', or 'Hutch' series. I've read all of the previous books, so I'm very familiar with Priscilla 'Hutch' Hutchins' history. The writing of the books has been spread out over a number of years, and this particular entry in the series is a classic 'Hutch' adventure.

By this stage in her life, Hutch is a highly experienced and highly regarded starship pilot. Her two kids are grown up, but her beloved husband Tor has passed away. Space exploration has gone out of fashion. Too expensive (sound familiar?) And some of those in power are paranoid and parochial in their attitudes. Fearful of the possible dangers of encountering aliens. It's all going to be shut down.

But then an extraordinary message arrives from deep space. It's an image of a beautiful waterfall, accompanied by a musical soundtrack. And it's clearly not on Earth. The first part of the book explores some of the responses to the message, and Hutch's frustration that it's going to be ignored. The politicians have put a ban on space exploration. But before the ban is slapped into place, Hutch and a small team of explorers are able to get away and head out into deep space.

This is familiar ground for readers of this series, and although it's nothing new, it's still interesting and enjoyable. And then about half way through the book or so, there are new developments. They eventually reach their destination, and a fascinating story unfolds, gripping the reader right up to the end of the book.

I did feel the depiction of the aliens was perhaps a little simplistic, but one of the fun things about this kind of 'what if?' book, is that we don't really know. What would/could aliens be like? How would we interact? Eternally fascinating questions. McDevitt's exploration of the issues surrounding his story are interesting, and even if over-simplified, they still felt realistic in terms of human reactions etc.

And how would the story end? You don't really know until the last minute (even if you can make a fair guess). The drama continues till the end. And finally, it's actually quite moving. I even shed a tear.

A worthy addition to this series. Long may Hutch continue!

Claudia Putnam says

I'd sworn off JM, and that was probably the right idea. Hutch is still stiff and asexual, as are McDevitt's women in general. Made out of cardboard. The dialogue between her and her kids is ridiculous. "Wonderful, son!" And her daughter, a high school teacher, addresses her students as "Boys and girls." In 2250, the highschoolers still have home rooms and sit in rows at desks...

Technologically, other than having FTL drives, we seem to be living in more or less the same world as now. People use Star-Trek style communicators on their wrists, rather than direct feeds to their brains or contact lenses the way most other SF writers imagine.

This is by way of saying that JM is a very lazy world-builder, in case you didn't know this already. I was hoping we'd finally learn something about the missing aliens, and while we do, a little, it's not very interesting. Because everyone, according to JM, in defiance of everything we know right here on earth anthropologically and ethnographically speaking, is all alike! Everyone everywhere in the galaxy will have evolved just like humanity... not all of humanity, though, WESTERN civilization-style humanity. Because, you know, it's a continuum, from tribes in the jungle to Washington, DC.

This is very convenient because although he can describe slightly different alien physiques, he doesn't have to go into complicated ecologies or cultures.

Like I said, LAZY.

So that's all I have to say about this. JM has a mentality that is trapped in the 50s.

Karen says

I have been in love with this series and Priscilla Hutchins since the first book and it just keeps going. I have watched Hutch grow as a person, mother, and pilot and enjoyed every second of it. The best thing is that you know when something happens out in the vastness of space that Hutch is likely to get called in because of all the experience she has.

Dr. Derek Blanchard is conducting a class when a transmission of a waterfall with a musical score is beamed from the telescope they are monitoring. His first thought is to go out and find out if there is a civilization out there who they intercepted from. It has been 7000 years and most on Earth do not want to get involved with superior aliens who could turn out to be hostile.

Dr. Blanchard however would like to go out and find them to confirm that it really was an alien world and not just something caught from a terrestrial source. Derek enlists Priscilla to pilot a ship seven hundred light years to get answers. But what they find is way more than they bargained for.

There is not a lot of action, which is just fine because we get to know the characters far better with them

being more about the talk. There is some good science and some very imaginative aliens who remind you of Earth animals. I recommend this to anyone who loves science fiction without the battles.

Alex Maclinovsky says

I did read it to the end which means it was compelling enough to keep my aversion to abandoning things above the critical level of boredom. The closest analogy I can offer is to the unique genre of Socialist realism which is unique in that instead of exploring the eternal conflict between good and evil is focusing solely on the conflict between good and better. There are no bad guys and the most villainous forces (the politicians and bureaucrats) are just misguided in their efforts to do good and redeem themselves in the end. The only real villain is gravity.

Mitchell says

I kind of expected something tired. Instead this was a fast good read but with echoes of the political climate of today. The setup on the book was really strong, I almost didn't want the journey to start. The ending felt a bit abrupt, effective but too short. For awhile there I didn't think we'd get an ending to this one but it did have a solid one. This book does lean into a series trope, of going too far with not enough resources. But it ties the series together in a nice way without super stating the obvious. It made me wonder if the author had planned this book from the start or tripped over it. In any case it was an enjoyable nice surprise. And might even work if you hadn't read the series - though it wouldn't have as much of a payoff. FWIW this review was for an ARC.

Sara says

I'm hard on Jack McDevitt as I am on all the authors I truly love. I want everything he writes to be amazing. What I think this book made me realize is that amazing can mean different things. McDevitt amazing has always been about amazing reveals and interstellar science that feels like something we could achieve and white knuckle adventures. But all his stories also carry this wonderful sense of positivity. He imbues his writing with the very firm belief that the innate goodness in people will always win out over the bad. His characters often talk about how beings capable of scientific advancements like traveling through space must surely have come to understand the futility of such crude things like war and violence. Its a marvelous idea, a wonderful way to view the universe and one I wish I shared more readily.

My frustration with McDevitt often hangs on this idea. I have so much trouble agreeing with him. That with a great understanding of the world and the universe, the knowledge of how to bend it to our will must surely come wisdom. I want to have his compassion, his optimism that when it really comes down to it we will choose right over easy. But too often I think of the cities in my country, the greatest country in the world, where people can't get clean water to drink, where people can't see a doctor because they can't afford it, where a child can't get a good education because we can't be bothered to pay his teacher a living wage. I think of those things and its too easy to see us a hundred years from now soaring through space then planting out glorious flag on some planet and "educating" its natives in the ways of democracy and the gods we want them to worship so we can reap their world of all its resources. I mean we do it everywhere else.

So I don't know what happened this time as McDevitt took me on a new journey with his brilliant interstellar pilot Priscilla "Hutch" Hutchins. Maybe I was just ripe for a kinder, gentler version of my world. Whatever the reason as the explorers crossing the universe in search of the origins of a mysterious signal, the first real evidence of a technologically advanced civilization other than our own come closer to their answers, I found myself wanting very much for McDevitt to be right. His characters are fighting the good fight. They've bucked the system, rebelled against a government and a people who don't want them to go lest they risk a war with whoever sent the signal. If they're powerful enough to send a message over space and time they're powerful enough to destroy us! Its too risky!

I think what it is really is that I hate that idea that because there is a chance that something bad might happen we shouldn't take the risk. The idea that the unknown isn't something to be explored rather its something to be feared, to hide from. The idea that because someone looks different, speaks differently, believes in a different god or a different way to love they should be hated.

The idea that ignorance is safer is repellent to me.

So I wanted Hutch and her companions to prove them all wrong. I wanted McDevitt to be right. I want him to be right.

There's a simplicity to this story that I don't usually find with his writing. It reads almost like a fable or a fairy tale where a rag tag band of rebels take it upon themselves to determine the fate of an entire planet based entirely on their conviction that there is more good than evil in the universe.

The book is still full of adventure and wonderful moments of excitement, McDevitt's gift for nail biting thrills is made good use of but its really the message at its heart that carried me through to its very satisfying end. Its message is louder than his other books but I think it should be.

Be open to the possibilities of the universe. When a stranger says hello, say hello back and then ask them their name, invite them to sit and tell you their story. Oh god how I wish I could do this.

How I wish we lived in the world McDevitt wrote for us.

John says

The Academy has been shuttered and Priscilla Hutchins (Hutch) is adjusting to life on Earth. Humanity has become fearful of continued space exploration—there's a growing paranoia that someday such expeditions will bring back something too dangerous. The President herself is campaigning for reelection on a platform of ending the space program.

When an astronomer discovers a signal from deep space which clearly indicates the presence of an intelligent, technologically sophisticated alien civilization, he recruits a team to seek out these aliens and Hutch is put in command. But people don't want them to go and the team must race to take off before the government can shut them down.

(Spoiler: They manage to take off anyway.)

Once underway, they discover new planets with signs of civilizations long since dead. They also discover what killed them: a rogue black hole barrelling through space. The black hole is on track to destroy another

planet, this one with an intelligent alien civilization on the cusp of developing advanced technology. Now they have to make contact with these aliens and find a way to save them.

The Long Sunset has all the delights of galaxy-spanning discovery, elements of a gripping race-against-the-clock thriller, and a compelling Big Idea about what alien life might be like. It's a potent mix of ingredients.

And they're all wasted. This is one of the most indifferent novels I read this year.

At the core of this novel, McDevitt offers an idea about alien intelligence and civilization which is genuinely fascinating: he believes that aliens will be just like us—technologically, culturally, in their values and customs, with houses, cars, schools, beach vacations, well-tempered music, religion, etc. Moreover, their history will follow the same trajectory ours did. If you encounter an alien race farther behind on the technological development timeline, their culture will be like stepping back in time to an earlier iteration of human culture.

McDevitt posits salient points to support this idea: the laws of physics are universal and spacefaring requires the development of certain technologies which in turn require iterative progress. There's some merit to his premise and he argues it well.

One can't help notice a couple of problems, though:

His vision of the universally required technological culture is exclusively Western (almost exclusively American, almost exclusively aspirational middle class) and completely fails to acknowledge the vast cultural diversity of our own planet and species. One wonders how historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and the like would react to the reductive implication that all culture is a product of technological development. It's also facile to assume there isn't more than one possible path to technological advancement, even within the strictures of universal physical laws.

But when we put those criticisms aside and accept his premise for the sake of the story, it remains problematic.

The thought that aliens would be just like us is intellectually fascinating but it's a boring dramatic choice. We can ponder it with some philosophical pleasure but as a storytelling mechanism it's bland. There are two first contact scenarios in this book and both of them go nicely. It's all pleasant. Everyone is agreeable and polite and gets along. The problems are mechanical, impersonal. There's no conflict in these encounters.

It could still be a good story—interesting people interacting under interesting circumstances. But it's clear McDevitt doesn't know how to tell this kind of character focused story. It comes across stilted and overly formal. The dialog is mostly characters talking about the situation, so there's less substantive character development than one would hope for. There's nothing personal about any of it.

I enjoy aliens in science fiction primarily for their role as foils and contrasts to humanity. In attempting to envision beings different from us, we reflect on who and what we are in unique ways. By creating aliens who are just like us (indeed, far nicer versions of us) this contrasting, reflective power is lost.

There's a reason McDevitt chose to address first contact this way: the very beginning of the novel establishes that most people on Earth have grown fearful of encountering hostile aliens more powerful than us. The peaceful, non-confrontational first contacts which occur are an answer to this paranoia: "See? There's nothing to worry about."

Structurally, this makes sense. Intellectually, it makes sense. Dramatically, it's weak.

There are two main sources of tension and conflict in this book:

- 1) The impending cosmological cataclysm, as the black hole bears down on the alien world and the race to bring help in time to evacuate them.
- 2) Earthly politics at first threatening to stop the expedition entirely, later threatening to scuttle the alien rescue attempt.

The black hole is a passive conflict, unavoidable, inviolate to the actions of the characters. The only impediment to the rush to evacuate the alien planet is Earthly political obstructionism.

Which means Earthly politics is the *only* source of substantial active conflict in the novel. In which case, McDevitt needs to delve deeply into this political conflict, to mine it for everything he can.

He barely touches it. The political situation on Earth is frequently discussed but there are very few scenes in which political conflict drives the interaction of the characters. There are a couple of scenes in which political conflict is the primary motive force—notably, at the beginning when the expedition launches, and near the end when Hutch meets with the President. But these scenes are mostly short and shallow, and only at the beginning and end of the novel.

It's clear that McDevitt doesn't know how to write good political scenes and wasn't comfortable with them. He doesn't seem to know how to handle this kind of storytelling and gets it over with as quickly as he can. His timorous attempts at it are awkward and unconvincing.

The end result is there's hardly any compelling conflict for most of the novel.

So we end up with a story featuring the exploration of strange planets, a world ending apocalypse, multiple first contacts with intelligent alien civilizations, a race against the clock, deep political conflicts...

And it's dramatically inert and timid.

This is definitely not McDevitt's best work.

Donald McEntee says

Well, there was a big problem, and an eventual solution.

I'd have to say that the overall scope of things was not as wide as previous Academy scenarios.

Nick T. Borrelli says

Click here for full review:

<https://outofthisworldrev.blogspot.co...>

Leather says

If the book is not free from McDevitt's usual flaws (bland characters, trivial details, slowness, lack of credibility on some aspects) *The Long Sunset* is a very good book.

We owe it to a fascinating story from beginning to end, and to a very good ending. While McDevitt uses his count-based plots as always, as usual the space program of humanity is questioned at the beginning of the book, but the space adventure of Hutch and her companions is fantastic, the suspense is well managed, the end is thrilling.

The political and media criticism, always very present in this series, takes once more place in the unfolding of the story (especially at the beginning and at the end). McDevitt has always used the world of the 23rd century to highlight the truth of today, it is often didactic but it is much less boring than in some previous books. (I am thinking in particular of the grueling "Odyssey").

This is probably the best of all the novels of the Academy series and certainly the least frustrating!

Tim Hicks says

Gosh, this could have been written in 1964. Maybe it was. Or it's a tribute. Or a primer for beginning SF readers. Or all of those.

We start with a well-worn old plot: an interstellar ship is ready to go, the government doesn't want it to go, and our heroes do a strictly-by-formula let's-go-anyway exit. We have an FTFTL ship so we can go lots of places (others would say a ship that is coated in narrativium).

Some actual plot-advancing stuff happens as they find things. Time for a search, hop, hop hop, here's a Lost Civilization. Let's take the lander down! It's a bit cold here, but we can breathe it, how convenient. Aliens who are almost like us, with chairs (just like ours despite the residents having tails, think about that) and drawers and a kindergarten and probably comic books and gum under the desks.

Search #2, hop, hop, hop. Aha, there they are! Let's take the lander down! What could go wrong? (reader goes "heh,heh, narrativium again). Oops! Oh well, breathable air and Earthlike temperature, how convenient, and the aliens are really nice. And they have dial telephones, powerboats, churches, and all that, despite being upright dolphins that somehow evolved fingers.

Oh, remember when the author told us they cut some corners in leaving early? I reckon Jack added that after realizing that the crashed lander thing only works if they didn't get around to waterproofing the comm units, and they ALL got wet and NONE of them work. Lucky the frammis repair units stayed dry. BTW, what are we doing landing in a planet in a machine that is so fragile that a frammis might fail at any time, so much so that handy spares are always available like headlight bulbs or fuses? Let's face it, the lander crashed because the plot needed it to crash.

OK, we're flying again. Another search. So let's go to the Goldilocks formula like so many novels before us. This one's too big, this one's too small, now let's show off our SF chops: this one's tidally-locked, this one has a binary star so it's unstable, this one's all volcanoed out, ... oh look! This one's ju-u-ust right. Let's take the lander down! No need for discussion, Hutch decides and we're all cool because we know she always gets

our asses out somehow.

OK, discussion has been productive, let's go back to Earth, where, as in all SF, the politicians and administrators are ALL corrupt and incompetent (although somehow they built intergalactic FTFTL, but SF books are always set in the bad-leaders years). Let's take the lander down! What could go wrong?

And we end with the story leaking to the media, as in about 50 other SF novels and probably a couple in THIS SERIES. Sigh.

HOWEVER. Underneath all that lazy plotting and lazy writing and lazy worldbuilding there hides a quite reasonable discussion of a scenario. Thing A threatened place B, they fled and left a message that we found, we look for B and find C, which is threatened by A. Can we help? Should we? Will our Evil Overlords let us? Should they?

Hmm, as I type this it reminds me remarkably of another recent read.
This is Robert Heinlein writing The Three Body Problem!

Anyway, I didn't expect a groundbreaking Nebula winner, and I didn't get it. It's a decent read.
