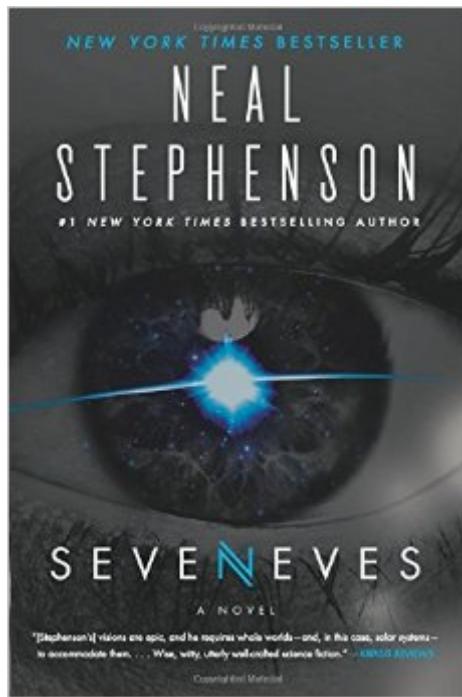


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Seveneves



Synopsis

Five thousand years later after a catastrophic event rendered the Earth a ticking time bomb, the progeny of a handful of outer space explorers--seven distinct races now three billion strong--embark on yet another audacious journey into the unknown ... to an alien world utterly transformed by cataclysm and time: Earth.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I really enjoyed the first two-thirds of SEVENEVES. The plot motored right along, characters were in real peril, and you never knew for sure who'd still be alive by the next page. The characters were pretty blatant archetypes, but I think that's secondary for fans of hard science fiction. I enjoy a good technical tale as much as anyone else, but in the end, stories need to be about people, not things and processes. The latter, while interesting, is better suited for textbooks and game manuals. Make no mistake, the first two-thirds of this book are fun, and I read for lengthy periods. But two-thirds of a great book is not a completely great book. The final third brings everything to a screeching halt in order to catch us up on 5000 years of history. The worldbuilding is some of the most detailed I've ever read, and that's a really strong aspect of Stephenson's work. However, the story suffers terribly from the lengthy nerdsplaining, sometimes lasting for many pages. We're introduced to a new narrative focal character and she's so poorly developed as to not even be an audience surrogate. She's a cypher, carried along on a vast blizzard of "look upon my works, ye mortals, and be amazed." Bottom line is that what began as a five star read for me devolved to four stars with the

lack of character development-still a novel of recommend-but then lost another star for the nerdsplaining and third act altogether. Call it a soft 3.5 stars, but if you like stories about people instead of things, you're not going to like this one as much as, say, Snow Crash.

I've been a Neal Stephenson fan since the early 90s when I read Snow Crash and I've been a massive fan ever since. He has pulled off an amazing feat, he CONSISTENTLY writes novels that are powered by profound ideas, well-developed characters, and hair-raising action. His earlier novels had all of these elements (and I love them deeply) but as he moved into "long form" novels like Cryptonomicon, The Baroque Cycle, Anathem, and Reamde, he put more emphasis on the ideas and how they develop and change over time. This is most evident in Cryptonomicon and The Baroque Cycle which take place at different points throughout history and follow the development of science, technology, money, politics, and... well, lots of stuff. I like all his work but I can dig why it isn't everyone's cup of tea. The math-intensive asides in Anathem and the discussions of various royal lineages and alchemical concepts in the Baroque Cycle are just a bit too much for many people and I also got bogged down in them. But it is ALWAYS worth the effort to see where he takes the story thereafter. So now that my fanboy preamble is over, let's check in with his new novel, Seveneves.**SPOILER FREE**Seveneves, as other reviewers have mentioned, begins with the moon being destroyed by a force (or forces) unknown, giving humanity roughly two years to get our act together and come up with a long-term survival plan before an apocalyptic bombardment begins that will sterilize the surface of the planet. We then meet one of his best casts of characters, written with the depth that is one of Stephenson's major strengths as an author. A scientist with a knack for promoting and explaining astrophysics to the public (very obviously based on Neil deGrasse Tyson), a tech-savvy billionaire who takes human survival into his own hands (kind of a hybrid of Tesla's Elon Musk and 's Jeff Bezos), as well as a wide array of geniuses, cosmonauts, politicians, and nuts who would each probably carry a book of their own. The other characters, who are not explicitly based on anyone in particular, actually do most of the heavy lifting and as is his habit, Stephenson writes solid and interesting female characters. That's a good thing because they (sort of) become the centerpiece of the book's second half. As preparations for human survival and eventual re-colonization of Earth are made (spanning a ~5000 year interlude in space) the reader gets to learn a great deal about space travel, orbital mechanics, genetics, mining, chemistry, and sociology. If I had to pick a weak spot in his prior works, it is that he often needed to communicate ideas in big chunks of text, so a character would start monologue-ing to other nearby characters when they were actually trying to get the idea across to us (looking in your direction "Anathem"). One of his

major coups in this book is putting a lot of smart and specialized people in a small space where they have to interact and explain their thought processes. It comes across as a very integral part of the storytelling and isn't obtrusive. It doesn't hurt that one major character is there to explain science intelligibly to a lay audience and these asides serve to bring all readers along for the ride. The last third of the book explores how the choices made by those fleeing Earth are magnified over several millennia. Sadly, one of his weaknesses is that he tends to end books hastily. I loved everything about The Diamond Age but the ending was so abrupt, I had to go back and check to see if I'd missed pages. The same issue comes up here. The last part is way too rushed and I am really wishing it had been held back as a sequel. The ideas he floats around (like the spinning of linked chains in zero gravity) in this section are tantalizing and I really wanted more. While ideas are the centerpiece of all his novels, I don't think Neal Stephenson gets enough credit for the gripping action sequences that he writes. Most notable in Snow Crash and The Baroque Cycle, but continuing unabated through all his novels, are fights, duels, mob attacks, invasions, escapes, sieges, and swashbuckling that is impossible to leave. It is NOT easy to write a good action sequence that tracks multiple characters through a chaotic situation and Stephenson continues his mastery of this particular brand of writing. Just like everything else in it, the final fight in this novel is rushed. It really is pretty neat but requires a bit of attention, so follow closely! Since I promised a spoiler-free review, I'll stop there. BUT I would like to stress that this book is really one of his best. His fully-realized characters, novel ideas from multiple knowledge domains (repeatedly interwoven with each other), and his gripping description of shocking drama/action have never been better. I just wish there'd been more.

TL;DR - This is the worst of Neal Stephenson's books, by a very large margin. Huge plot holes, no character development whatsoever, multiple poorly developed points of view leading to superficial protagonists, illogical premises, inconsistent story-world. If you are a die-hard Neal Stephenson fan this will be on your bookshelf anyway, but wait for the bargain bin copy. If you are into space exploration, hard sci fi, or post-apocalypse and TEOTWAWKI scenarios - spare yourself the time and effort and read pretty much anything else in that area. Detailed review [BIG SPOILERS]: I can safely be described as a life-long fan of Neal Stephenson's work, and have read and own all of his books. I feel I must say that as a preface to what comes next. Seveneves is by far the worst book written by Neal Stephenson, and that includes the meandering narrative of the Baroque Cycle, and the collaborative Mongoliad effort. Usually fiction of the magnitude of Seveneves, running close to a thousand pages, suffers from some weak points by sheer nature of its size and complexity as a

story. That being the case, it doesn't mean that the whole book will suffer from these weaknesses, because if the fundamental structural elements of the story are sound then the whole will stand on its own. Unfortunately, Seveneves is a disaster in every respect. The moon blows up and humanity has 2 years to find a way to survive as a species before the earth is bombarded by a meteorite shower lasting several thousand years and obliterating everything on the surface of the planet. So far so good, but the humans of Seveneves decide that the best solution from this predicament is to focus all their resources into an escape into low earth orbit around the international space station [ISS], which, if you are technically inclined, is by far the most energy inefficient option as opposed to building deep underground or underwater bases [more on that below]. In effect, the majority of the plot is centered around the desperate efforts of a tiny remnant of humanity to deal with the totally predictable effects of the absurd premise - namely the fact that their survival plan positioned them right in the middle of a millenia-long meteorite shower, and constant solar radiation. Speaking of solar radiation, its plot role is to magically deal with characters Stephenson doesn't know what to do with. What is more, when compounded over millenia, it turns out solar radiation has zero adverse effects on the human organism. Facing this world-ending event, all world governments, including the Chinese and the Russians, magically delegate all their authorities and resources to the US President [I kid you not] and a totally US-dominated team of scientists and military led by [I kid you not] Neil deGrasse Tyson. The character of Doc Dubois is such an obvious and lazy reference to Tyson that after the first 100 pages I started doubting whether the book was written by Stephenson and not by a ghost writer. The plot asks us to believe that a TV science presenter is a deus ex machina capable of solving pretty much impossible problems on the go, and that real scientists not only take him seriously but always delegate final decision making to him. Eventually it becomes comical. Same goes for the totally superficial, yet so important in the plot, character modeled on Elon Musk. Absurdly long stretches of the narrative are focused on detailed technical descriptions of contraptions which will never be encountered again in the story, while major moments in the plot such as losing ones family and children are dedicated a paragraph or less. Apparently scientists do not emote much. Characters constantly appear to value trivial technical problems quite more than the ability to speak to their loved ones condemned to die on earth. It takes Neil deGrasse Tyson all of 5 seconds to decide to abandon his children for the benefit of being on the ISS - this is not presented as a moral issue. Speaking of the ISS. If you know anything about the ISS you probably know that the only way to get to it right now is on a Russian Soyuz module. The commander of the Soyuz is always a Russian, and, while ISS mission commanders can be from other nations, the commander of the Russian Orbital Segment [ROS] of the ISS is always a Russian too. Now, the

ROS is important, because it and only it controls the navigation and guidance systems of the ISS. In other words, the control room of the ISS is and always has been controlled by Russians, who pretty much wrote the book on space station building and maintenance. Apart from the Russians, the Chinese are the only other nation to currently put people into space independently, with an active space station program of their own, modeled on the Mir and Soyuz programs. Obviously, if you were to write a book whose plot is entirely centered around a quasi-realistic sci-fi scenario involving the ISS, with a target audience of people interested in these sorts of things, this might be an important fact to consider and weave in your plot. Not so with Seveneves, which magically deals with uncomfortable facts by ignoring them altogether. And so, the Russians play the plot role of space-plumbers and thugs, while the Chinese have no plot role at all. A rag-tag team of US scientists led by Neil deGrasse Tyson is all it takes. Remember the absurd premise of trying to survive in low earth orbit for 5 thousand years in the middle of a meteorite shower? Apparently someone pointed that out in draft edits, because there is a secondary plot latched superficially to the main plot, involving throwaway characters who somehow manage to successfully survive [5 thousand years] in a mine and on the ocean floor. How did they do that without the major nation-state resources necessary to accomplish it? We are never told. Instead, these characters are superficially tied to the main protagonists through family bonds which conveniently melt into air the moment the meteor shower starts, only to reappear as cherished relics 5 thousand years later [I kid you not]. In Neal Stephenson's version of historical development, 5 thousand years is basically like 50 years - some people die, some people change a bit, some people get a little bit weird, but basically everyone still speaks the same language [naturally - English], and everyone understands each other's jokes. After 5 thousand years of solitary development all it takes to immediately reestablish connection between 3 cultures is taking out the family heirlooms. This is not even high-school level of absurd, so I don't really know what to say about it. Even 50 years in a shared cultural space generates more variety than what Stephenson wants us to believe was generated over 5000 years in communities completely cut off from each other. Imagine bumping into a Sumerian and immediately starting to discuss life, politics and economics in English. That's the major plot moment of Seveneves for you. Characters make randomly absurd decisions with infuriating consistency. Protagonists who are clearly dangerous for the survival of the species [cannibals] are not only allowed to live, but others regularly sacrifice themselves on their behalf. A protagonist who continuously endangers the lives of everyone is allowed to continue to do so, in a situation where what is at stake is the survival of the species - which we are told is constantly on everyone's mind. Characters do not undergo any dramatic development, they just appear, are given

a two page treatment which reads like a Wired advertorial, and then go on their business to die for other characters without an explanation why. The final part of the book introduces a new main protagonist who, and I have to admit this is an achievement of sorts, has no personality whatsoever. Points of view between protagonists shift so often that the reader cannot begin to empathize with the poorly written characters because there is no time. Coming to think of it, the only redeeming element of the book are the space propulsion ideas. If Stephenson had written a short story collection playing with each idea in turn, it would have been honest, and great. Instead, we have this monolith of bad writing and worse characterization, which, in solidarity with its plot, should be shot into low earth orbit and kept there indefinitely.

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