



A Circus of Hells

Poul Anderson

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DEATH MOON!

Crack Lieutenant Dominic Flandry was not a man easily swayed from his duty to the Empire... not, that is, until galactic vice king Leon Ammon offered him a million credit bribe, a voluptuous woman called Djana, and a commission to explore a dark and treasureladen moon.

But within the desolate peaks and valleys of that strange world of ice and shadow, Flandry found more he had bargained for. Supposedly barren, the planet swarmed with a hideous race of strange, inhuman creatures... infernally controlled by a deranged and brilliant computer brain. Each creature, like a piece in a bizarre and lethal chess game, was programmed to kill.

And although Flandry did not know it – so was the woman he loved...

A Circus of Hells Details

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From Reader Review A Circus of Hells for online ebook

Raj says

This is a story about two empires in microcosm, seen through the eyes of Lieutenant Dominic Flandry as the empire of Man wanes and that of Mersea waxes. Flandry is on a routine survey mission (with a bit of "unofficial" work on the side for a local crime boss) when he is captured by a Merseian vessel.

The book had an odd feel to it. None of the characters were hugely sympathetic and the dry tone of the writing didn't help make me warm to any of them. I was slightly disappointed by this, since I've really enjoyed Anderson's other work.

Graham says

First half was interesting, and then a second half, almost another book kicked in. The chap, Flandry, who had started off as a whizz kid turned into an utter toad at the end, whereas Djana, who started as a bit of fluff, evolved into a sophisticated diplomat unwilling to act as a tool.

Only three stars because although the second planet Talwin has an eccentric orbit resulting in the evolution of two different top species, the story is more James Bond with occasional clever bits. A shame, because most of the book dealt with a building of a relationship which transpired to be as substantial as balsa wood.

David Brawley says

3.5

Robin says

Frivolous, discursive, and lacking the pull and cohesion of the first book. The brusque wit, thoughtful plotting, and classic 60s cosmophilia remain thankfully intact, pushing the book slightly above average.

Charles says

I've already reviewed most of the Dominic Flandry books. Flandry is a kind of James Bond of space but the books have lots of action and intrigue and Anderson's patented exotic worlds and species. Very good stuff. One of my favorite SF series.

Lyn says

Written in the 60s, I see Poul Anderson's character Dominic Flandry as a Jonny Quest who made it big and went to outer space, and took on a James Bond / Austen Powers hype.

He was bold, cool, and had a certain way with the ladies.

Anderson's complex characterization again takes the top prize, reeling in a spaghetti western mess of a plot into something worth reading. Poul's ability to tell a balanced story with good, bad, and ugly on both sides of the Berlin Wall is in rare form here as the "evil" galactic lizard men have theological warmth while our hero comes off as something of an ass.

Most pleasing is Flandry's "Bond girl" a former prostitute named Djana, who shows surprising depth of character and a dynamic portrayal.

Setting the Dominic Flandry series about 500 years after the Poletechnic Van Rijn / Falkayn action, Anderson has cast this later Terran Empire into a decaying and increasingly decadent culture, with the not incorruptible Flandry staving off the eventual decline of his society.

Ever the quintessential "idea guy" of the classic science fiction pantheon, ultimately, Anderson threw too much into this one and it kind of came apart at the seems.

One fun mention is the combination animal and machine creations may have been an influence on John Varley's Gaean trilogy, with its description of a predatory factory.

All good fun, great for an Anderson nerd like myself, entertaining for an aficionado of 60s pulp, but maybe not the best for a first time reader.

Rick says

This is the second in the Flandry series. I wish I liked it more. The concepts are intriguing, the set-up decent... the characters fairly flat and unlikable. Flandry -- our hero -- is vain, self-absorbed, chauvinistic. This wouldn't be so bad if he had any charisma at all. Oh well. And having the hero wording out his calculations in his head... about as exciting as, well, calculations.

Steven Vaughan-Nichols says

This is a good space opera, with some very interesting aliens but while the deus ex machina that saves our hero at the end is set up earlier in the story it's still poor story-telling.

John says

Grade B+. Book A4.

Cameron says

Giving up on this one... part boring nature documentary, part boring narrative about nothing happening.

Sam says

A interstellar soldier/spy/adventurer at a remote outpost of the Terran (human) empire seeks personal fortune and military advantage over the alien Merseian empire. The main character Dominic Flandry embarks on a excursion to scout out a planet for mining resources for a local gangster. Along with him, in the role of sidekick, goes the prostitute Djana.

This could have turned out to be a terrible book, in particular its plot is abysmal and makes almost no sense. But unusual aspects improve the book. First, it is interesting to find out that the Merseians, although very similar to humans in many ways, are actually culturally superior to the human empire. It seems that the human empire is declining and the Merseian rising, and for all the right reasons. Second, Djana turns out to be an interesting character. She is ostensibly cast in the dual roles of "helpless female" and "experienced sex object", but turns out to have surprising strengths, including eventually latent mental powers. She unlike most of the other characters seems to be nice person. On the other hand, the protagonist, Dominic, turns out to be a amoral, greedy, and self-centered.

Also interesting was the discussion of various alien races, the Merseians and others. The descriptions of aliens and their cultures tended to drag out too long, but certainly they were interesting in their own right.

After reading the book, I learned (from Library Thing comments) that this is the second of ten books on Dominic Flandry. Not sure if I want to read more or not. Certainly not all at once.

Jason says

From one of the best novels in Anderson's Technic Civilization saga, we arrive at one of the worst. This sequel to the wonderful Ensign Flandry is a dud, from start to finish, an interminable slog, and a surprisingly shoddy affair from a writer that usually, at least, has a competent handle of the basics.

Let's start with the characterization. Flandry must have let his success on Starkad get to his head, because he's now an insufferable prig. Gone is the earnest and conflicted philosopher of the first book. Anderson has rewritten him here as an aloof and arrogant scumbag, a man who casually demands of his employer that he be supplied with a prostitute for his upcoming mission, to attend to his needs. Having received this prostitute, he spends the rest of the novel treating her abysmally - having sex with her, yes, but also snapping at her, ordering her about, insulting her, humiliating her, and mocking her. If his characterization is juvenile and unpleasant, hers is utterly woeful - she weeps and begs and pleads, continually asking Flandry to hold her. No matter how much Flandry scolds her and infantilizes her, she keeps falling into his arms and crying, "Oh Nicky! Oh, Nicky! Save us!" He even calls her a slut at one point. In another scene, after he rescues her from something, he says, "I shall expect you to show your gratitude in the ways you know best." Gah! This whole relationship is just so icky, so unnecessary, so poorly thought-out, it makes the whole novel sink into

shrillness before the plot even gets started.

Hah! Did I just say plot? Sorry, I meant incoherent banality. What we have here is a Frankenstein monster of a book, stitched together out of bits and pieces of ideas for stories, none of them good. It feels, frankly, like Anderson was just making it up as he went along. First, there's a "find the treasure and get the reward" plot. This soon morphs into a standard "guy-and-his-whiny-girlfriend-walking-through-the-desert" plot, and it isn't Anderson's fault, to be fair, that these scenes reminded me of the movie *Spaceballs*. In any case, Flandry and his prostitute eventually arrive at an automated city where some robotic bugs are playing a massive game of chess. Okay, one thinks, the mystery deepens...is this novel about an artificial intelligence? Or an enemy machine? No and no, because on the next page, our heroes are whisked off this planet and captured by the Merseians, and those bugs, and that planet, and indeed the entire mission that began the book and sent them there in the first place are quite literally never mentioned again. Never. Not once. The first half of the book is abandoned, like an unwanted baby left on a doorstep. Suddenly, we're in a different story, this one about a joint human/Merseian expedition to explore some alien natives. At this juncture, the book, with a straight face, jarringly takes on an anthropological and scientific tone, as if, despite the offensive and lightweight stupidity of the earlier pages, Anderson secretly wished all along this were a hard sf novel. It begins to expound, for pages and pages on end, on planetary fauna and flora, on geological activity, on weather patterns, on native cultural practices. These descriptions, long and tedious as you can imagine, couldn't be of less interest to the reader. Flandry is a prisoner during all this, threatened with mindwipe, or possibly death – why should the lives of these natives mean anything to him, or to us? Why is Flandry actually exploring them? Is it because, for a few pages there, Anderson tries his hand at a "white-guy-saves-the-natives" plot? Anyway, no matter, because soon enough, these natives are left behind just as quickly as the chess-playing bugs were, and we're off like a flash to the next whim of Anderson's aimless narrative.

And that whim is a doozy: Flandry's prostitute, it turns out, is some kind of Jedi. So says the wizened old Merseian who becomes her new father figure. (She goes from an oppressive boyfriend/client to a kindly father figure – how nice.) She has some kind of power within her, like Rey from *The Force Awakens*, and for a couple of chapters, she spends time being trained in the ways of the psychic prostitute. Again jarringly, these pages are filled with experimental narrative devices, ellipses, short paragraphs, dream imagery, streams-of-consciousness. It's all very serious and artistic. I wondered if someone had glued a few pages from another novel into the middle of this one, as a joke. Anyway, very soon we beam to the next plot, the prostitute's power utterly forgotten, and there's an escape, and some heroics, and I think there's an attempt to make some kind of political story out of all this, but I don't know. Whatever. Near the end, the prostitute begs Flandry to stay with her, because she loves him. He refuses, because he has too many other women to fuck, and she wanders out of the book and, hopefully, out of Anderson's canon entirely. What are we supposed to think of all this? Is Flandry a loveable rogue? Is he a tragic lonely figure? Is he a stereotypical and clichéd plot mechanism? Take your pick.

Offensive attitudes aside, these jagged and clunky shifts in tone and plot are devastating to the novel's functioning. None of it works. We're in a space ship listening to some asshole berate his prostitute as she cries in his arms, and then we're suddenly in a hard sf novel that describes, for three pages, the hydrogen dissipation in a supernova. Then, we're on an anthropological expedition to learn from the natives, and then we're in something like a Zelazny novel, with symbolic dream imagery and temporal dislocation, as our Jedi prostitute gets her training. Then it's an action plot. Anderson clearly has no idea what story he wants to tell, and the only thing that holds any of it together are a pair of characters that are completely unsympathetic, implausible, and unworkable.

I will continue to the read the Technic Civilization saga, because it has given me many hours of pleasure. But for those only interested in the peaks of Anderson's storytelling career, I strongly encourage you to skip this

one. It was very difficult to get through.

Brendan says

The plot falls apart about halfway through, and Flandry's character takes a weird turn for the worse. A lot of the idealism seems to be missing in this book. It wasn't nearly as tightly paced as the first, and overall just plain not as fun.
