



Brittle Star

Rod Val Moore

What Books Press (Oct 1, 2013)

Softcover \$14.00 (234pp)

978-0-9889248-1-9

Dualities of hot and cold, zealous and level-headed, distinguish characters and their flaws in this hilarious sci-fi work.

Set in a universe where all work is academic, *Brittle Star* follows the journey of a shipload of prisoner pioneers as they establish a penal colony on a bare yellow planet somewhere near the Horsehead Nebula. Their crimes silly and their survival skills nonexistent, the prisoners flounder for purpose until a single rebel dares to break from the establishment. This hilarious allegory for the follies of the ivory tower is a promising debut by talented newcomer Rod Val Moore.

Displaying a balance of lyrical style with breezy readability, *Brittle Star* is an unusual mix of literary and accessible. Though technology is integral to the story, it plays out mostly as a metaphorical device. A handful of shrunken astronauts from an ancient spaceship are an excellent example. Primarily, they represent the prisoners' last idealized hope, the ironically larger-than-life adults doomed to disappoint.

Higher education is *Brittle Star's* central theme, and Moore skewers it merrily. The professor-prisoners are essentially incapable of doing real work, aside from conducting a series of oddly incongruous classes. Main character Knox, for example, spends his first few months as the colony's official dance instructor. Indeed, there's no need for pioneer hardship; the prisoners are provided with everything from clothing to food. The dome that cultures their minds also restrains their minds, stunting them beyond the ability to function in the outside world.

The pervasiveness of the central theme, as well as Knox's superiority, are overt throughout the entire book. However, the narrator's perspective gives *Brittle Star* a twist that calls all assumptions into question. For most of the story, the narrator seems to be the colony's collective, and the colonists' love of dance, fads, and broadcast memes suggests gestalt intelligence. If the collective is indeed the narrator, then *Brittle Star* is unquestionably colored by envy of the independent Knox. However, the intimacy with which the narrator knows Knox's thoughts almost requires that Knox himself is the narrator. Scathing assessment of Knox's flaws, ignorance of events away from Knox's point of view, and ultimate celebration of Knox's rebellion all suggest a fractured self-image that casts the story in a new light.

Brittle Star also features a small host of dualities. The prisoners live at the mercy of two unequal suns, one too hot and one too cool. Likewise, Knox's two lovers—his intense Earth wife, Mhurra, and the remote Zelen—mirror his change in perspective and potential for new growth. Krell's indefatigable colonial zeal also seems to inspire a more level-headed reaction from Knox, which in turn leads to the discovery of the spaceship and their means of survival. It is possible to understand each character in the context of their duality: Knox seeks balance between blind fervor and cold practicality. His ability to determine his own fate comes with his realization that he can't rely on others to supply his beliefs.

Brittle Star is a must-read. Lyrical and satirical and, above all, wickedly funny, it will appeal both to readers of science fiction and to anyone who has experienced higher education.

ANNA CALL (Winter 2014)

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