

The Secrets of Star Whales

Rebecca Thorne

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With a mesmerizing vision of life among the stars, wherein space's endless horizon only seems limited by the expectations of a small, blue-collar community, Rebecca Thorne's middle grade novel *The Secrets of Star Whales* is deft in addressing big dichotomies: engineering versus art, home versus the larger world, and following in your parents' footsteps versus forging your own way.

Stella cetacea, also known as star whales, are the only creatures thought to live in the vacuum of space, but they're elusive and perhaps mythical, having been sought by scientists and poachers alike for nearly 300 years without success. In the 5th star system, right outside the Kialoa Nebula, in the remote mining station of Azura, twelve-year-old Max wonders if such creatures are possible, much less accessible to someone like him. Then, a ship comes smoking into his station, bringing Mr. Hames, a substitute teacher who threatens to change it all.

This novel nails the nebulous and shifting group dynamics of classmates who've grown up together and are testing new configurations and social alignments as they take their first tentative steps toward independence, self-discovery, and the people they could become in adulthood. Friendships stop being based solely on shared proximity, and Max fears being left behind, both literally and figuratively. As life becomes a trajectory of individuation and change, his anxieties about friends embracing different futures and roles than the ones Max wants are portrayed with unique perception.

Here, growing up requires honesty, vulnerability, and accountability to others. *The Secrets of Star Whales* is a rollicking middle grade adventure with a subtle message about processing and expressing emotions, and the traps that await those who allow their sadness to masquerade as anger.

LETITIA MONTGOMERY-RODGERS (March / April 2021)

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