

A Review of Debatable Space

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Like your space opera with plenty of action? What about some science fiction technology thrown in for good measure? Oh – and a band of violent but likeable pirates – how does that sound? There's more... How'd you feel about a sexy, powerful heroine whose voyage of self-discovery runs parallel to the epic battle scenes and power struggles that litter this story? Palmer delivers all this in his impressive debut novel.

Engrossed in devising rhapsodic phrases about a newly discovered sun, Lena is far too slow to respond to the threat of pirate invaders – until they board her yacht and take her hostage. Flanagan, their captain, explains that they will hold her ransom to extort money from the brutally ruthless ruler of Humankind, the Cheo. As Lena is one of the Cheo's daughters, he's bound to pay up. Only he doesn't. Because, as we discover, nothing is exactly as it initially seems. Not the Cheo, not Flanagan – and certainly not Lena.

As her imprisonment with the pirate band continues, Lena re-examines her life. And we are treated to a fascinating insight into a complex, believable posthuman character, warts and all. The episodes she recounts take us on a journey from moments of true poignancy to high farce, while exploring the options open to a driven, insecure character on finding herself immortal. However, living alongside the pirate band means that she now has to accommodate the needs and wishes of others – something she hasn't had to do for a very long time.

Generally, male authors in the genre don't write wholly convincing female characters. Palmer's magnificent exception to that rule is all the more impressive, when Lena's introspection intersperses a rollicking adventure with plenty of epic battles and fight scenes to satisfy the most ardent space opera fan. Think of Simon Green's Deathstalker series to get an idea of the scale he is working on.

Palmer's world is convincingly depicted with plenty of hard science to support his detailed universe. In fact, my only major quibble with this book is that Lena's descriptions of the technological changes throughout her lifetime, at times, holds up the narrative. But this is a personal preference. Other sci-fi fans will probably fall upon these particular passages as solid proof that Palmer is a master of his craft.

Other than his deft handling of his heroine, the other standout feature of this book is Philip's punchy writing style and the wry humour that permeates the story. It leavens the violent backdrop and helps us identify with Lena. I cared about her – despite her opinionated, vain and selfish character. The fact that Palmer manages to pull off such a trick in his first novel marks him as a talent to watch.

9/10