

Nostalgia Is Heartless: Book Two: The Heartless Series

Sarah Lahey

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In this gripping novel set in a near future beset by relentless climate emergencies, a principled scientist grapples with personal and scientific challenges.

In Sarah Lahey's science fiction novel *Nostalgia Is Heartless*, a scientist takes on the reckless human beings who keep consuming with abandon, despite the decimating effects of climate change.

In the middle of the twenty-first century, global temperatures are rising, rain is sparse, and a deadly virus has killed 5% of the world's population so far. In this setting, Quinn is a climate scientist who has an impulsive sexual encounter with Tig, a cyborg, and becomes pregnant. Still, Quinn vows to stay committed to her career. Quinn and Tig dispute over what is safe for Quinn to do while pregnant; the future of their long-distance relationship is often in question.

Then a flood wipes out Quinn's research island. Quinn manages to escape, though her mother is presumed dead. An artifact hints at a way to go back in time and save her, but Quinn is stumped by its combination of new and old technology. And Quinn also contends with a militant group, Shun Mantra, that captures energy from Earth's core, putting the planet's stability at risk. Quinn has a climate model plan in mind as a solution, though information about it is scant.

As the book moves between Quinn's personal conflicts and its global conflicts, disconnects arise, though many are resolved by the time Quinn meets two siblings with unusual talents. She helps them to evade kidnappers who want to harvest the boy's blood for its antibodies, and enlists them in her time travel project. Still, her exchanges with others are humorous and fast, even when human beings face the threat of extinction. "With the right footwear, you can rule the world," one character notes about 3D-printed snow slippers in a fierce, frozen environment.

Precise and sensual when it comes to details about the world's colors, tastes, and textures, the book stays attentive to its surrounding features throughout with its climate suits, bacteria-based foods, and a lovable AI meerkat who quotes Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. Most such details are tied to particular characters for individuation and to explain their motivations. One enemy politician, for example, lives "on a cocktail of microbes" instead of traditional food and is happy to risk Earth's future in return for profit.

The book's characters are mired in vices, including ambition, jealousy, and greed. Their short views of history and shorter attention spans mean that the responsive technologies they've developed are only temporary solutions to long-term problems. As a world leader notes about politicians' response to one time-limited plan, "They liked the hundred years part. They'll be dead by then; it won't be their problem." When Quinn, who has a strong ethical sense, can't identify one person she knows who is honest, she despairs about the future for herself, her child, and her world. Nonetheless, she continues risking it all, including her pregnancy and her relationship with Tig, to make a last chance bet that Earth can recover from human exploitation.

The science fiction novel *Nostalgia Is Heartless* is set in a near future beset by relentless climate emergencies, in

which a scientist grapples with personal and scientific challenges.

MICHELE SHARPE (July 9, 2021)

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