

My Pen Pal Ien

Glynn Green

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Glynn Green's science fiction novella *My Pen Pal Ien* explores the nature of time and destiny through the tradition of childhood pen pals.

Dyrain is a fifteen-year-old girl in the late 1990s. Understood at face value, her life is pretty dull—a combination of school, homework, and trying to get her driver's license. She wants nothing more than she wants freedom from her strict parents.

But Dyrain has a secret: She has a pen pal named Ien. Ien is a teenager, too. And he's an alien. According to his letters, which Dyrain hardly believes, he's part of an alien race that is fighting for its existence.

Ien's race has a unique power: they're able to write the lives of human beings, and Ien is writing Dyrain's life. She and her future family are the only ones who can save the aliens from the enemy that's been preying on them.

The story is told through Dyrain and Ien's letters, in short chapters depicting Dyrain's life, and through the story Ien writes for her about her future life as Mrs. Sholt Popsic, a fashion designer, seamstress, and the mother of three extraordinary children.

This story-within-a-story is where the main action of the book takes place, and it's funny. Green imagines the future with both sincerity and snark, including Twitter's evolution into something called the eqi, which allows people to watch their favorite celebrities 24-7. Such possibilities are particularly cutting.

The letters between Dyrain and Ien are the most interesting parts of the book, containing all of the tension and misplaced expectations of the pair's sometimes rocky relationship. In her letters, Dyrain often calls Ien out for mistakes and inconsistencies in the story he's written about her future, making for a nice touch and characterizing Ien as a new writer, eager to please Dyrain with the story.

Although the characters and premise are interesting, the novel is hard to follow. The story proper is preceded by an unconnected pen-pal exchange between Ien and a young man in the 1960s. The exchange is tedious and does not advance the plot; if anything, it shows that Ien might not be a reliable narrator.

The story ends mid-plot, just as the thread about Dyrain's future is gaining steam. The characters in her future family are sweet and share a warm relationship; the prospect of watching them take down a villain is tantalizing. While it's possible that the story will continue in a future sequel, there is very little closure in this book for modern-day Dyrain or her future family.

My Pen Pal Ien is a clever book, part science fiction and part humor. It combines a smart take on the future with a nostalgic detour into the past, though it does not take Dyrain's present and future selves through her entire story.

A. J. O'CONNELL (January 3, 2018)

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