



Five-Twelfths of Heaven

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In a space-faring civilization where a single woman is increasingly disenfranchised, the star pilot Silence Leigh is defrauded from her inheritance by a greedy competitor. Forced to ally with two men, Silence is dragged into a deadly political struggle, and is tantalized by the hints of the legendary Earth, as well as the dread and the glory of Magi's power. Her dreams of having her own ship and of escape from the Hegemony's oppressions take on new direction and focus when she joins the crew of "The Sun-Treader"

Five-Twelfths of Heaven Details

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From Reader Review Five-Twelfths of Heaven for online ebook

Emma says

I came across a recommendation for this book series while I was looking for science fiction and fantasy books that include polyamory. The description of it by Jo Walton as a "polyamorous alchemical space opera" turned out to be spot-on accurate.

Surprisingly to me, the books are heaviest on the alchemical element. Much of the world building and plot has to do with space travel that is controlled by musical harmonies and manipulation of mystical symbols. I can't recall reading anything else quite like it. I appreciated the genre blend with fantasy and the divergence from more common tech-heavy, space-faring sci fi.

The polyamorous component has to do with the main character, Silence, and her two husbands. What starts out as a marriage of convenience turns into something "more passionate" but the passion is entirely off-page. Not so much as a single kiss among the three of them! So if you're looking for a romance, this is not it. It's not clear to me if they form a V or a triad -- meaning, if Silence is separately involved with her husbands or if the two men are also involved with each other. A throwaway line in the third book implies that at least one of them is attracted to other men, but blink and you'll miss it. In any case, the three of them have a relationship that is clearly very loving and has its tender moments.

Melissa Scott builds an interesting world, with a repressive interstellar government called the Hegemony and a legend of lost Earth. Women must have male guardians to represent them in legal matters, generally aren't allowed to be pilots or magi, and are forced to cover their faces with veils. The first book is in danger of falling into the Exceptional Girl trope, since Silence is nearly the only female character of any note. I was pleased to see this outright challenged in the second book, however, when she befriends another woman and learns to value her own gender more and to respect choices that are different from her own.

All in all I enjoyed the Roads of Heaven series. It was a pretty quick read. I hold back from giving it 5 stars because the writing style was a little repetitive, the relationships not explored in as much depth as I would have wanted, and the third book ends rather abruptly without fully addressing the political ramifications. I recommend the books to anyone who is a fan of space travel science fiction, feminist female main characters, alternative relationship structures, or alchemy.

kyknoord says

In this universe, Space Magic(TM) is - quite literally - space magic. Engineers are musicians, pilots are mystics and just about everyone else is a complete dickhead. Also, dubstep is a weapon of mass destruction, which is weird since the book was first published in 1985 and Skrillex and his ilk weren't even embryos then.

Kaa says

Interesting and enjoyable science fantasy. I find Melissa Scott's writing style, characters, and world-building compelling, and I love the role of music in the magical technology of this universe. The very unusual method

spaceflight reminds me a little of the Ninefox Gambit series, in that the authors pretty much throw out most of our current science and take a highly creative and colorful approach to the subject instead, which I heartily approve of. The ships in the story run basically on alchemy and music, and it's awesome.

Much of the universe this story takes in is very hostile and oppressive to women, but none of the three central characters need to be convinced that this is wrong, which I appreciated. There are several interesting female characters, including the heroine, Silence. Although she moves from a marriage of convenience to affection for her two husbands by the end of the book, this story is not particularly a romance. I do hope all three of these characters and their relationship get more development in the next two books.

Nicole says

Roads of Heaven trilogy book I

Part space opera part sufficiently advanced science indistinguishable from magic and part social commentary.

FTL is managed using harmonics-sound powered flight. It is the math of sound they use to plot routes tuning the vessel with hyperspace known as 'purgatory' in ship board slang.

Some of the social commentary on requiring women to be Roads of Heaven trilogy has come into relevance once more. Here it is the Hegemony that accords women few rights on its planets.

The protagonist Silence is offered a chance to begin again by an off-worlder, Denis Balthasar, and his crewman, Chase Mago by marriage to both. Silence gets to travel and the ship acquires documentation to travel within Hegemon space. They don't tell her they are part of the Wrath-of-God, rebelling against the Hegemony.

Abi Walton says

I don't know what to say about this book. I read it because it was written by Melissa Scott and also it intrigued me when Tor.com wrote an article on it. But overall it was a disappointment, and I think mostly because Silence wasn't a fully formed character more a lense and the really interesting parts the marriage between Silence and her two husbands wasn't explored much.

Overall I have the second book but I'm not sure I will persist with the series.

Sharon Iliffe says

Had this on the shelves for a quite a while and decided to read last week. I love Silence Leigh; she is a woman struggling to reach her goals while operating in the confines of various patriarcies. The author does not write her as a perfect strong woman; Silence has moments of weakness and acknowledges her flaws, but she is also very self aware and does what she has to do to get to where she wants to be. It is interesting and satisfying to me that Melissa Scott doesn't downplay the effect that an oppressive patriarchal environment can have on women.

(Mild spoilers - but no plot point - follow.) At many moments, Silence doesn't overcome her obstacles just because she is a 'strong competent woman'. While that is a factor, sometimes luck or help from others are also a necessary factor. There is also an interesting moment when Silence is relating some of her history to

other women and the way she was screwed by patriarchal authority - the other women are sympathetic but didn't quite 'get it' as they are from more privileged backgrounds where those stresses don't pertain.

Andrea says

Really one of the most original methods of space travel I've ever read, where pilots reach worlds by visualising symbols in a kind of musical alchemical phase shift.

I always find Melissa Scott very readable - I'm just interested in what happens next, although a lot of this story is just the protagonist, Silence, reacting to circumstance. She lives in a very woman-unfriendly part of the galaxy. Most of it has been conquered by the Hegemony, which strips most of the rights from women. Even outside the Hegemony, women seem thoroughly second class - confined to certain roles and never being interesting things like pilots or mages (except on Planet Matriarchy, though I'm not sure what has led Planet Matriarchy to not be conquered by the Hegemony).

But even in less than ideal circumstances Silence's family managed to finagle a pilot certification for her, which works fine so long as her father is alive, but leaves her in a bad place once she no longer has a male guardian willing to look out for her interests.

I didn't precisely like Silence - I didn't like her tendency to tell her companions to shut up when she wanted to think, and I definitely disliked her decision to 'walk to port' - but I remain interested in what happens to her and will most likely continue with this series.

Diane says

I've read this whole series at least 3 times. Scott has created a very 'real' world and the characters are well constructed. I like the way 'unconventional' relationships (in 'modern' Western eyes) are written as straightforward. It is really classy science fiction with strong human stories. Great

Bobby says

Fun twist on genre fiction with magic mixed with sci fi. World felt a little lightly built out at times but overall the plot moved along well and the characters are fairly well realized. I liked the way pilots memorize space routes like wizard memorizing spells.

Rhode says

Possibly the best explanation for FTL (faster than light) spaceship travel in any SF book ever. Scott invented her own science for this and it's marvelously creative and sustained throughout the entire series.

But I don't read SF for the science, I read it for the adventure. This book has plenty of that as well. It starts with a familiar set-up -- If a society fairly similar to the Saudis with burkas and other heavy restrictions

against women, was the basis of a strong empire that had taken over most of human space, how would a talented woman manage to have her independent life?

The heroine is just barely 30, and has been a space pilot for her whole adult life. Then her profession is threatened because she is a woman. And so her adventures start.

I've loved this book since it was first published. It's not too serious or heavy, just a true adventure story with an intelligent woman at the heart of it. Along the way she manages to collect not one but two husbands, but the romantic element is very much back burned. It's played as a marriage of convenience between business partners for practical purposes. Nevertheless, you wind up enjoying both the husbands as well drawn secondary characters.

If there are lists of SF with kick ass yet realistic female leads, this series belongs firmly in the top 10.

Sunyi Dean says

I have so many mixed feelings on this novel.

So... context first. I picked it at random off the shelves, and decided to read it because I liked the title. If you look at the cover, note that it shows a blond woman and two men, a ship in the background--that and the blurb make it sounds like a classic space opera type story.

The cover is bullshit. This is a science fantasy space-opera about a religious mageocracy who rule space travel through magic and enforce a highly unequal society, particularly against women (many of them wear veils, and there is a blatant Jewish/Muslim feel to much of the setting.) The title comes from their unique terms for space travel; subspace, or its equivalent, is called "Purgatory" and looks like literal rivers of fire. Maguses draw their power from "hell" and when ships travel via FTL, their speed is measured in increments of "heaven" so "5/12ths of heaven" is the speed that the Sun-Treader ship travels at. (Presumably, getting to 12/12ths of heaven means you're dead, though this was never explicitly confirmed.)

PRetty cool, huh? Not conveyed on the cover.

Also not conveyed on the cover: The woman, Silence Leigh, is explicitly described as very pale with black hair. That, and the setting, makes me think of her as somewhat Asian. But she's been whitewashed, or perhaps just blond-washed, for the cover purposes. It's doubly annoying since her colouring is relevant to the book's cultures (indicative of caste/class). But no, some twat had to make her blonde. God forbid anyone find brunettes attractive *grumble grumble*

Annnyways. Main plot: Silence Leigh is a crack pilot who has been disenfranchised and lost her inheritance, essentially because she is a woman (this is what it boils down to). She comes to an arrangement with two guys; they're gonna sign up for a threeway marriage so they can all get citizenship in this empire they're in. (The empire has a 0 immigration policy, you only get citizenship through marriage or birth; one of the men is a citizen but the other isn't, and a M/M marriage doesn't confer that citizenship but apparently a MMF one does.)

I mean... on the whole, it's really a pretty progressive book in some ways. There's a little bit of internalised misogyny here and there, and some outdated stuff on gender. But this novel was also published in 1986 (I

wasn't even born, lol) so *for its time* it was pretty darn good on that front, imo.

One of the more interesting things is that although Silence agrees to this marriage for cynical and monetary reasons, she does actually develop deep, platonic affection for both men. It's not quite a marriage, and for anyone hopeful of a NK Jemisin style 3 way sex scene, you'll be disappointed--no sex in the book--but it's still reasonably well done and enjoyable.

And yet, despite the ideas, ambition, and surprises, I only mark it at three stars >.>

Structurally, the story drags in places. The pacing is odd, the plots meander or else everything happens at once; the novel lacks focus. "Earth was their destiny" says the tagline, but the subject of Earth isn't raised till almost the end. And yes, this is an older book where, I guess, people were happier to accept cliffhanger endings, but I was still frustrated that the novel felt unfinished, as if it cut off right when it was starting to go somewhere. Presumably the sequel is a direct follow-on, though whether I can find it in this house is anyone's guess.

Silence herself is a bit... exasperating. She feels less like a character and more like a lens with which to showcase the ideas and worldbuilding. Her reactions are inconsistent and she behaves in ways which further the plot or stall the plot as required. I found her hard to relate to. Again, the rules have changed for modern SFF, but ideas alone are not enough to sell me on a book.

For all that it was engaging, and had a kind of refreshing vigour (and I do appreciate space opera written by women, particularly). I am interested enough in those ideas that I'll be keeping an eye out for other books in the series, if I can find them.

Bogi Takács says

My review is now online on tor.com: <https://www.tor.com/2018/08/29/quiltb...>

Magical spacefliiiiiiiiiiiight!

Source of the book: Bought with my own money

Ian says

This is the first book of the Silence Leigh trilogy, followed in 1986 by Silence in Solitude and in 1987 by The Empress of the Earth. It was later released in a SFBC omnibus edition, The Roads of Heaven. But that's a pretty naff title for the trilogy, even if it is, well, pretty accurate (it's also used by the current small press Kindle omnibus). Because in the universe of Five-Twelfths of Heaven, it's the music of the spheres which allows for interstellar travel. Starships have "harmoniums" (harmonia?) and it is the music they make which drives starships into orbit and pushes them into "purgatory" (ie, hyperspace) at velocities measured in "twelfths of heaven". Most starships travel at a sixth of heaven, so five-twelfths of heaven is pretty quick. It's also the speed of the ship, Sun-Treader, whose crew pilot Silence reluctantly joins when she finds herself trapped on a world of the Hegemon after her grandfather dies. Because her grandfather owned the starship she piloted, but her uncle had done a deal with a local merchant so the ship would need to be sold to cover

grandfather's debts and, as a woman, Silence has no legal standing... But Captain Balthasar of Sun-Treader agrees to act as her representative in probate court, and offers her a job afterwards. He needs a female pilot – and female pilots are very rare – because his engineer has fake papers, but if Silence enters into a marriage of convenience with the two of them they can get him proper papers. Polygamy, apparently, is okay, but not same-sex marriage. Silence agrees. Things go reasonably well, but then Balthasar is called to a captains' meeting of Wrath-of-God, a major pirate combine, and it's war against the Hegemon. But the attack fails, and Silence and her two husbands are captured by Hegemon forces, and put under geas. Except Silence manages somehow to break the geas – it seems she could well be a magus. And... well, spoilers. Obviously, the main draw of Five-Twelfths of Heaven is the mix of science fiction and magic. It's cleverly done. FTL is itself a metaphor, and Scott recognises this and chooses to use a metaphor typically not associated with sf instead. It works because she maintains rigour, her magic system has as many rules, and operates as logically, as some made-up "scientific" FTL drive would. Instead of computers churning out numbers, her pilots have to memorise Tarot-like symbolic diagrams. Instead of laws of physics, she writes about notes and chords and dissonances. Different words for the same things. And a good example why you can't use tropes to differentiate between science fiction and fantasy. If I'd discovered Scott back in the 1980s, I think it likely she'd have become a writer whose work I sought out. She certainly is now. I'm looking forward to reading the rest of this trilogy.

Marie says

My favorite part was how the people in the story relate to their technology metaphorically as magic, but you can totes tell it's science.

My least favorite part (and that almost cost the review a star) was how it started to feel like... magic.

I want to read a sequel and I want it to categorically state that you aren't 'born' a magus in this world, you study to become one, and the study involves physics.

Still, it's a "lost colonies" world and I love those, and I love "geas" whenever it gets used, I don't even care if it's an overused trope, this time they do it nice and complicatedly. The book had a feeling of medievalism about it with FTL drives and a lost Earth and star maps and a woman with two husbands, so I'm giving it four stars.

Walter Underwood says

Jo Walton called this "polyamorous alchemical space opera", and she nailed it, though the three-way love story isn't even part of the story, just a casual plot element.

I really love space opera that just flows, and this nails it. Never even a paragraph of plodding exposition or clumsy "As you know, Captain..." monologue. I'm never a fan of worldbuilding without story, so this world gets a double thumbs up because it is creative and essential to the story. Spaceships travel faster than light through purgatory using the music of the spheres. Ah, you've heard that one before, I'm sure.

Plotwise, there is a slow start where plot possibilities open up, but not happen, are not even foreshadowed, then things start happening, including the Hegemon's elite space marines. Dig it. I could do with more

characterization on the rest of the cast, but Silence Leigh is wonderful. No superwoman, just a woman in a man's job (space pilot) marooned in a society where women have no rights. She is no superwoman, just a person.

And the best part? There are two more books.

This isn't in print, but you can find used copies or borrow mine.
