



Knocking on Heaven's Door

Sharman Apt Russell

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Winner of Arizona Author's Award for Fiction and the New Mexico/Arizona Award for Science Fiction.

On a hotter and more volatile earth in the twenty-third century, humans like Clare and Jon live in utopia, hunting and gathering in small tribal bands, engaged in daily art and ritual, reunited with old friends like the shaggy mammoth and giant ground sloth. Even better, they still have solar-powered laptops and can communicate with each other around the world. The understanding of physics has also advanced. When scientists first cloned extinct species from the Pleistocene, they discovered that many of them were telepathic—that consciousness travels in waves. For most people, animism has become the preferred religion, a panpsychism compatible with the laws of a fractal holographic universe. As Clare tells one of her students, the return to an older, Paleolithic lifestyle is “one of humanity’s greatest achievements.”

It’s too bad that utopia had to come at such a cost: a genetically engineered super-virus that wiped out most of earth’s human population. Humanity was shaken by that event, and humanity vowed to change. Now, on the 150th anniversary of that catastrophe, a small group of men and women—as well as a smarter-than-average dire wolf and saber-toothed cat—are suddenly faced with decisions in which the stakes are higher than ever before. Will earth repeat the cycle of unbridled hubris? Or is humanity’s destiny even stranger than that?

Knocking on Heaven's Door Details

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From Reader Review *Knocking on Heaven's Door* for online ebook

Kim says

Knocking on Heaven's Door is an extremely unique take on post-apocalyptic fiction. I listened to the audible version. I've never read (or listened to) anything like it. The narrator did a fantastic job. I especially loved the narrator's take on the character of "dog", who is a hyper-intelligent dire wolf with human-like thought.

Sharman Apt Russell creates a beautiful new world where humans and nature coexist together in harmony after a terrible apocalyptic event wipes out most of humanity. The survivors reject the old ways that caused humans to live at odds with nature and instead selectively choose to keep some technology while at the same time embracing a sustainable hunter-gatherer, egalitarian, tribal sort of society.

The world-building is at the forefront of *Knocking on Heaven's Door*. The new society described is so different from the kind typically found in post-apocalyptic novels that the author spends a lot of time showing the reader how the new society evolved and how it works.

There are many interesting concepts presented in the book, many of which will require an open mind. Below are a few examples.

One concept is that of the fractal-holographic universe, which has something to do with how the consciousness of all living creatures and things in nature are connected with each other in the universe. I thought it was something the author made up, but it is based on a real theory. For more information, check out this website: <http://holofractal.net/introduction/>

Another idea is that of animism, which is a belief that plants, animals and non-living things like rocks have a spiritual consciousness.

Yet another concept is telepathy, which many human characters in the book, called "receivers", use to communicate with certain animals.

All in all, if you are looking for something different in post-apocalyptic fiction and you are open to new ideas, I recommend checking out *Knocking on Heaven's Door*.

Disclaimer: I received a free audible copy in exchange for an honest review.

Lucinda E. Reid says

Uneven but intriguing concept

The author makes a reasonable attempt at presenting the story from the perspective of the different main characters. The future portrayed is novel, but slightly unbelievable. The conclusion is decent although it was a struggle to get there. I almost would like to see a better written sequel.

J.G. Follansbee says

A strain of environmentalism sees civilization as a mistake, a wrong turn in history taken 10,000 years ago at the invention of agriculture. The error sparked a chain of events taking us down the path to global warming and if you extend the trendline, global apocalypse. It would've been better if the first seeds sown by humans had fallen on rocky ground or were choked by weeds, goes the logic.

That civilization might be an intelligent adaptation to a harsh, dangerous, and above all unpredictable environment (Will I find game this week? Are enough berries ripening this season?) doesn't figure in this thinking. The success of farming and the resulting rise of urbanization has meant a paradise lost. Fiction writers in particular are prone to view our hunter-gatherer past with envy, seeing our ancient ancestors as "in harmony" with the earth.

In the worst case, they romanticize indigenous people as remnants of this purer time, conveniently forgetting in the case of North America that some tribes only stopped killing each other after white people invaded (who then started killing each other as well, but that's a different blog post). The latest twist in this sentimental view is "rewilding," which includes aesthetic practices of ancient skills such as flint knapping and spear-making as a path toward healing man's relationship to nature.

Nature and science writer Sharman Apt Russell expresses this longing for civilization to go away in her speculative novel *Knocking on Heaven's Door* by imagining a virus wiping out 99 percent of humanity, but not before biologists bring back Pleistocene predators, such as the saber-toothed cat and the short-faced bear. With the population decimated, mammoths roaming the earth, and the climate wrecked by excess carbon, the remaining humans seize the chance to recreate the (imagined) good old days and set up a new hunter-gatherer way of life. It's rewilding at its logical extreme.

Except that people get it both ways in Russell's story. The death of civilization leaves behind things no one wants to give up, including email, the internet, laptops, and enough scientific apparatus to explore a theory that posits we're all a hologram. In this absurd world traipses Brad the "lab rat," Clare the faux-paleo hunter and writing instructor, Luke/Lucia, a gender-switching hermit, and Dog, a direwolf that can read minds.

Russell nearly succeeds, particularly in scenes portraying life in a new tribal society and the jealousies endemic in human relationships, whether it's in the office or the wickiup. The novel is ambitious and wildly imaginative, but it tries too hard, particularly when Brad resurrects a human being, complete with its old personality, from a fragment of DNA. If Russell had left out the kitchen sink, *Knocking on Heaven's Door* might have been more plausible.

This review also appeared on Joe Follansbee's blog.

Carol Webster says

Took me awhile to get into it, but ultimately a fascinating book! Enjoyed a different view of a post-apocalyptic society, and the exploration of the concepts of animism.

J.J. Amaworo says

Is there anything Sharman Apt Russell cannot do on the printed page? Knocking on Heaven's Door is a lyrical, superbly written tale set in the future. In the midst of the great ruin of Earth, brought about by ecological catastrophe and a supervirus, the remnants of humanity wander in their ravaged Eden. Communing with nature, taking only what they need, the heroes do everything that humans have always done: fall in love, fight, procreate, and try to survive. Apt Russell's is a singular vision that includes a host of stunning ideas – a gender-hopping bush-dweller, telepathic animals, and ways of revivifying the dead. Knocking on Heaven's Door is a triumph of the imagination, a brilliant and mesmerizing addition to the sci-fi canon.

Janice says

This is an odd little book.

It's set maybe 150 years in the future. The vast majority of humanity has died in a supervirus plague. Before they died, though, they figured out how to bring back and clone various Paleo-animals - dire wolves, teratorns (some kind of giant bird), giant ground sloths, short faced bears, etc. And surprise! they found out that these paleoanimals were sort of psychic. That is, some humans could hear the Paleos thoughts in a slightly muzzy way. This was handy for avoiding predators and/or finding prey.

Then the world fell apart, mostly. There are a few groups of surviving humans living in widely separated parts of the world. Fortunately, they have retained the ability to scavenge or build solarcomps. These are computers that connect the remaining groups of humans via satellite. The satellites, we are assured, will function for hundreds of years. However, no mention is made of the server farms that would be needed to handle storage of maps, etc. Maybe they're in the few labs that still exist.

Humanity has returned to a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, but with email. That part was interesting, even if it strained credulity a bit.

Then there's Dog, a dire wolf with an interesting mutation. He's much smarter than your average dire wolf, and can communicate much better with humans. He becomes the catalyst for bringing a new sort of living being into existence. This is the bulk of the book, after we've met the main characters: Brad, the lab nerd, Clara the teacher/mentor, and Luke/Lucia, a person comfortable in their own shifting sense of gender.

The end of the book hints at changes coming to the world.

I was dubious about some of the premises here, but the book was pretty readable. I think it's interesting to see an author wondering about semi-modern people returning to hunter-gatherer lives.

Larry Wegman says

A nonsensical post-apocalyptic (disease in this one) story where people actually choose to live in a

paleolithic society (but with the internet) when they have much more nearly civilized options. Oh, and there are restored paleolithic animals (cloning a la Jurassic Park) which are telepathic.

Mary says

Unexpectedly

Interesting and bewildering in a good way. In a new future paleo animals have been restored but it's the humans who steal the show!

Christine says

Knocking on Heaven's Door is speculative fiction that will entice newcomers to the genre while never disappointing those already in love with wildly imaginative visions of our planet's future. Sharman Apt Russell, already well-known for her award-winning writing as citizen-scientist, breaks new ground in this novel. Its characters seem as real as the moral and survival dilemmas they face--I started to say the characters are "real people" but of course many of the most important characters are animals from Paleolithic times, or their "unique consciousnesses," golden and disembodied, whose minds are able to blend with and enlarge human consciousness. This is a novel with a generous, affirming vision of what this planet's future could be. Best of all, for this reader, the story is shot through with a dry sense of humor that had me laughing out loud even as (for instance) my mind stretched to comprehend the consciousness of the character named Dog, a cloned direwolf with a fully functioning Theory of Everything and--from blending his intelligence with humans--a penchant for thinking in borrowed language his own experience can't recognize. Here's a bit of Dog's rumination: the biome in ungulates' stomachs "nested together like Russian dolls. (What were Russia dolls?). How extraordinary."

Extraordinary, yes. Read this book, and I think you will agree.

Joseph Gendron says

Ms. Russell creates a future story for the human race, and once extinct fauna, after the virtual elimination of the human population except in isolated areas. Events take place 150 years after the great winnowing and results in "The Return", a return to humans living in a manner reminiscent of hunter-gatherer societies with key exceptions. One of these is solar-powered computers, made with scavenged parts from the ruins of the deceased civilization, making possible communication and education within and amongst surviving groups via still intact orbiting satellites. This fascinating world has many unique elements, including Paleolithic fauna that were cloned by scientists prior to the decline of the human population and that have since multiplied across the planet. These animals carry the ability to telepathically communicate their wild intelligence with humans, and vice versa, which makes for interesting relationships.

I found this novel enjoyable to read and contemplate as probably many of us have wondered what civilization will be like if human population is greatly reduced due to a global catastrophe. Science buffs will also appreciate the old and new scientific concepts the author cleverly utilizes throughout. Whether the

“Knocking on Heaven’s Door” is answered may require a sequel.

Lynnanne Huber says

Wonderful and unusual

This book was a delightful surprise. The combination of paleo living with computers and satellites was continually intriguing and something that I haven't seen before. I loved the main characters of all species.

Linda Shields says

There is a DOG!

Catalina Claussen says

Knocking on Heaven’s Door Review

Knocking on Heaven’s Door, a novel by Sharman Russell
Yucca Publishing, an imprint of Skyhorse Publishing 2016
266 pages

Sharman Russell does not back down from the fundamental human questions of our common origins and shared future in her dystopian sci-fi novel *Knocking on Heaven’s Door*. She confronts the impulses and instincts entwined in our DNA that no amount of reasoning and spiritual practice could deny. The human quest to dominate, to take charge of our world, rather than surrender to the truth of our interconnected existence is our undoing.

Set in twenty-third century New Mexico in the wake of an era known as the Return where a super-virus crippled the human population on earth, Russell depicts a “Paleoterrific” society living in the midst of ruin. The protagonist, Clare, is an online writing teacher who connects with students from the three remaining human civilizations in Russia, Costa Rica, and the American Southwest. She is also a guide for Brad, an employee of the lab responsible for DNA experiments that tend to be questionable in this fragile new world. He is on a requisite quest that he has delayed for quite some time. He and Clare strike up an unexpected relationship that leads them both to question everything they have known.

Russell is a true lover of knowledge whose affinity for anthropology, history, physics, biology, anatomy and physiology, genetics, geology, botany, basket weaving and so much more come together in this book. One of the most mesmerizing scenes is the death of Dog, a cloned extinct species from the Pleistocene era who has gained consciousness via telepathy. As he lays dying in Chapter 11, the omniscient narrator leaves no detail behind:

In those last moments, his body was deliriously busy, bladder emptying, heart pumping, right and left atria filling with blood, priming the ventricles, ventricles contracting, propelling blood to the lungs, aortic and pulmonary valves opening atria—then not filling. Where was the blood? The heart waited to contract (111).

I further enjoyed Russell's depiction of Clare, a strong female character who has misgivings about her pregnancy because of how she might be received by her tribe given that the father is not one of them. Via Clare's experience, Russell confronts issues regarding family structure that manifest in our current patriarchy and into the future.

This interesting and well written novel proved to be a challenging read for me. As a fan of documentary, realism, romance, and young adult fiction, the combination of trying to understand the nature of the post super-virus world and the vocabulary associated with it made for a slow read. In the first half of the novel, I felt uncertain of the setting and I found myself re-reading a number of passages to nail down the basics. Once that unsettling feeling passed, I was able to grasp Russell's vision of a future that is daunting on the one hand, but essentially optimistic. Human beings gain the capacity to communicate with plants and animals and ultimately construct a reality with the benefits of being able to hear one another. Knocking on Heaven's Door is not for the faint of heart. Be ready for a wildly unexpected look at the twenty-third century and all that it takes to thrive in this new world.

Katharine Haake says

Sharman Russell's Knocking on Heaven's Door is an intoxicating blend of pre-and post world, and a curiously optimistic view of a future in which humans, having more or less destroyed the world we live in now, exist in harmony with a nature that includes telepathic pre-historic animals and a communal technology dependent on the sun. Here, they play out full range of human emotions just the same as ever in an age old story of love and loss, while all around them marvelous events remind us that whatever we imagine our experience to be, the truth is always something else, something not quite knowable. Told with wit, grace, and humor, Knocking on Heaven's Door is as thoughtful and provocative as it is entertaining – page-turning sf at its philosophical best!

Gwen says

Strange, but enjoyable.

I received this book free from Goodreads First Reads.
