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Books: Kim Stanley Robinson's Latest Sci-Fi Gem 2312

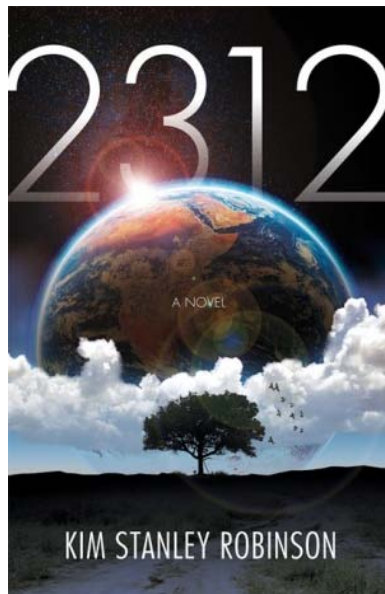
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2312 BY KIM STANLEY ROBINSON *** 1/2 out of **** \$25; Orbit 561 pages

Science fiction at its best can accomplish one of two things. Either an author is adept at extrapolating current scientific thought and expands our ideas of the possible (like Arthur C. Clarke's popularization of putting satellites into geosynchronous orbit) or an author uses a futuristic setting to shine a spotlight on the present.

Kim Stanley Robinson does both. His new book 2312 is bursting with so many ideas and vivid characters that readers will be almost upset to hear it's a stand-alone. How could anyone create such a vivid, believable, mind-bursting future and not want to explore it further?

The story takes place 300 years in the future. Humanity has expanded beyond the earth to colonize various planets and moons and asteroids and any other heavenly object you can name. Tension between

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the over-crowded dysfunctional earth and the people on the outer worlds is always high despite their mutual dependency. Limited resources, ever-lengthening lifespans (200+ years and counting), and good old lust for power are bringing the crisis to a head.

Terrorist acts soon sabotage the safety of everyone but who is committing them? Is it the work of multinational corporations still struggling to hold onto power? Resentful people trapped on a dying planet? Power brokers desperate to swing popular support to their own particular vision for the future? Or could it be the work of qubes, those quantum-based computers of a sort that serve as artificial intelligence and which apparently are starting to act "strangely" and may have achieved some sort of consciousness and -- along with it -- a desire to be free?

This grand scale narrative is immediately anchored in the story of Swan Er Hong. She's the granddaughter of Alex, a very powerful player in interstellar politics who apparently feared some qube revolt and insisted on doing most of her work face to face. When Alex dies at the beginning of the book, Swan finds herself drawn into multiple conspiracies and a need to revenge the attack on her home city Terminator, located on Mercury. Complicating matters? The landscape artist Swan may be falling in love; indeed, her own implanted qube is aware of it before Swan.

Okay, that's the very broad outline of this tale. Robinson's narrative fun reminds me of Melville's *Moby Dick*, thanks to playful interruptions of the story with lists and internal monologues and extracts, such as the intro to a manual on how to terra-form your own asteroid. ("As your assembly hollows the interior, be aware that ejection of the excavated material (best aimed toward a Lagrange salvage point, to collect the salvage fee) will represent your best chance to reposition your terrarium, if you want it in a different orbit.")

I haven't even touched on the polymorphous, polygender world of *2312*, where referring to someone's gender is akin to using the informal "tu" in Spanish and not something you'd want to even hazard a guess at in many circumstances. Humans have modified themselves into "talls" and "smalls" for various reasons. (It turns out smaller body ratios invariably live longer and work better in low gravity environments.) And sexual organs of all types can be added on to your body as you please.

Even that doesn't capture the humor, such as the way Robinson brilliantly maps out a future history of economic systems in just a few short pages (all reflecting the various influences of solar colonies and the type of trading in raw materials and finished products they'd engender) with the kicker being a one-line reference to the almost complete disappearance of capitalism as one of the main accomplishments of the colonization of Mars. (Capitalism remains a "sport" for some, a game to be played on the margins of the real economy. Being good at this rough and tumble endeavor is a hobby or almost an art form. Almost.)

In short, Robinson's story is gripping, funny, and rich with vivid characters -- like the "small" Inspector Jean Genette and the imperturbable, frog-like Warham. It describes a possible future in such vivid and exciting ways you can't wait for it to arrive.

But Robinson doesn't just spell out future possibilities; he inhabits them. One section lays out the way to hollow out an asteroid and create a terrarium to support life -- Swan in fact spent much of her early artistic career creating these various worlds and coming up with themes and interesting combinations of Earth environments to make each one she worked on unique and fascinating. We learn how these interiors are circular and therefore you can be standing on the "ground" and look up: "above" the clouds you can see a lake, located in the sky from your perspective but simply the opposite side of the asteroid. Wonderful, memorable stuff. But it's not until a character is in one such space and remarks that he feels like he's inside a map that has been rolled up and put into a tube that this idea truly comes to life in a simple but effective image. Robinson offers such insight again and again.

The story ends on a perfect note that's emotionally satisfying and implies a remarkable new development in what constitutes life in one brief, amusing exchange. Then Robinson indulges in one more extract and a rose-tinted epilogue that is quite unnecessary. It's a minor complaint about a novel that is so sure-footed throughout.

2312 is clearly one of the best books of the year but I'm not sure I can recommend it to people who aren't already steeped in sci-fi. I fear they might be lost by the ideas and assumptions that sci-fi fans now take for granted as future possibilities. Robinson's *The Years of Rice and Salt* is still my favorite book to introduce people to his talent; it goes far into the future but begins in the past and includes ideas of reincarnation that make that millennial spanning work easier for newbies to grasp. Then I would send people to his landmark trilogy -- *Red Mars*, *Green Mars*, *Blue Mars* -- a wonderful tale about colonizing and terraforming Mars that is as good as hard science fiction gets; being set in the near future makes it easier for readers not accustomed to sci-fi to follow the possibilities as they slowly arise.

In contrast, *2312* throws you into the deep end. For those ready to take the plunge, it's an exhilarating experience.



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4. Fun Home by Alison Bechdel ***
5. Death Walks In Eastrepp by Francis Beeding ***
6. Lumious Airplanes by Paul La Farge ***/
7. The Professionals by Owen Laukkanen ** 1/2
8. Unterzakhn by Leela Corman **
9. The Child Who by Simon Lelic ***
10. Hinterland by Caroline Brothers ***
11. The Yard by Alex Grecian *** 1/2
12. The Alienist by Caleb Carr ***
13. On The Wings Of Heroes by Richard Peck *** 1/2
14. A Princess Of Mars by Edgar Rice Burroughs *
15. The Gods Of Mars by Edgar Rice Burroughs **
16. The Warlord Of Mars by Edgar Rice Burroughs ** 1/2
17. Undefeated: America's Heroic Fight For Bataan and Corregidor by Bill Sloan ** 1/2
18. Stoner by John Williams ****
19. The Sisters Brothers by Patrick DeWitt *** 1/2
20. The 500 by Matthew Quirk **
21. The Age Of Innocence by Edith Wharton ****
22. The Alienist by Caleb Carr ***\
23. Crispin: The Cross of Lead by Avi **
24. Rogue Male by Geoffrey Household ***
25. The Perks Of Being A Wallflower by Stephen Chbosky **
26. Traitor's Gate by Avi ** 1/2
27. Cogan's Trade by George V. Higgins ***
28. 2312 by Kim Stanley Robinson *** 1/2
29. The Twelve Rooms Of The Nile by Enid Shomer ** 1/2
30. Bring Up The Bodies by Hilary Mantel *** 1/2
31. In One Person by John Irving **
32. A Million Heavens by John Brandon ***
33. The Case Of The Deadly Butter Chicken by Tarquin Hall ***
34. Seward: Lincoln's Indispensable Man by Walter Stahr *** 1/2
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Francois G
81 Fans

07:37 AM on 05/25/2012

It's always good to see a critic of a SciFi book, they're so rare... like the genre is not even worthy of criticizing...

I'll certainly have a look to this one.

Note to the author (of the article) : shame on you if you're a SciFi fan and haven't read Edgar Rice Burroughs' Mars novels before 2012...

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Michael Giltz
freelance writer
127 Fans

09:22 PM on 05/25/2012

Hey, we've all got holes in our reading :) At least I'd read Tarzan of the Apes. You know a big reason I didn't? I wanted to read them in slim, easy to carry mass market paperbacks with lurid cover art. That just felt right for those books. Instead they -- and the Conan books -- were usually only available in massively heavy, omnibus sets. It was an aesthetic choice but I finally caved before the movies came out. Thanks for commenting.

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Francois G
81 Fans

02:09 PM on 05/27/2012

You're welcome :-)
I was lucky to read the first French translations in their original paperback.

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JustThisGuy
88 Fans

02:06 PM on 05/24/2012

I really liked his Mars books, and really did not like Years of Rice and Salt. Given that, I'm not sure what to do with your recommendation...

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HUFFPOST COMMUNITY MODERATOR
Debru
421 Fans

07:50 PM on 05/24/2012

I feel the same way--loved the Mars Trilogy, couldn't get into the Years of Rice and Salt. I started 2312 today and am LOVING it. I got chills when the story started on Terminator, Mercury.

I think if you liked the Mars Trilogy, you will like 2312.

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER
Michael Giltz
freelance writer
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09:23 PM on 05/25/2012

Have you read anything else by Robinson? The global warming series? The California series? if like me you think he's a major talent, one book that didn't do it for you shouldn't keep you from reading his latest. It's certainly closer to hard sci-fi than Rice & Salt, which I am fairly alone in loving. Maybe it's a Buddhist thing.

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JustThisGuy
88 Fans

02:47 PM on 05/29/2012

It could be. I really failed to connect or care about the characters in Rice & Salt. It was too slice of life for my tastes, if I recall rightly.

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oldschoollib
Live from the Heartland
199 Fans

01:00 PM on 05/24/2012

I love Robinson's Mars trilogy. Can't wait to read this one. Sounds like he got his "inside-out" asteroid imagery inspiration from Larry Niven's Ringworld, another one of my favorites.

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER

Michael Giltz

freelance writer

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09:24 PM on 05/25/2012

Ringworld is a landmark work and I'm sure Robinson has read it as well. Thanks for commenting. I think you'll enjoy.

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Posted: 08/15/2012 12:16 pm

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HARRISON, TX: THREE PLAYS BY HORTON FOOTE *** ouf of ****
59 E 59

Playwright Horton Foote won an Oscar and a Pulitzer, not to mention sustained acclaim for his work in television, film and, of course, on stage. Nonetheless, his

stock will continue to rise, if that's possible. The surefootedness of his writing, the durable combination of vivid characters and subtle but plainspoken dialogue all reward actors who learn to plumb their depths. It's a terrible pity the marvelous staging of *The Orphans' Home Cycle* a few years ago at Signature didn't transfer to Broadway. These three one acts won't make that leap either, but anyone who seeks them out will enjoy the quiet pleasures Foote was so expert at providing.

I wrote just last week about [the unique experience](#) of an evening of one acts and here is a great example. The second play is not terribly interesting and the third has two weak performances. But the evening as a whole is greater than the sum of its parts, thanks to Foote.

The first and most entertaining one act is *Blind Date*. All three are set in the small town of Harrison, Texas, in this case right on the edge of the Depression in 1928. Dolores and Robert are entertaining her sister's daughter and Dolores is just determined to help Sarah Nancy get along in society. She keeps arranging blind dates, but Sarah Nancy (an amusingly grumpy Andrea Lynn Green) won't cooperate. She's a tomboy with no time for nonsense or making small talk whatsoever. Dolores (Hallie Foote) coaches her in appropriate topics for conversation, Robert (Devon Abner) merely wants to wrangle some food out of his wife (he was supposed to eat in town but forgot) and then the boy Felix shows up (the garrulous Evan Jonigkeit who doesn't look remotely like the horrible things Sarah Nancy describes). That's it.

But in that modest little comedy, Foote creates a vivid world. With the right actors, it's a rich play indeed. A lesser actor would have left no impression as the husband Robert, but Abner mines his lines for humor, frustration, sympathy and more, proving how rich this secondary character can be. Jonigkeit has fun as Felix, rattling off the books of the Bible as a stunt, plowing forward to find a topic of conversation even as Sarah Nancy blocks his every approach and letting the sparks fly while leaving room for the surprising finale that hints that these two young people might, in fact, have a future together. Green has a ball as the recalcitrant gal, galumphing up and down the stairs in patient resignation of her fate. And Hallie Foote -- she embodies this world so completely, the second she walks on stage you know this character so

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vividly and well that you trust completely in where the story is going. She's funny without ever going for the laughs, astringent without ever being mean, desperate in the face of a young woman who simply will not make small talk and turns a list of appropriate topics into a very amusing bit of business. You never want her to leave the stage.

The second play, *The One-Armed Man* is the least interesting of the evening. A businessman is confronted by a bitter former employee who lost his arm in an accident at the mill and now comes by once a week, demanding his limb back. Usually, he takes some money and goes off to get drunk. But today, he's brought a gun. The setup is very telling. The businessman, C.W. Rowe (a fine Jeremy Bobb) berates his assistant for being in debt, sort of like an Ebenezer Scrooge who thinks he can impart some wisdom to his employees while nickel and diming them to death. As the harried assistant, Abner (the father in the first play) does a marvelous job of subtle rebellion, letting us know exactly what he's thinking without ever dropping the surface appearance of a lackey. Unfortunately, this piece never finds the right attitude towards the one-armed man McHenry (Alexander Cendese). Is he unhinged? An avenging angel? The guilty conscience of the owner that simply won't go away? Cendese didn't seem to know, so we didn't either. I wouldn't be surprised if a different production of this would be thoroughly gripping. Like Chekhov, Foote is seemingly easy to do but without hitting exactly the right note, the essence of the work is lost.

The last play also has its faults, but the large cast and the general strength of the story keep it afloat. *The Midnight Caller* is about the residents of a boarding house in 1952, all women until a businessman moves in. That's upsetting to the fussy Alma Jean Jordan (a very funny Mary Bacon). But the real problems begin when Helen Crews is kicked out of her home and moves in as well. Helen is a scandal to some in town because the handsomest, wealthiest man in Harrison fell for her and she would go off with him on car rides and other jaunts at any hour of the day or night. They were desperately in love, but their mothers kept them apart and she finally gave up while he sank into alcoholism. Now wherever she lives, he comes over three sheets to the wind and bellows out her name until he tires of it and stumbles home.

Bobb is quite good as the businessman who takes a shine to Helen (much to the unspoken frustration of Alma Jean). But it's the women of the boarding house who make this a pleasure. Bacon is marvelous, matched by Green as "Cutie" Spencer, the superior Jayne Houdyshell as a schoolteacher who realizes she has spent her life on the porch watching other people's lives take shape and, of course, Hallie Foote as the proprietor, again so good you can't get enough of her. Unfortunately, Helen and the drunken gentleman caller are played by Jenny Dare Paulin and Cendesne, both of whom are by far the weakest of the bunch. It may simply be a lack of experience with Foote. His lines are simple to memorize but getting them right is an entirely different matter.

Nonetheless, taken as a whole this is a solid entertainment showing the durability and strength of Foote's work. Pam MacKinnon directs with subtlety, the costumes by Kaye Voyce are spot on and the lighting by Tyler Micoleau sensitive to the moment at hand. The set by Marion Williams is functional, though they might have found a more elegant solution to where to place Helen's room in the third play. Still, with limited means and a small stage, it is quickly peopled by the world Foote created. Here's hoping his works keep coming back to New York again and again.

THE THEATER SEASON 2012-2013 (on a four star scale)

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[Baby Case](#) (NYMF) ** 1/2
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[Swing State](#) (NYMF) * 1/2



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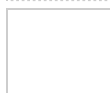


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