

Incandescence by Greg Egan



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Author: Greg Egan

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Reviews of the *Incandescence* by Greg Egan

Gardagar

Impressive gamble, this. Make over half the book a blow-by-blow description of a non-human, non-technology society (ArkMakers) working out the laws of physics in a literal vacuum, orbiting a neutron star (they communicate by drumming). And then use non-standard words for the most common concepts, like up/down, ahead/behind, warm/cold. I know that some readers liked this, and I tried hard to stick with it, but increasingly found myself scrolling forward.

Sentient populations elsewhere have moved to a post-human, or should I say post-body, way of life. One can exist as software, or pop out of the computer into a body. None of which is explained. Want to visit a world 8,000 LY away? No problem -- just email yourself there and grab a body on arrival. Obviously, they are not relying on Microsoft products. People can live a really, really long time doing this. So, who cares?

More than half the book focuses on the ArkMakers and their science projects in mind-numbing detail. I mean, at the level of launching a smooth stone and carefully noting its trajectory to see if it is straight or curved. Will they be saved? Will they be brought into the disk (of the Milky Way) and its society? Will the beings trying to help them be allowed back into the disk (this was up in the air)? We don't know because the book just stops. It doesn't really end, because there is no ending; it just stops. Clearly, once the physics and engineering project was over, the author saw no more story there. And there is no sequel that I could find. There are a few stories set in the Incandescence universe but none seem to be related.

I demand a story in my novels. Watching technological primitives slowly discover the laws of physics is not really a story. Well, it is, but it is a long, disguised physics lesson basically intended to demonstrate the author's premise that a pre-technology society could discover the laws of physics and even quantum physics without telescopes and other sophisticated equipment, given the right environment. I and many other readers found it less than involving and it doesn't get better, because the science gets more complex the further in we go.

3 stars because it is Greg Egan.

Pedar

I really enjoyed this. Two views of the search for knowledge. Each from opposite ends of the spectrum. The story alternates between a seeker from the outer rim of the galaxy and his companion and the residents of a relic space vessel in the edges of the grip of a Neutron star at the galaxy's core.

The players from the galactic rim are our far future descendants as well as other sapient species well over a million years in our future. They have explored every speck of the galaxy (aside from the core), have unlimited life spans, been everywhere and done everything. The race captured in the grip of the Neutron star has been genetically engineered to be passive, inquisitive and dedicated to the work they do to preserve the species. This defense mechanism was perpetrated to permit the race to survive the eons of isolation and limited environment in which they must exist. The "hook" is that they were also engineered to respond to drastic changes in their environment by having a very few individuals retain the capacity to enquire and progress. This story involves the response of this species to the threat of a destabilized orbit about the Neutron star and the moral dilemma of the outer rim visitors of exactly what they should do intervene or not. A really deep situation and no pat answers are provided. I loved it!

Insanity

I like Egan's books. This is an original plot set in the far, far future and removed to a different part of the galaxy, involving another species and their awakening to critical thought. For the most part I enjoyed the novelty and the development, and he did a brilliant job with several aspects of the future technology. Two warnings though: 1) Greg really delves into descriptions of the geometry problems and math the creatures are developing and after awhile it really becomes too much and tedious, and 2) there are two parallel plotlines in the book, but it is totally unclear how they relate to one another or tie up at any point. In fact, they don't - I re-read whole portions of the book to see if I missed it but could not find any alignment (e.g. the central characters in one plotline are aided by or inherit/learn something from the characters in the 2nd plotline). If it's there it is so subtle I did not get it at all, hence the missing 5th star.

Jonide

This is an excellent example of hard science fiction--one based heavily on real and speculatively realistic science and technology. It has somewhat of a space opera setting, which risks being a disadvantage by depending on scientifically implausible ideas--but this book successfully avoids that.

When I look for hard science fiction books on Amazon (which is not my primary way of finding good ones), I take into account the number of reviews which say (in one way or another) that the book is

too scientifically challenging for them--the more of those reviews, the more carefully I consider buying the book.

Manemanu

This book's thesis is wonderful - a true extrapolation of today's science into the future. Its physics and math is so advanced, however, that it left me in the dust. I barely detected Einstein's thoughts but had absolutely no hope of any real understanding. Compounding this lack of comprehension was that beings described as simplistic farmers suddenly advanced into celestial mechanics in the blink of an eye. A possible, but lame, explanation for this appears much later in the book, after I had been reduced to rapidly scanning, not reading, the chapters concerning the Splinter natives. So, taken in its entirety, this book was a failure, but a brilliant failure. That, or I totally misunderstood all of it.

kolos

I chose this book not knowing anything about it. The story is confusing, and then you add math. I like the idea of a species awakening to save itself from oblivion, but again, I got so lost in the math. Rakesh's story line was just as confusing as we are dumped into the world with little explanation of how his existence came to be and how it all worked. And the question of the Aloof remains unanswered.

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