

Supernova: Book One of Echoes of a Neutron Star

A. J. Salinas

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A bullied kid embarks on an unexpected extraterrestrial sojourn and learns to cope with the unexpected.

Through vivid writing and high-tension scenes, *Supernova* presents a bullied protagonist who visits another planet while he is submerged in a lake. This well-organized first installment of a planned series aimed at middle-grade readers is written by A. J. Salinas, a teacher and fantasy writer. *Supernova* is his debut novel.

Trevor admires Valerie, the seventh-grade class president, but she, like practically all the other kids, bullies him. On a school field trip, the bus driver has a seizure and causes an accident. The other kids escape, but Trevor and Valerie are in the bus when it submerges in Lake Miyuna. Trevor helps Valerie get out, but he is underwater for at least half an hour. During his submersion, he meets an extraterrestrial named Alix, who explains to Trevor that there are passages to other worlds.

The action starts quickly as the prologue presents the ordeal of Trevor's birth—eight weeks early—with the power out in the hospital. Trevor's mom, Nina, had no idea the impact that the supernova was having on the Earth's magnetic field or on her son at the time of his birth.

Salinas' writing is engaging. He uses dialogue that effectively moves the story forward and offers vivid descriptions. Regarding water gushing into the sinking bus, he writes, "Like the vent of a volcano, it was exploding upward." Suspenseful episodes, such as the one of a metal monster chasing Trevor and his only friend in a junkyard, alternate with calmer scenes, including discussions about classmate Bobby's plan to ask Valerie for a date. There are some minor editing problems, including typos and missing words, but these do not greatly impact the flow of the story.

Some middle-grade readers may have difficulty dealing with the torture and death of underage subjects of scientific experiments. Salinas writes that a machine has tentacles that bore into the skull and wrap "around the entire brain." *Supernova* is most appropriate for readers thirteen and up.

Most of the characters have distinctive traits. Trevor suffers from shame and embarrassment due to bullying: "Being younger and shorter than most of his classmates meant that physical abuse was inescapable." Trevor's struggles to overcome his feelings of humiliation demonstrate how harmful bullying is. The beautiful cover art depicts Trevor watching the sunrise on the other planet, which represents an important aspect of the novel. Its mysterious appearance will appeal to prospective readers.

In the end, various plot threads remain unresolved, and reading the next two installments will be necessary for readers to be satisfied. Books two and three are as yet unpublished and this may prove frustrating for the target audience.

Coping with experiences that others don't understand is difficult. Young readers will identify with Trevor as he struggles to decide whether to tell others about his extraterrestrial sojourn.

NORMA DAWN KELLAM (January 6, 2014)

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