

Space is Not the Place

...and Lea's fictional spaceship society is, essentially, totalitarian

Jess Flarity

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a review of

Hermetica by Alan Lea. Detritus Books 2021

The journey of a generation ship is a classic of the science fiction genre. One that tells the story of what happens when a bunch of humans decide to leave Earth in a sub-light-speed rocket that will take generations to reach its destination.

The lack of unlimited resources and tight living conditions enables an author to experiment with alternative organizations of society, what critic Brian Attebery refers to as a science fiction parabola. The parabola is intriguing because it is boundless despite having an origin point, as J.D. Bernal's long essay, *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil*, published in 1929, is the progenitor of the generation ship as a concept. In contrast, Alan Lea's novella *Hermetica* is the latest data point along the parabola's edge.

Confinement is at the heart of Lea's story. An appropriate theme if you're trapped in a giant tin can hurtling through space or just stuck in your apartment because of the pandemic. Part mystery and part social philosophy, *Hermetica* is notable for its extensive use of the they/them pronoun, though it is a quick read and may leave the reader feeling unsatisfied by the ending.

The story is told from the perspective of Dase, a gender-neutral person who works as a futuristic massage therapist on the massive generation ship, *Hermetica*, which is populated by millions of people. The book is also an alternate history, as Lea envisions a more utopian version of our reality, one where NASA and the U.S. military had their budgets switched in the 1970s, so the ship could be built and ready for departure by 2022. The reason for abandoning the planet is shrouded in mystery, but this makes sense considering the plot twist later in the story.

The story takes place in the 2050's, making Dase one of the unlucky ones on board because they have no memories of the real Earth and will also die before the ship ever reaches New Terra. This gives the character a sense of being stuck in limbo, suffering from a never-ending lack of closure, and further extends the theme of existential hopelessness one might feel if they were trapped their whole lives in perpetual quarantine.

Dase uses the pronouns they/them, and all the other characters in *Hermetica* are also referred to in agender ways. The only moment I encountered where I could assume someone's gender is when Dase mentions their film professor as being a "kindly, bearded old person," though in this future, perhaps women can get hormone treatments to grow beards if they want them, so even maleness here can't be assumed.

Dialogue is blocked without any "he said/she said/they said" tags, which is perhaps why Dase can only ever talk to one person at a time, but this ultimately doesn't feel like a limitation, and Lea's use of they/them feels organic on the sentence level after only a couple of pages.

All the characters end up a little blurry as a result of being agender, however, what do Dase's friends, Milty and Zimp, actually look like? As readers, we can't be told too-specific details or else we might start thinking of them as male or female, which is what Lea is trying to avoid.

Science fiction juggernaut Kim Stanley Robinson was aware of this problem ten years ago when he wrote *2312*, as that gender-bending novel features a person named Mqaret, who is genderless and therefore, for some reason, impossible for the author to sketch using words. This problem continues in Lea's story, and much like the notion of a non-binary person passing for one gender or another in the real world today, doesn't appear to be going away anytime soon.

Hermetica has another sinister side. Despite the ship's society being more egalitarian than ours in its approach to gender, Dase lives in a state of hyper-surveillance that includes close monitoring of their own body, accompanied by a daily drug regimen. The reader's Truman Show radar should start beeping well before Dase discovers an old scrap of newspaper behind their unit's wall panel, and the alarm bells should really go off when they learn that nobody is allowed to do any experiments related to gravity, which might prove that the ship isn't in space after all. The later reveal of the ultimate truth behind *Hermetica*, which I won't spoil here, is both clever and satisfying—Lea does a great job building up to this moment.

There is also a strong anti-authoritarian subtext in Lea's approach to gender, and Dase can eventually be seen as a sympathetic anarchist in their desire to know the truth about their society. But the ruling forces, never personified as a single individual, continue to suppress any critical information. The reader is eventually shown that the ship is essentially totalitarian, while Dase continues to attack the weak points of this society's control, which is related to both knowledge and forced labor.

The main weakness of *Hermetica* is shared by other literary works of science fiction with political themes, as the plot seems to run out of energy halfway through and then fully gets stuck in second gear. Lea also does a fair amount of soapboxing related to Dase's notion of obsolete gender pronouns, which are interesting asides but also kind of tedious, and for me, these segments only kicked me out of the narrative's fictive dream.

The story also wavers into a kind of metafiction at times, as Dase researches climate denialists in the American 20th century, and there's mention of a choking disease called ARPV-20 that is obviously a direct analogy to Covid-19. These parts of the story serve almost as a satire of our reality, and I suspect that different readers will react to these segments in a broad range of emotions, from outrage to smugness, or even vague amusement.

Despite these minor faults, I recommend that you pick up *Hermetica* from Detritus books and discover the mysteries of this novella for yourself, which can be easily consumed in a single afternoon. Lea's contribution to the generation ship parabola is an admirable one, and perhaps future authors can use this data point to fuel their own creative works, as our notion of gender continues to undergo a quiet revolution.

Is a society where we're all they/them tilting us more into utopia or dystopia? This question itself is a false binary that *Hermetica* and other works of transgressive science fiction continue to dissolve.

Jess Flarity (he/him) is a science fiction writer and a PhD student in Literature at the University of New Hampshire. His dissertation might be about the history of non-binary gender in science fiction or something else, as he's in limbo at the moment as well.

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