Review of *To Each This World*

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Julie E. Czerneda is a prolific author of SF and fantasy, having written over twenty (usually long) novels and multiple shorter works over the last quarter-century. Most of her novels are parts of series, but *To Each This World* is one of her rare stand-alones. Nevertheless, it revisits territory Czerneda has explored before. The novel is a space opera in which New Earth has an alliance (called a Duality) with the alien Kmet, which becomes complicated—and deadly—due to biological imperatives and communication problems.

Czerneda has a lot of balls in the air in this novel. New Earth is now, as far as our main characters know, the only place inhabited by humans, with Earth Original (one of many instances of Czerneda’s clunky writing in this book) lost or destroyed—what happened is never made clear—, the six sleeper ships sent out hundreds of years earlier to colonize other worlds lost, and New Earth now eschewing space travel except via the Kmet portals, which allow for instantaneous travel from one destination to another but are used solely for commercial ends. Kmet technology has allowed for the creation of polymorphic AIs, one function of which is to serve as aides; the AI Flip is a major character. Communication with the Kmet is handled primarily by the Arbiter, Henry, who is one of our three main characters. Human pilots work with the Kmet to control the Portals, giving us Killian, a second main character. However, humans never go to space in their own bodies any more, instead uploading their consciousnesses into epitomes, or clones (I assume; how the epitomes are grown is not clear); should the epitome be threatened with destruction, the consciousness can be returned to the hibernating “real” body. (And if you think that this is going to hit a snag at a critical point, well, you know your SF.) Furthermore, tech allowing the projection of “oneirics,” or humans who serve as advisors to our main characters, into the receiver’s mind while in a sort of trance state, means that Henry and Killian have access to assistance from New Earth-bound folk no matter where they are—the tech evidently allowing for instantaneous linkage across space. The plot catalyst is the receipt of a message from one of the evidently lost sleeper ships and the Kmet’s concomitant concern about humans being anywhere other than New Earth, as another alien race, the Dividers, represent an existential threat. The action of the bulk of the novel, then, takes Henry and Killian with a Kmet on a quest ultimately to seven other worlds to try to find human settlers/survivors and return them to New Earth. So: multiple alien species; substitute human bodies;
complex AI; projected consciousnesses; sleeper ships; a space quest—this is a lot to manage, which might explain the fact that the book is almost 500 pages long.

Sadly, that makes the book too long, though paradoxically, not long enough. Though some of the planets visited on the quest are uninhabited (or no longer existing), our heroes encounter three different human colonies they must convince to evacuate within days. None of these are adequately developed, and Czerneds mainly waves her hands at the logical and psychological complexities that would be involved in such an endeavour, even for relatively small populations. On the other hand, Czerneda’s character-focused approach with her protagonists fails to be compelling because there is little sense of character growth or development. Killian, for instance, spends the novel with a chip on her shoulder, without ever really developing (or, to be frank, becoming tolerable). While one of the points of the novel is the difficulty of communication even among humans, never mind with aliens, the character conflicts here seem largely constructed for dramatic effect rather than being organic. Furthermore, while Czerneda is usually quite good at depicting plausibly alien aliens, there is little sense of depth or complexity to the Kmet, and when we do finally encounter them, the Dividers are an enigma at best. Indeed, at times what is even going on, let alone what motivates the characters, is a challenge to parse.

Czerneda does touch on interesting subjects, such as the morality of using “alternative facts,” one might say, to convince people to do what is in their best interest—at least insofar as those presenting the “facts” think. The intricacies of the insides of the Portals are fascinating, as well, owing something to the Gothic tradition, with plenty of hidden passages and concealed corpses, keys to find, and even a sort of ghost in the machine. Czerneda also requires the reader to consider the important question of whether the Kmet are evil because their actions are inimical to human survival. There is also a profound and fruitful irony in the human distrust of the Kmet, given that the novel makes clear that the humans have deceived the Kmet in various ways (e.g., by not letting them know about the substitute bodies or the oneirics, as these would violate the Kmet’s rules). Indeed, while the novel eschews any sort of overt political commentary, its depiction of politics governed by paranoia, betrayal, and Machiavellianism obviously resonates with our contemporary reality. Czerneda even nods to pronoun use, creating specific pronouns for the Kmet (kmeth) and the AIs (alt), though oddly, and despite depicting queer characters, she never (that I noticed) uses any pronouns for humans other than he and she.

In short, this is an entertaining albeit overlong space opera. It does not really expand or transcend the genre, and its length makes it an unlikely choice for classroom use.

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