



Helliconia Winter

Brian W. Aldiss

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This is the final volume of the Helliconia Trilogy -- a monumental saga that goes beyond anything yet created by this master among today's imaginative writers. The centuries-long winter of the Great Year on Helliconia is upon us, and the Oligarch is taking harsh measures to ensure the survival of the people of the bleak Northern continent of Sibornal. Behind the battle with which the novel opens lies an act of unparalleled treachery. But the plague is coming on the wings of winter and the Oligarch's will is set against it -- and against the phagors, humanity's ancient enemies, who carry the plague with them.

Helliconia Winter Details

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From Reader Review Helliconia Winter for online ebook

Ian says

This probably ought to be called "Autumn" rather than "Winter" as it mostly concerns the Sibornalese civilisation's preparations for the forthcoming "Weyr"-winter, rather than life in the depths of the planets centuries long "mini ice-age". Technology hasn't quite advanced as far as one would hope either; this is a few centuries after Summer and I'd have thought they'd have got as far as steam engines (there is a very brief mention of some primitive railways) if not electricity, but they aren't quite there and will obviously be knocked back again by the deteriorating conditions. Given that this is around 500 years after "Summer" I'd have thought they'd have got as far as the 19th Century but they seem to be stuck in around the 17th - there has also not been a religious reformation and God the Azoiaxix still reigns supreme.

The first half of this is another great adventure yarn - we have the battle of Isturiacha, the retreat and then the dash along the coast before the challenges of the journey up to Kharnabar. We also have the grotesque challenges of the Fat Death and the tyranny of the Oligarch. This is all enjoyable and a lot less bogged down with politics than Summer. However, the second half is dominated by asides covering deteriorating conditions on the Avernus and indeed a lot of future history, and philosophy, on Earth itself.

I found the Earth stuff in particular getting in the way of the main story. It also dates the book badly - lots of 1980s obsessions with nuclear war and Gaia. A similar phase now may include a new incarnation of Gaia but would focus more on an environmental catastrophe.

A highlight of the book is the description of the Great Wheel itself. This is mentioned in the other books but the claustrophobic and isolating experience of Luterin's time in it is quite profound. But, like him, I do wonder how the thing could be made and started (I think the river actually does everything and the prisoners' contribution is negligible - otherwise they'd never had got it started and would be at risk of it stopping permanently if a plague or anything else wiped out a large enough proportion of them. "Pull you biwackers!").

An enjoyable conclusion to the series and better than "Summer" though the very nature of Helliconia's Great Year means the end is with a sombre mood as civilisation girds its loins for the impending centuries of cold, even while surrounded by summery murals and in snow covered fields called "the vinyard".

I still think it should be called Autumn. And I think the map is wrong - with two suns I'd expect the planet to have two sets of tropics and polar circles - unless the orbit of Batalyx around Freyr corresponds to Helliconia's ecliptic around Batalyx (and that there are eclipses suggests it doesn't). Unless my understanding of celestial mechanics is faulty (which it may be).

There is scope for another "Winter" book I think, perhaps set in Hespagorath (which has a Scandinavian feel in Summer) as Freyr never sets but also never gives much warmth.

Natasha Hurley-Walker says

It's difficult to summarise my experience reading this trilogy in a simple review. For starters, I felt I couldn't adequately judge the first book alone, no more than one could judge a tree by its first leaves, so I read the

whole trilogy as if it were part of one large arc - if not quite a great circle. Besides the sheer length of book to review, the other problem I have is that I just didn't enjoy it very much. But this is a trilogy about aliens living in a complex biosphere and plots the rise and fall of multiple empires in the vastness of space. It combines biology and physics and romantic fantastical stories. If I, an avid fan of science fiction and fantasy, don't enjoy it, who on earth is its target audience?

So - to the review.

Helliconia is a planet orbiting a star (Batalix) distant from Earth, in a highly elliptical orbit about a binary companion (Freyr). As an astronomer, I can thoroughly vouch for the accuracy and detail into which Aldiss goes describing the stellar and planetary types, and the astrophysical (mis)fortunes through which Helliconia goes. I am more confused by his astronomy in how it relates to the Great Summer and Winter. In spring, around the equator, Freyr is depicted as becoming brighter and larger - fair enough, the Batalix--Helliconia system is approaching periastron with Freyr, so the latter will increase in apparent luminosity. However at the end of the third book, set in Sibornal, at a latitude similar to the UK on Earth, Freyr is depicted as sinking below the horizon, not to rise again for many centuries. If it sets, then it must be visible elsewhere on the planet. If by some twisting of orbits one can ensure that Freyr no longer rises on Sibornal (like our own Sun does not rise north of the Polar Circle during the Arctic winter), then on the other side of the planet, there must be a comfortable country where they will observe Freyr happily for several centuries, only losing it at periastron, when it returns to Sibornal. This would also mean that the Helliconian Freyr-day is the same length as the Great Year, or near enough that humans have yet to have determined the difference. Which I'm pretty sure humans would have noticed by now, and all migrated to the country where Freyr is visible during the Great Winter, and invisible during the all-too-hot summer. So - my issue here is that the world is believable *up to a point*, and then the system of logic is discarded in favour of making a scene work. This is a familiar pattern throughout the books.

In Helliconia's biology, humans are depicted as (view spoiler)

While we're on the subject of language, I'd like to tell you about a few of my friends. They have names. I know, names, eh? Useful things, everyone has them. Some of my friends have two syllables in their name, some have three. A couple are known only by one, and a startlingly large number are called Dave. A tiny minority have names which are difficult to read on first try, but in those cases, are usually known by a part of their name more easily pronounceable.

On Helliconia, everyone has a unique name. In Winter, it's a nice short name like 'Grunt' or 'Augh!'. For the rest of the year, it's an utterly unpronounceable mishmash of syllables with capital letters randomly added throughout. The only ones I can remember are 'Yuli' - because it appears twice, and is the Helliconian equivalent of 'Dave' - and 'Sartorilvrash' - again because it appears twice, and on second viewing I actually tried to say it out loud, but gave up when I bit my tongue on the fourth attempt, the pain giving me temporary eidetic powers. I know that one of the major female characters has a name a bit like the sound that murlocs make in Warcraft. I didn't even try to pronounce that one, much as I enjoyed the character.

Back to the biology point, Aldiss does paint a beautiful picture of a very 'other' world that has adapted (8 million years is ok, should be enough) to a long difficult winter and melancholy flowering of a fleeting summer. But again, some of the biological details are just not consistent and cry out for an explanation. (view spoiler)

Frustratingly, I could see what Aldiss was trying to do. I loved how much detail he put into everything - but despite the amount it just didn't hang together well enough. The characters were... memorable, I will give

him that. Their names are impossible but some of the stories were quite dramatic to follow - Helliconians really have a tough lot compared to Earthlings.(view spoiler)

Of course - I find that scene funny because it agrees with my own sentiments, that religion is the enemy of science, but Aldiss too often sets up these stories to justify his morality; I enjoy the bits I agree with and get annoyed by the bits I don't, but either way it's a cheap trick.(view spoiler)

Writing-wise, Aldiss does well, although he's far better at describing landscapes, ecosystems and the movements of the sky than he is at describing people and events. Many crucial events are skipped over for dramatic emphasis. A man hears something extraordinary from an authority figure, and then is being pursued, blood on his hands - we don't see the actual moment of violence, but we do get to hear internal agonising about it later. The point-of-view of the books is a little weird - the reader is treated to long objective discourses on anatomy and astronomy, but also hears the thoughts inside the Helliconians' heads. It basically feels like Aldiss is talking - I could never get away and feel really immersed in what was going on.

I liked the melancholy, I liked the examples of human striving in the face of adversity, the pathos of a 2,000-year-long-year, the need of people to make sense of the world, and not to be alone. But to me the world-building was a misspent distraction, because Aldiss didn't follow through and really use what he'd built up. We had no(view spoiler) just... many disconnected threads strolling through a beautiful but shakily-constructed world. I am glad I managed to get through the books, and appreciate the effort that went into them, but I was disappointed that the internal logic didn't hold, so neither could my suspension of disbelief. I could not escape to Helliconia.

Justpassingby says

When asked by his publisher about the underlying theme of his recently-published trilogy, Brian Aldiss replied in the most English way possible: a change in the weather.

Starting from a simple idea in celestial mechanics: the climate changes provoked by a planet's orbital eccentricity, the author develops the most fascinating history of a people's discovery of its own origins and its complex relationship with nature. He acknowledges the influence of (non-fiction) author James Lovelock and his 'Gaia' hypothesis postulating that all living and non-living parts of the Earth form a single organism.

In the previous two volumes the artificial satellite Avernus was closely living up to its stated role of an observation station, i.e., sexless from a storytelling perspective (although the second volume has one of its inhabitants briefly descending to Helliconia and leaving a small mark). Not so in the dramatic finale, where we even get a glimpse of recent events back on Earth. The Helliconia storyline itself centres on the captivating adventures of a nobleman turned deserter against the background of despots who blame all setbacks on alien races.

Ethan says

The premise behind the Helliconia trilogy is interesting and original, but there is very little plot to any of the

three books. Aldiss includes detailed notes about the celestial mechanics and the biology of Helliconia, but I wish he would have devoted some of that energy to adding some concrete plot. I found this last book in the trilogy to be the hardest to finish, though it was a great sleep aid.

Turin Turambar says

1.5 stars.

Oh. my. god. Everything I feared would happen in this book while reading the first two happened and then some: the deeply nonscientific Gaia BS, the preachiness, assimilating every human ambition to "possession", "power" and delusions of grandeur, anti-space and anti-technology propaganda, and if it wasn't enough the characters were less interesting if not infuriating at times. I liked Spring and Winter - not very much, but I liked them. This one is just terrible.

Fantasy Literature says

4.5 stars from Jesse, read the full review at FANTASY LITERATURE

Like an architect seeing a cathedral they've designed have the steeple raised, or an engineer watching the bowsprit attached to a ship they've built, so too must Aldiss have felt writing the final chapter of Helliconia Winter (1985). The orbits within orbits, themes revolving around themes, and characters caught in the cycle of life, come to an end. But only on the page.

The series has covered millennia. The third and final book, Helliconia Winter, continues to tell a human-scale tale in harmony with the larger forces at play — geology, astrophysics, and biology all heavily influencing the narrative. This time around, however, Aldiss wields a heavier thematic hammer. The understated Gaian theme of Helliconia Spring and Helliconia Summer is now pressed on the reader in more overt and convincing tones. Tying into the major concepts presented in earlier volumes, Helliconia Winter is a genuine capstone to a sublime series.

Like Helliconia Summer, Helliconia Winter does not pick up the story where the previous volume ended. It instead jumps roughly 500 Helliconian years into the future. Steam engines are beginning to replace livestock, a railway network is starting to take shape, and cannons and guns are manufactured with precision and consistency. The apex of the planet's blistering summer has passed and the onset of winter moves imminently closer with each technological advance. ...read the full review at FANTASY LITERATURE

Rachael says

[I would be interested to see what another installment of the series would entail, if the eradication of the phagors was as widespread as the Oligarchy was claiming, and presumably, if the Fat Death plague was halted. Also, with the ending of operations on the Avernus... - (hide spoiler)]

Ivana says

The epic trilogy about the world of Helliconia, in some ways so similar to Earth, and yet, because of the virus, forever out of our reach, is finished, and in a good way. It is a very ambitious project to cover the span of a few thousand years, and more, in a science fiction trilogy, but Aldiss managed to do it -- and he did it through human (and not just human) drama and political intrigue, thus making it very alive and never boring or like an encyclopedia entry.

Florin Constantinescu says

A science fiction series with fantasy plots and a planet as the main character is how I'd describe this series. The books share very few plot lines, but closely follow the changes of an entire ecosystem across three seasons, so should be read in order.

What Brian W. Aldiss does here is nothing short of amazing. I have yet to read such interesting and detailed biological descriptions of the denizens of "Helliconia". He is also very adept at building local "legends" that are slowly unraveled as the series progresses, but not necessarily by the characters in the book.

The only thing I regret is that there wasn't a fourth "Autumn" book in the series. I'm sure the author would've been able to find more to write about.

Chris says

The final book of the series brings us to the beginning of winter, and the machinations of various groups trying to see society through the looming period. This one gets a little weird as Aldiss talks more about Earth and injects more sentiment. The characters continue to have a murky sense of morality and killing remains shockingly casual. It doesn't bode well for humanity changing their trajectory through winter in any positive way.

Adam Whitehead says

The world of Helliconia is moving away from the supergiant star Freyr. The Great Winter is about to descend on the planet with full, unmitigated fury. The tropical continent of Campannlat is ill-prepared to deal with the falling temperatures, and the defeat of their armies by the forces of the harsh northern landmass of Sibornal signals the beginning of the end of their period of dominance. Luterin Shokerandit, a soldier in the Sibornalese army, returns home in triumph, only to face treachery. The ruthless leader of Sibornal, the Oligarch, has decreed that the victorious army is returning home infested with plague, and cannot be allowed to reach succor.

Meanwhile, life on the Earth Observation Station Avernus, in orbit around Helliconia for almost four millennia, is drawing to an end as the inhabitants revert to savage barbarism, even as the world beneath them falls from the glories of Summer into the abyss of Winter. But some in Sibornal have vowed that humanity and civilisation will ride out the Winter no matter the cost in blood...

Helliconia Winter picks up the story of the world of Helliconia 478 local years - 669 Earth years - after the

events of Helliconia Summer. As before, whilst the individual characters who starred in the previous novel are long dead the fall-out of their actions continues to have consequences in this novel, although in this case at something of a remove, since the action is now transplanted to the northern continent of Sibornal. Here, we follow a band of characters led by the betrayed Luterin as he struggles to return to his distant home in the Shivenink Chain, giving rise to what, potentially, should have been the most dynamic storyline in The Helliconia Trilogy. Instead, we get a travelogue. A fascinating, intelligent, well thought-out travelogue, but nevertheless there is the feeling of Aldiss pointing out the cool scenery at the expense of developing his themes in tandem with the plot.

This is not to say that the themes Aldiss wished to explore with the trilogy have been neglected, but they have been shunted into a somewhat unfocused subplot that ranges from the Avernus back to Earth and to one of Earth's almost-failed colony worlds. These ideas are interesting and intelligently-handled, but whilst in Spring and Summer they integrated nicely into the Helliconian story, here they are separated, to the detriment of both. That said, it is satisfying to get an answer for the mystery of why the Helliconian afterlife spirits went from angry, monstrous creatures in Helliconia Spring to peaceful, loving entities in Helliconia Summer, and these developments do a good job of tying the relevance of events in the two earlier books to the events of this one.

On the plus side, Aldiss's gift for invention remains formidable here. The landforms the characters pass through, the political machinations within the government of Sibornal and its member-states and the constant evolution of the flora and fauna of Helliconia to deal with its climatic extremes all remain stunning. His characters are similarly well-drawn and convincing, but it has to be said in this case they are mostly unpleasant and selfish characters whose ambitions and motivations are interesting on an intellectual level, but unengaging on an emotional one. In particular, his female characters receive short shrift here, which is odd especially after the first book in the series (where it is the women of Oldorando who drive forward its scientific and technological development). The ending is also rather more unsatisfying than in the first two books, where the ambiguous conclusions are alleviated by us learning what happened next in historical texts mentioned in the succeeding volume. With no succeeding volume to Helliconia Winter, the ending is too abrupt.

Helliconia Winter (****) is packed with inventive ideas, fascinating characters and some genuinely exciting and dramatic moments. However, it is the weakest book of the trilogy, with an unsatisfying ending and a cold, remote prose style that is not as engaging as the first two books in the series. Nevertheless, the ambition and achievement of the trilogy as a whole remains stunning. The novel is available now in the USA and in the UK will be reissued as part of the new Helliconia omnibus due for release on 12 August this year.

Steve says

Winter has come. And humanity has learned either nothing at all, or simply the wrong lessons, but life will on. Such is the dour ending of a dour trilogy.

As the Great Winter of Helliconia- a five-century mini-ice-age - draws nigh, the northern continent of Sibornal tries to prepare, and as so often when faced with a threat, uses that threat to justify fear, repression and Othering. They also deny their role in the natural order, trying to control or destroy that which they cannot.

As always the grand themes of the book are well worth discussing, but the actual book leaves a lot to be desired; the characters are difficult to empathize with and there is little better to hope for- this is a world that's been trapped in greater and lesser repression for thousands of years and seemingly not going anywhere.

I am a Romantic; I search for the hopeful (if not happy) ending, and the lessons to be derived. But I couldn't get any of that out of Helliconia; at best, we should not strive for mastery over nature? And that, for humanity, only comes at great cost.

Metaphorosis says

3 stars

Metaphorosis Reviews

In Helliconia Winter, Brian Aldiss finally settles into the human-scale story he approached in *Summer*. The result is, if not exactly intimate, still substantially more engaging than the previous volumes. Winter is coming, and with it the Fat Death, the plague that kills some and transforms others to prepare them for centuries of cold ahead.

It's hard to say that any of Helliconia's characters is particularly likeable, but they are, at least, interesting. There's more action and less philosophy here. Enough of the secrets of the world are revealed for the content to be satisfying, though some of the mechanisms lean toward the arbitrary.

To be frank, my reaction on finishing the series was mainly of relief. It's seldom that I find books this slow. Mainly, I think the issue is that Aldiss, lost in the vast scope of his plan, forgot to approach it through characters we could identify with. That gradually improved as the trilogy progressed, but even in this last volume, I didn't care enough about the lead protagonist, Luterin Shokerandit, to have strong feelings about what happened to him. While an improvement on its predecessors, *Winter* is not a strong book.

Bjørn Sørlien says

Liked this a lot more than spring and summer

Jana says

I loved this series.

Aldiss achieved an incredible feat of world-building. Helliconia is detailed and intricate and rich, the ecosystem finely tuned to the specific quirks of the binary star system he imagined. The necrogenic animals, the cycles across the Great and Small Years, the subhuman races and their quirks all blew my mind. The Bone Fever and Fat Death and their use for adapting Helliconia's humans to the changing seasons were just brilliant. The subplot dealing with background developments on Earth was just as well done.

Even though each book dealt with an entirely different set of characters, it was never difficult to empathise

and become involved in their struggles. The characters were realistic and human, each with their own strengths and weaknesses. The interactions between man and woman across the books (Shay Tal and Aoz Roon, MyrdemInggala and JandolAnganol, Luterin and Toress Lahl) mimicked the themes and progression of each phase of Helliconia so well that I just stand amazed.

This is a world that has not left me since I read Helliconia Spring. It is an immense tapestry of story and world, threads from centuries ago resurfacing for some small relevance in a new setting created by the position of a planet relative to two suns. It is simply genius.
