



The Shell Collector

Hugh Howey

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The ocean is dying. The sea is growing warmer and is gradually rising. Seashells have become so rare that collecting them is now a national obsession. Flawless specimens sell like priceless works of art. Families hunt the tideline in the dark of night with flashlights. Crowds gather on beaches at the lowest of tides, hoping to get lucky.

Supreme among these collectors is Ness Wilde, CEO of Ocean Oil. Ness owns many of the best beaches, and he keeps them to himself. It's his fault the world turned out this way. And I aim to destroy him.

My name is Maya Walsh. You might be familiar with my shelling column in the Times. I was working on a series of pieces about Mr. Wilde, when out of the blue, he called. He says he wants to talk. But I don't think he's going to like what I have to say.

The Shell Collector Details

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From Reader Review The Shell Collector for online ebook

Laurie Jameson says

If you're looking for a sci fi fix, this is not it. If you're looking to step out and try something a little different, you've found it. Howey's love for the ocean and concern for our environment shines through and he gives it to you in an easily digestible way. He also gives you a love story to round it out. The only reason I gave this 4 stars instead of 5 is because I figured out where this story was going and how it would end; I like to be surprised.

Nathaniel says

OK, you're going to have to forgive me but this review is going to be almost entirely political. If that's not your thing, here's the short version.

This book is a major departure from Sand Omnibus (which I've read) and Wool (which I've heard about but haven't read yet). Both were action-oriented, post-apocalyptic novels. By contrast, The Shell Collector is near-future sci-fi to the point of not really being sci-fi at all. It's also more experimental, in the sense that it is working much harder at a literary angle and downplaying the genre-intensive aspects of sci-fi.

To me, it read like an experiment that was promising but not entirely successful. The happy-ending resolution didn't match the literary aspirations and the prose / description wasn't quite strong enough to sustain the largely plot-less story. But passages were quite good, characterization was decently strong, and there's definite potential.

OK, now the politics.

Politically speaking this is about the weirdest book I've ever read.

The best way to describe it is to reference this astute blog post about American partisanship: I Can Tolerate Anything Except the Outgroup That post divides the US into tribes: red (socially and fiscally conservative), blue (socially and fiscally liberal) and gray (fiscally conservative, socially liberal). The gray tribe is the smallest, by the way, and is more often than not associated with the blue tribe.

Well, this book is like an anthem of the gray tribe. It prizes libertarian values like individualism, free enterprise, objectivity, resourcefulness, science and (perversely) a kind of elitism that sneers at ordinary people. Howey goes out of his way--it's subtle but distinct--to take shots at the red tribe (people who oppose the protagonist out of religious dogma) and the blue tribe (people who oppose the protagonist as a matter of an intrusive big government that colludes with corporate interests). None of that is really weird, though.

The weirdness comes in the fact that a major theme of the book is that rich tycoons who bring the world to the edge of collapse (via rising sea levels and ocean salinity) are people, too. Seriously, that's the major point. It seems to channel Ayn Rand at times in the extent to which it goes out of its way to defend billionaires who are seen as titanic, tragic, misunderstood heroes.

Consider the fact that, for example, it takes anthropic global warming seriously (major species die-offs, flooding of New York City, etc.), but then works hard to (1) absolve corporations of any blame and (2) argue

that the solution is... more science. I agree with that idea, more or less, but for me it's a practical matter. In this book it seems personal.

Which also gave the book some weird MRA (Men's Rights Activist) vibes. The viewpoint character is a female reporter, but she seems to exist pretty much exclusively to serve the interests of the book's true hero: Ness. (Named after the Loch Ness Monster because his billionaire father knew that his son would be hated and envied--treated like a monster--because of his riches.) Ness basically does everything right at every step throughout the entire novel: he is better looking, stronger, smarter, purer, and has suffered more and done more good than anyone else in the book. Or, as far as we can tell, the world. (Except maybe his granddad, another tortured-genius-bleeding-heart billionaire.)

The reporter exists basically to be wrong about everything ever. And also to be overwhelmed by her attraction to Ness, of course. That too. Then later on to come to completely the wrong conclusion and try to ruin everything, but it's OK because eventually they get married and she does, in the end, give him the (painfully obvious) solution to the world's problem.

All of which might make it sound as though I dislike the book, but it has real moments of very genuine warmth. The protagonist's relationship with Ness's daughter (from a previous marriage) is really sweet. Her interaction with Ness's ex-wife is not sweet, but is certainly well-written and very interesting. Howey can write. There's no doubt of that.

But, stepping back from the politics for a moment, the book really does suffer from the protagonist having nothing significant to do. There are never really any substantial stakes in the book, never any real tension, never any reason to turn the page and see what happens next. I mean, there is a romantic angle, but it is also just weird. It's mostly weird because of how slavishly conventional and chaste it is, which are normally things that strike my fancy (if for their rarity if not the fact that I'm a sucker for virtue in the old fashioned sense), but in this case the blithe disregard of Ness's relationship with her biological mom (Ness's ex-wife) is a very jarring counter-point to the otherwise utterly conventional "we're a happy family" ending. It's like 1/2 of the sentiments of a traditionalist are there, but the other 1/2 has been amputated. It's just... weird.

But, as I said, the weirdest element is definitely the idea that we have to send an ecologically-conscious reporter to go and learn that she has been horribly maligning this billionaire family that made their fortune drilling, refining, and selling the oil that literally killed the oceans. It's *everyone else's fault* for being mean and judgmental and not realizing how *special* Ness is. Oh, and yes, he uses his billions to save the world more or less single-handedly, although by that point in the story you're not sure if anyone else in the world is worth saving. Except the viewpoint character (I really can't remember her name) and the hired help, because they are loyal to Ness and loyalty to Ness is the ultimate test of good guys and bad guys in this book.

Very strange. Again and again I thought: am I reading this right? I was. And so, for novelty alone, I'm sort of glad this book is out there.

And now I'm curious to see how his fans have reacted to this very odd departure from his books thus far.

Beth says

Not typical Hugh Howey fare...too much like a romance novel which is just not my thing.

Shilpi Goel says

Hugh Howey, you're not unlike an octopus. Your tentacles not only have the potential to reach out across genres, but also have enviable grasping power. And oh, just to stretch this out --- all that romance in the "The Shell Collector" is too much for one heart; you too, my friend, have three hearts.

Okay, with that lame attempt to laud Howey, let me be a bit more sensible and say, "Kudos!".

Howey successfully ventured into the steamy land of romance with this book, but he didn't leave his own familiar (pre/during/post) apocalyptic world far behind. In "The Shell Collector", the world is in a bad shape, but it hasn't quite ended. The water bodies are warmer and seashells are precious commodity. A reporter, Maya Walsh, is on a quest to get the story behind Ness Wilde, a rich oil man who apparently has had a part in destroying the world. Maya and Ness are thrown in together, and sparks fly.

I usually steer clear of reviewing any romance books I end up reading, partly because they're all very predictable and have the same old familiar plots. What'd I say about them that hasn't been said before? If I were to be really critical, I'd say that I see those familiar elements in "The Shell Collector" as well --- there's a rich, misunderstood guy, his young, naive daughter, and an idealistic, I'm-on-truth's-warpath woman. Yes, there's definitely more meat in the plot than your standard romance books, and the backdrop of the whole story is intriguing. However, I refuse to be overly critical. Romance books are like fairy tales for grown-ups; we all know how they are going to end, but it's the getting there that tells a passably okay book apart from an excellent one. "The Shell Collector" falls resoundingly in the excellent spectrum.

I've always appreciated Howey's ability to write his books from the perspective of a female character (Juliette from Wool, Molly Fyde, etc.). However, somewhere in the middle of the book, I couldn't quite identify with Maya all that well; she seemed a bit remote. This little bit aside, I enjoyed "The Shell Collector" immensely. I'm looking forward to more meatier romances from Howey. Who knows, he might end up writing a nice whodunnit as well!

Ellie says

I've been a massive Hugh Howey fan since a friend insisted I read the best-selling dystopian series, Wool. I asked the same question so many people ask me, 'Why is it called Wool?' I received the same answer I always give, 'Read the book!'. To answer that question would be to give away one of the greatest openings to a book I've ever read. So, The Shell Collector was always a book I was going to read. What I didn't expect was to feel such a strong affinity for it.

Unlike his other darker works of fiction, where the remains of humanity live in underground silos (Wool, Dust, and Shift) or sand-dive for the ancient relics of long-buried cities (Sand), The Shell Collector is a much lighter read. There's still the ecological disaster - the story takes place in the near future, where the oceans have warmed and seashells are virtually non-existent - but there's also mystery and romance. Howey manages to skilfully blend all three genres.

It would be easy to say the relationship between the principle characters - Ness Wilde, CEO of Ocean Oil,

and Maya Walsh, avid shell collector and environmentalist - is what this book is about. In a way that is of course true, but The Shell Collector is so much more than a romantic mystery. It's an environmental warning and call for action. Not unlike the other dystopian futures he has created before, the future he envisions here is not totally beyond the realms of possibility. The warnings of the climate change scientists have come true, with dire consequences for the world's oceans.

It's also Howey's homage to the oceans and his own experiences with both the sea and shell collecting, and it's for that reason that I felt such a strong affinity for the story he weaved. Having lived next to the sea for most of my life, I felt connected to this book in a much deeper way than his others. He took me back to what it felt like to search for and collect seashells, and left me feeling incredibly lucky to live within a five-minute walk of the Atlantic ocean. It felt like the book I was waiting for him to write.

Sarah says

I am angry at Hugh Howey for luring me into an atrocious romance novel when he promised a semi-dystopian crime. Why would you do this to me Hugh? You betrayed me! Now, any time I read one of your books, I have to ask myself if this is a romance in disguise.

Before I begin, a brief synopsis of how the novel begins its plot. Maya Walsh, a journalist, is writing about the family of Ness Wilde, who is incredibly rich due to oil and his massive shell collection. The world is flooded, and shells are rare. Ness asks for an exclusive interview with her, which she turns down. She then gets a call from the FBI asking her to help her investigate Ness because they believe he is creating fake shells. This also ties into a murder they are investigating.

All of this presents as an intriguing mystery for our heroine to unravel.

Too bad Maya is terrible at her job, and Howey threw up his hands in the air in regards to carrying out the plot and solving the mystery fully.

There were many things that irked me about this novel, and I have created a list of them. Hopefully this will serve as a warning to any of you before you decide that you'd like to give it a shot.

1. Why are shells so valuable? Where did they all go? What impact is this having on the environment? - I hope these questions never pop up in your head, because Howey doesn't answer them. He just hopes you'll accept them as facts.
2. What about other sea life? Another good question. Too bad these is no answer.
3. There is a man named Ness, who was named (view spoiler)
4. Howey uses a lot of shell metaphors. Maya hates her shell, she hides in a shell, Ness's whole facade is a shell, relationships are shells, the TMNT are heroes in a half shell, etc. etc.
5. There is a prolonged and unrealistic scene where the main character bonds with Ness's daughter, never asking questions about her dad that might be relevant to the case.
6. It turns into a romance novel for no good reason, and Maya seems to throw many of her career duties out

the window. (view spoiler)

7. Maya acts like 32 is crazy old.

8. Ness is a big harmless lug the whole novel, and regardless, at one point in the novel (view spoiler)

9. The murder (view spoiler)

10. Maya, who apparently loves the sea, is taken into the down deeps with Ness in a sub. Instead of marveling about how cool it is to be under the sea in the sub, the two disrobe and have a poorly written make out scene. She then gushes on and on about making out with Ness, and sounded like a girl half her age.

I feel like ten reasons should be enough to dissuade you from giving this book the time of day. Consider yourself warned.

Steve says

4.5 stars

This was nothing at all like any previous Hugh Howey book I've read thus far. More a romance and character study than an apocalyptic recovery story, it was very well-written. The narrator was perfect for the story, too, and the Audible version was very well done.

Kayla Thomas says

I have very mixed feelings about this book. Hugh took a crack at romance, and maybe underestimated the genre. I'm a huge Hugh fan, so this is hard to write, but he left a lot of unanswered questions. Did Maya just abandon her career with the New York Times to live with Ness and write a book? How did she get out of her assignment with the FBI? Though I think passion can develop quickly between a man and a woman, especially in a book, I'm not sold on the quick attachment between Maya and Ness's twelve-year-old daughter. The first quarter of the book had me confused about why shells mattered, if ness was an old man, and if the mystery was whether or not Ness killed a guy. I'm still wondering why that man's death was even an issue!

While there was a lot of characteristic beautiful Hugh Howey prose, and thought provoking/quotable lines, I was left wanting and looking for a more fleshed out story.

Susan Copple says

The Shell Collector ... not my cup of tea

I was mesmerized and immediately drawn in to the beginning of this story. The promise of a time when things in the world were not like they used to be -- Discovering and finding sea shells that have all but disappeared in the world. A top notch reporter working on stories to uncover the real truth behind the oil

family who for generations may have caused the demise of the sea wildlife. Then suddenly, the story takes a big left turn and the story gets lost in romantic flights halfway around the world, love in a 2-man submarine at a depth of 20,000 feet, private islands private jets, research ships and helicopters. Yawn. There is still a plot, and many emotional outbreaks. Lots of ragged emotion, hyperventilating and tears. Champagne in bed too. Yawn yawn. The story had such promise. I was looking for magic. I wanted to know more about shelling, more about the treasures that were gone, and the treasures that were left behind. Maybe I was looking for a story like 'Sand', but one that involves water instead of sand. This just felt like a perky romance story. I am a Hugh Howey fan, and read most everything he publishes. This story just didn't satisfy.

Matt says

I probably would have given this book 2 stars had the jacket description actually described what the book was about however, it was entirely misleading. This is a romance book, and a boring one at that, although, I will be the first to admit that I have no interest in the genre to begin with.

The description led me to believe that this was going to be some kind of dystopian mystery. It was not. Don't fool yourself if you think it will be because you will be sorely disappointed.

For clarity, I generally do not read reviews before picking something up because I don't want to walk into a book with any preconceived notions. However, it sounds like I need to change my habits because the last few books I have read I could have avoided, had I read some reviews beforehand.

I picked this book up for four reasons: 1) I've heard that Howey's Wool / Silo Series is pretty good, so I tried to give him a try; 2) It had good ratings (again, I didn't read reviews); 3) the jacket description had me intrigued; and 4) It was cheap on Audible and I DIDN'T find it in the romance section.

Spoilers follow, or rather, a series of points as to why this book was a waste of my time.

(view spoiler)

Paul says

Fifty Shades of Shells. Well not quite but still a strange shift for Hugh Howey to move from his post apocalyptic sci-fi to something a bit softer and with a strong romance theme in there.

Still post apocalyptic to some degree but a much smaller slower apocalypse, basically set in the near future where sea levels and temperatures have risen by quite a bit, but aside from that a lot of it's the same just with most life in the sea wiped out and shells highly collectable and expensive because of this.

The plot revolves around a female journalist spending a week with one of the villains of climate change, an oil mogul from a long line of oil moguls as he tries to change her mind on a piece she wrote about his Grandfather and to show his own progress.

Quite an interesting environmental piece. Not as action packed or dark as the Silo or Sand books but still interesting and always good to see an author try something new.

Larry Silvey says

This could have been much more

HH writes books that suck you into the story. You feel for the characters. This book's subject matter could've done the same. Our heroine has more baggage than a freshman going to go off to college. She does not elevate herself to hero status. We do not learn how Ness and his ancestors became scoundrels but that they were despised by society. There is no adventure here. Basically this is a so-so romance novel with several very good moral and philosophical lines.

Phryne says

Hugh Howey is one of my favourite authors of science fiction but in this book he ventures into the genre of Romance - not one of my favourites by a long shot! So I approached this book with some trepidation. As it turns out the science fiction is still there the story being set in a world where the oceans have been ruined and shells have become something precious. This was good. However the romance was so horribly predictable that I would be quite prepared to discover Howey was having a joke at our expense. The hero is incredibly rich and good looking with a stupid name, the heroine is feisty and also amazingly good looking but doesn't know it yet. They meet, are more attracted to each other than is feasible at first sight, fall in love, engage in ridiculously romantic sex, are separated by a foolish misunderstanding and get back together in the nick of time to live happily ever after. Three stars because I read it to the end and because the silly story line was set in an excellent background. I want to know more about that watery world where city underground train lines flood during high tides and people splash through sea water in city streets to get to work.

Ashley says

Hugh Howey invents curious, future worlds where people live and work for centuries in silos beneath a toxic surface (Wool, Shift, and Dust). Worlds where people surf over deserts that have smothered cities, diving in

as survival warrants the pilfering of long-abandoned wares (Sand). And, more contiguous, where people face the predicament of rising waters and coastlines creeping into the sea.

Okay—so in none of Howey’s worlds would anyone want to live. But once you start reading, you never want to leave. *The Shell Collector* is set more than a quarter century away on the coast of Maine and in a submerged New York City. It brings the usually speculative and remote welfare-of-your-great-grandkids argument on climate change, to the table. But unlike, say, the hard-hitting image of water that’s “a hand sweeping everything from the table” in Jim Shephard’s “*The Netherlands Lives with Water*,” Howey’s conservationism here is more subtle. This story is more about the characters—Ness Wilde and Maya Walsh, Holly, Special Agent Stanley Cooper, and a generation of what could be our future grandkids coping with disappearing shores. And because these characters are convincing and realistic individuals, like all Howey’s characters, they have to point their fingers somewhere—the past.

So they place blame on the closest they have: Ness Wilde. Wilde is the CEO of Ocean Oil, and he and his patrilineage of CEOs of Ocean Oil have profited from the rising levels, temperatures, and acidity of the seas for decades. They’ve contributed to countless dying oceanic species while hording their share of everyone’s most esteemed and yet elusive treasure: seashells.

Maya Walsh, an avid shell collector herself as well as a contributor for the Times, is determined to bring to light these wrongdoings—and not just the blood on Wilde’s hands of endangered seashells and marine life. She has the rare opportunity to interview this infamous man, and she dives in. Scuba suit and all.

The Shell Collector is stirring and beautiful. It captures environmental problems and catastrophes we’re familiar with today, especially along the Eastern seaboard, but exacerbated over decades. And yet we see the resilience of humanity through qualities like forgiveness and empathy. The way Howey uses environmental issues as an impetus for actualizing certain human emotions, connections, and insights reminds me of how Karen Thompson Walker did it with *The Age of Miracles*. In this novel, a slowing of the earth’s rotation affects not only time, sleep cycles, gravity, tides, and animal migrations. It’s more about self-realizations, relationships, and legacies. So too is *The Shell Collector*.

The science fiction, activism, romance, race and heredity, shell collecting—none of it is heavy-handed in this novel. Even the occasional torrent of shelling verbiage like sozon’s cones and conchs and lace murexes flows with the storyline. By and large, the novel is an authentic balance and a cohesive, well-researched piece, written in a first-person female voice that’s immediate and credible. Here Howey demonstrates flexibility of narrative and plot as well as shares his personal hobby of shelling he took up while living in North Carolina.

And the imagery is unforgettable. Sentences are poignant, drawing us in with, “My earliest memory of the beach is of it being a harsh place for a wheelchair.” Others like, “They don’t belong here, the palms...perhaps these are million-dollar annuals whooshing by”; “No longer beautiful backdrops skirting the city, [the rivers] became a coiled threat”; and “Hey. The story isn’t over yet. Keep reading,” kept me reading. Even through the Acknowledgements.

The Shell Collector is a new genre for Howey. He calls it “something like an environmental thriller romance with a sci-fi dystopian aftertaste.” But once again, he immerses his readers with layers of themes, imagery, and mystery to deliver a story that’s truly profound.

- Ashley O’Brien, Copywriter and Freelance Writer in Massachusetts and Rhode Island

Rebecca Carter says

I read Hugh Howey's Wool trilogy a few years ago, and loved it so much I felt too much trepidation to read another of his books, incase it didn't live up to the same expectations. After a few lackluster reads I decided it was time to read more by an author I find intriguing. The Shell Collector is an ecological dystopian novel with a difference. I wasn't sure what to expect when I began reading it, it's different to the style of Wool in many ways (it's minus the Wool similarity to Game of Thrones of characters suddenly falling off this mortal coil), but it's excellent in its own way.

This is only my fourth Howey book (if you count the Wool trilogy individually), therefore I don't have many comparisons as to how this measures up to his usual style. I did read other reviews online before I bought this, with some commentators not impressed that this had a romance storyline running through it and romance is their least favourite genre. I read most genres, so this didn't worry me, and in comparison to other books the romance is negligible for the first 50% of the book. However, I can understand how some of the fans of Wool who avoid the romance genre may feel luke warm towards this book, and that if you don't particularly enjoy romance storylines and are only a die hard dystopian fan, then this book may not be your cup of tea.

The concept of the story is set at some undetermined (the year is revealed at one later on point in the book, but not the century) point in the future, where the oceans are dying, marine and bird life bordering on extinction and sea levels rising at rapid rates. Seashells have become rare and invaluable collectors items, with most of the worlds beaches pillaged clean of them.

He doesn't go into too much detail about how this is affecting human life and people still seem to be living relatively normal existences, just with the threat of a world heading into a climate meltdown with the sea levels rising and mass extinction of animals/mammals/sea life. Given what is happening today, this is a believable and scary storyline which grips the reader and makes you wonder if the damage our own planet is undergoing is reversible. It's not set so far into the future and is not so much dystopian fiction, as this could actually be us in another 50-100 years non fiction unless something changes.

I won't say too much more about the premise of the book - that is easily read on the description - apart from the story revolves around a female reporter who finds herself investigating and interviewing the rich, powerful, yet elusive man (the heir of a huge oil drilling corporation) whose family she deems responsible for much of the damage caused to the oceans.

The plot is simple, yet riveting. Probably because it is easy to imagine this world actually occurring in not so many years in the future. It would be a perfect beach read for the northern hemisphere summer (it's winter here in the southern half), with vivid descriptions of beaches, crashing waves and sea shells.

I give this book 4.5 stars, although because of the Goodreads system, I'll round it up to 5 rather than down to 4. Hugh's shown he can be an author with diversity in his writing style by trying out new genres and has produced another super interesting book touching on topical matters.

Sonja Arlow says

I have read 11 of this author's books... ELEVEN... so clearly I am a fan of his work. But with this one I could not feel the unique magic he always weaves around his stories.

Kudos to Mr Howey for trying something new and write outside his comfort zone but the problem I have with romance novels is that 99% of them follow the same predictable recipe and this one was no exception:

- 1) Our male lead is devilishly attractive, highly successful/rich/damaged but with a heart of gold under his cold persona
- 2) Our heroine is ballsy, driven and more beautiful than she realizes
- 3) Then a misunderstanding/betrayal almost destroys their budding romance but this gets resolved just in time.....
- 4) And they live happily ever after

I've had my fill of Nora Roberts books for a lifetime and because I know this author could have done so much more with this story I cannot give a high rating.

Am I still a fan of Hugh Howey? You betcha

Will I read more of his work? Yes but not before I can find out what genre it falls into.

Paula says

Wow, I loved the Silo books, but this was unfortunately an incredible FAIL.

Although the premise of the book is to present a future greatly impacted by climate change, the reader comes away with the impression that there are only a few inconveniences: flooding (but we can invest in big projects to protect large cities and people on the coasts have to move, big deal) and wildlife extinction (leading to the main character's unconvincing nostalgic thoughts about the disappearance of shell fish and of seagulls when she goes to the beach, but no serious consequences). Seriously? No mention at all of major impacts on the human food chain, water shortages, massive migration, resource wars?

I started reading expecting good sci-fi, and all I got was this ridiculous romance novel. The Love Interest "has more money than God", is super hunky, has a heart of gold, is using (part of) his ridiculous wealth to save the world, AND falls madly in love with the main character.

Paul Hancock says

In Wool, Shift, and Dust, Hugh Howey showed us his mastery of a future in which humanity has caused its own downfall. He told complicated stories of a far future that we can deflect as being truly fiction. In the shell collector, Howey tells a less dramatic yet much more disturbing tale of a not so distant future. This future is more disturbing, not because of its magnitude, but because it is such a believable extrapolation of today's world.

The shell collector tells the story of a NY Times reporter, trying to dig up some dirt on an oil magnate called Ness. The setting is a world in which shells have become a most valuable commodity, not for their beauty, but for their rarity, for the animals which create these shells as their homes have become extinct.

This story combines the all too familiar stories of: big oil, political lobbying, fear of the 'un-natural', and public opinion gone wrong. Though these stories are familiar, they are brought together to tell a new story of caution in more ways than you might expect.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. At times it was heartbreakingly beautiful, and nostalgic, not always at the same time, but always with an intensity that made me feel as well as think.

Perceptive says

This has got to be one of the most boring messes ever disseminated via kilobytes.

First, let's get one thing straight: THIS ISN'T A ROMANCE. It's not women's fiction. It's not a convincing dystopian-set novel. The science in it is laughably bad, so it's not SF. It's good for several laughs, however.

All the reviews blaming the genre for the book's suckage? You missed the sole culprit: the book sucks because the writing sucks. But thanks, Hugh Howey. By using the most hackneyed, eye rolling cliched tropes and writing first person present tense prose so breathless and overwritten that Harlequin would have rejected you within three pages, you only confirmed petty prejudices and biases against the genre.

On the other hand, the genre is doing just fine as it is, so perhaps it's for the best there will be no crossover between audiences.

The Shell Collector is set on the East Coast of the US in an undefined time period (89% of the way through the book, we finally discover the year is 2040) when rising tides have decimated the coasts and major seaside cities rely on levees to protect them. This is apparently the result not of global warming, not of a systemic abuse of the environment, but because one single oil company did...something...that caused the sea to rise and sea life to die off. Well, some sea life. Actually, for a book about depleted oceans, an awful lot of marine animals make an appearance.

Shells are now, like, super rare and there's a Dutch tulip mania surrounding them. To the point that if a few dozen shells make their way into the world, it will crash the global economy. Or something like that. The world building in this book is sketchy at best, illogical and highly unscientific at worst (which is any time the reader stops to think about it). To begin, the food chain repercussions aren't even touched on.

Life seems to go on as absolutely normal, the only difference being inconvenienced bridge-and-tunnel New Yorkers may have to wear galoshes to commute. Poor New Yorkers. Technology remains exactly the same as 2015 if not devolving backward, to the point where Our Heroine slams down a newspaper on her editor's desk like it's 1940 and she's Hildy Johnson. And she knows her articles are being read because people held actual newspapers on the commuter trains instead of staring at their screens. Apparently in 2040, no one will read newspapers on screens like they do, oh, right now.

Our Heroine is Maya, a thirty-two year old mixed race (her description) woman. Maya is a divorcee, whose marriage broke up nine years ago when her premature daughter didn't survive birth. Which is truly sad. It's beyond horrible to lose a child. But...she was twenty-three at the time and there is no mention of infertility or complications that would keep her from conceiving and bearing a future child. Yet Maya is convinced she will never ever have a child, ever. And that makes her wax (and wax) maudlin. Because women, we're broken and useless and empty inside if we don't have our own biological children, amirite? We can't possibly

have other value or form other relationships or be happy making a life for our single, barren selves.

Also, as a child Maya was horribly teased for being mixed race so she feels ugly and in need of a new "shell" (oy, the marine metaphors and similes in the book - there must be at least one if not more per page) until the (white) hero tells her she is beautiful, natch.

(He also tells her women half her age must envy her body - so still maturing sixteen year olds are supposed to be jealous of her? Ick).

Maya is a marine biologist who wrote a renowned column on shelling but who now works as an ace investigative reporter. It's a good thing we are told these things, because in the course of the novel she is shown to be terrible at all of them. She's a marine biologist who can't recognize a specimen case and who is shocked, I say, SHOCKED to learn that sea life is possible, to quote *The Little Mermaid*, fathoms below. I guess the Discovery Channel and/or PBS don't make it to the year 2040. And she's an investigative reporter who refuses to listen to voicemail or read her texts because, yeah, those aren't necessary in her line of work at all.

Maya wrote an absolutely brilliant exposé, if she does say so herself, on four generations of the Wilde family, who own Ocean Oil and apparently single-handedly cause the ecological sorta-but-not-really disaster that appears to have no real consequences for the world except for making galoshes manufacturers really happy. Oh, there's some reference to the Wilde grandfather channeling his inner Gene Hackman as Lex Luthor and buying up near-coastal land so he'd own all the beaches when the seas rose, but otherwise, again, the ocean thing is barely touched on. Still, her first article - on the great-grandfather - caused the current Wilde male, first name Ness (view spoiler) to get in touch and offer her an exclusive interview.

Yes, people, it's the "reclusive, enigmatic billionaire grants plucky heroine an interview" time again! Roll eyes.

But Maya doesn't have to worry about her virtue. While Ness, of course, has Big Secrets, they are nowhere as naughty as Christian Grey's. In fact, the only character trait he shares with Christian is the creepy, stalkerish tendency to watch females while they're asleep and to never let them out of his sight. (Dear Authors: characters who exhibit latent Ted Bundy traits are NOT sexy. Stop it. Now).

Ness is, in fact, among one of the most beta heroes put on paper. He cries at the drop of a hat and is unfailingly passive. We're told he's a playboy who loves 'em and leave 'em, but we're shown a milquetoast. Maya, on the other hand, is abrasive, rude and aggressive. I'd enjoy the flipping of the clichéd gender stereotypes if it felt like an intentional author choice, or if the characters approached three dimensions. But despite being in Maya's head in first person present tense, neither character reads as authentic.

An interview with the elusive Wilde just falling into her lap isn't enough for Maya. Extra convincing comes in the form of FBI Special Agent Cooper, who I assume enjoys a slice of cherry pie and a damn fine cup of coffee every now and then (thankfully, there were no dancing dwarves in the book). Cooper shows Maya three perfect lace murex shells, which would apparently be worth millions on the open shell market. They both immediately conclude that Ness boy must be up to no good! What motive an oil billionaire who owns most of the beachfront property and possesses a museum-worthy collection of shells would have for counterfeiting and selling new shells is never really touched on.

So now Maya is wearing a wire for her interview. When she meets Ness, I think the reader is supposed to see the sparks flying, but two characters with less chemistry on the page would be hard to find. Yadda yadda,

Maya finds herself continually thrown in Ness's company, and a relationship of sorts forms.

I say "of sorts" because they are both aware Maya is a journalist and Ness is her subject. Although, for someone who ASKED for a reporter to come out and get the real story, Ness is unaccountably coy. He insists on keeping things mysterious and cryptic, for no other other reason except if he told her upfront, there would be no story. So Maya (and the reader) is dragged from one watery setting to another for some basic lessons in marine biology.

To prove Maya is utter rubbish at her job, as soon as Ness is about to tell her His Big Secret about the shells, she decides to instead jump him, out of blue, while they are far below surface in a deep sea submersible. But no sex. Oh no. This book is as coy about sex as Ness is about his activities. This leads us to eye-rolling narration such as:

The frenetic energy is gone, replaced by a comfortable caressing, a writhing embrace, a pleasurable squirming. I wrap my arms around him and squeeze. I kiss his neck.

"Maya," Ness whispers in my ear. If there is more, it is lost as he buries his head in my shoulder. The steel shell around us groans. We are the torus inside. There is no space or time. No concept of being. Just a floating feeling, a sense of escape and flying, another Icarus kiss, completely free, the empty cosmos around us, exploring each other there at the bottom of the sea.

It's the prose a teenager writes for English Comp 101 thinking he is being erudite and profound when in actuality it's overwritten, pretentious and rather nonsensical ("Icarus kiss?!").

So after their bout of "comfortable, writhing, squirming" embraces, Maya and Ness go to his Caribbean island hideaway for no story reason other than it makes a "romantic" setting. (view spoiler).

And then we're back at Ness's Maine mansion (pun intended) for the denouement, which is straight out of the most hackneyed suspense novel ever. Complete with Maya fearful for her life even though Ness has been nothing but laid back and rather submissive since the beginning. Only to discover, of course, that's it's all One Big Misunderstanding that would have been cleared up in Chapter Three if it weren't for Ness's inexplicable reticence to come clean and Maya's shoddy reporter instincts.

The book is a mishmash of bad romance tropes, all used in their most blunt, anvil-like and cliched forms. To make matters worse, the characters do not earn their romance novel happy ever after ending. (view spoiler)

And Ness's Big Secret? Here's a hint: apparently the Jurassic Park/World franchise didn't survive into 2040, either.

In fact, the book seems to have a very...interesting...message: Don't worry about global warming, boys and girls. Don't worry about rising sea levels. Don't worry about species extinction and mass life die-offs. Just invest in galoshes and near-coastal land and you'll be peachy keen. Nature has a way of righting itself and

even if it doesn't, kindly billionaire philanthropists, without any oversight or regulation or checks/balances, will help it along because they're just swell people that way.

Thanks, but no thanks.

Will Swardstrom says

Another Hugh Howey book. Another vision of the future.

This time out, however, the future isn't so bleak and isn't a terrifying place to be. In fact, in *The Shell Collector*, the world he's created has been decimated by rising sea levels, but the story is bright and hopeful, a stark contrast to the previous trips to the future we've taken with him.

I really enjoyed *The Shell Collector* as a speculative fiction romance, featuring Maya Walsh as the intrepid reporter, trying to unearth the truth about Ness Wilde, the CEO of Ocean Oil. Wilde and his family are pariahs because of the earth's condition; sea levels rose in no small part to the ways the Wildes have abused the earth's resources over the years. But, as she gets to know Ness, she discovers that the story she is planning does not accurately paint him or his family. That there is far more behind the man.

Throughout it all is a search for elusive shells, which have become collector's items and currency in this futuristic society when shells have all become rare due to the ocean conditions.

This book is vastly different than anything I've seen from Howey before, but there are themes that he has certainly tapped into again. A prominent one is going beneath the surface of the earth. In *WOOL*, the deeper the characters went, the more the sparks of rebellion grew. In *Sand*, the deeper the divers went, the more death and despair crept in. In both, claustrophobia was present, but the way out was usually through death. In *The Shell Collector*, Howey again takes our characters deep—this time to the ocean's floor to see the creation of new life in the volcanic hearth in the depths of the Atlantic Ocean. Claustrophobia is present, but this time, our characters experience hope and healing. The shells that each of them are for different reasons, are given new life in a submarine at the bottom of the world, and they discover each other in the process.

Unlike in *WOOL* or *Sand*, where the depths of the earth usually lead to death, Howey utilizes the intense pressure to create love and affection between our protagonists.

Science fiction plays a role in this book, to be sure, but it is a light one. Howey has created a romance novel and a good one at that. The plot was consistently pushed along by twists and turns, but wasn't bogged down by unnecessary points where Howey could have devolved the story to erotica levels. Howey once again shows he knows how to write, no matter the genre or convention. Well done!
