



Great Sky River

Gregory Benford

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After the events of Across the Sea of Suns, small groups of humans have settled on other star systems. However, there is a constant threat from the Mechs, a civilization of machines left over from other civilizations and evolved to see all biological civilization as unstable and dangerous.

Great Sky River tells the story of the Bishop family, who fight for their very existence on the planet Snowglade, which has been taken over by the Mechs. The Bishops are one of a number of families on Snowglade, all named for chess pieces. These "families" are more like clans or tribes. All use cybernetic implants and mechanical aids to enhance their perceptions and physical abilities. Personalities of dead members of the Family can be stored in memory tabs and accessed by plugging them into ports implanted in the neck. Bodily functions, such as the sexual drive, can be turned off to remove distractions. The Families seem to be equipped for long conflicts and periods of privation, continually migrating to avoid the Mechs.

Great Sky River Details

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From Reader Review Great Sky River for online ebook

Juan Antonio says

Una novela de humanos sobreviviendo al acecho de las máquinas que los han mermado. Hubiera sido muy buena si Benford no fuese tan complicado con las descripciones sobre las máquinas o las bases de éstos.

Mouldy Squid says

Book Three in the Galactic Centre Series starts some 70 000 years or so after the end of *Across the Sea of Suns*. Being far future fiction, it doesn't suffer some of the problems that *Across...* and it feels much less dated. This, however, does not mean that it is entirely free of problems.

Benford's style is, as always, clear, concise and capable of painting the landscape of the novel in the reader's mind. In *Great Sky River* Benford shows what makes him an award winning author. His use of diction is wonderfully evocative, and he works hard developing a slang that could pass as the degenerate future of English. His plotting is tight and rarely melodramatic.

These high points aside, the novel does have some issues. The future humans, now beaten, scattered nomads in powered suits, spend all of their time running. It is a wonderful conceit and works well; great and mighty man capable of crossing tens of thousands of light years now reduced to the same basic existence as the Cro-Magnons. They have fallen so far that they can no longer even repair the exoskeletons they wear. It's a wonderful idea that sadly necessitates a great bit of *deus ex machina* (quite literally in one case). This is always jarring and at one point groan inducing.

In lesser hands this would have been a deal breaker, but Benford pulls it off. Along the way he contemplates the meaning of humanity, human dignity and human resilience in the face of terrible odds. His commentary is delivered well and is never directed from author to reader.

If you have invested the time in the first two books, *In the Ocean of Night* and *Across the Sea of Suns* you won't go wrong continuing the series even if it is quite a jolt with such a span of time between the action of the first two books and this one. On the upside, it is not at all necessary to read the preceding novels; once can jump right into the story with *Great Sky River* without missing anything.

A solid, if not inspiring, novel.

Amy Rutherford says

Odd start, great finish. I had a really hard time getting my bearings for the first third of the book--a lot different than the first two--but ended up getting sucked in and really looked forward to picking it up.

David Bonesteel says

The only reason I can't give this book five stars is that the *deus ex machina* ending was disappointing.

Perhaps the communications from beings that live in stars and the existence of a hidden ship that just happens to be awaiting the arrival of our hero wouldn't have seemed so left-field if I had known that this was the third book of a series when I began it. I presume that these are plot elements left over from the first two books. Isn't there some way to let the reader know that before he begins reading?

At any rate, I plan to go back and read the prior books before forging ahead. It looks like I still have a lot of great reading ahead of me!

Mike says

The best book in GLACTIC CENTRE series.

Bill says

Well, now I'm hooked. This is the third book in Benford's "Galactic Center" series, but the first one set this far in the future. I liked it. I will have to see what happens in the next book, too.

The author has created a rich world of the future where mankind is on the run from intelligent machines that dominate his world. Centuries of human advancement have seemingly been lost in the years of war. The story is about the struggle of a last few hundred on one planet.

Mr. Benford heightens the interest by allowing the characters to speak in a language that is both familiar and different. The world they inhabit is alien to both them and the reader and the author's descriptions keep it that way, without getting burdensome.

This is one of the most satisfying SF novels I've read in a while.

Laura Ruetz says

First of all, this says it is book three in a series and I haven't read the first two, but that did not diminish my enjoyment of this book. So, for all readers who have not read the other two, don't let that keep you from reading this one.

I ran across this book and realized that I had not read this one before. While I grew up reading science fiction, hard science fiction was never one of my favorites, as I leaned more towards fantasy. That being said, this book is a fabulous read. It took me a chapter or two to get into in, but by then, I was hooked. Humans are struggling to survive, constantly on the run from mechs, in this classic struggle for humans to overcome and survive. The characters are complex, and this is a great read. The blend of science and character is well done and engaging. There is enough going on behind the scenes that really makes for a compelling read, as things are not always what they seem in this book. I won't say more because spoilers....

A must read for science fiction fans - even if hard science fiction isn't your cup of tea, if you like the genre, you will like this book. I didn't want to put it down. It really outlined the struggle of the human element vs each other and vs the mechs.

Walt O'Hara says

I just finished a re-read of GREAT SKY RIVER, the third book of Gregory Benford's **GALACTIC CENTER** novels. This is my favorite Benford series and my personal favorite of that series. I last read it when it was a new hardcover; now I am listening to it on an audiobook. The reader's performance is only so-so but I can't fault the story at all. It really holds up well, an action story that muses on human existence. And giant killer robots. And a Great Escape plot.. why the hell don't they ever make *intelligent* summer genre movies out of material like Great Sky River? It would blow the socks off of the yawner comic book and horror movie pablum we are normally subjected to.

In case you are unfamiliar with Galactic Center, it is a story of humanity's contact with a mechanical civilization located near Galactic Center. The first two books of the series set up the confrontation with Mech Culture; this novel moves time forward hundreds of years to a planet called Snowglade, which had been settled by humanity as a haven against the Mechs. Mech Culture hardly even acknowledges the existence of humans, considering them annoying pests when the higher order mechanical beings even think about them at all-- but they have virtually wiped out humanity on Snowglade anyway. Great Sky River takes place years after the final bastions of the Human Clans (named after chess pieces, a nice touch) have fallen to mech assault.

The POV character is Killeen, a leader of House Bishop, who are on the run away from the Mechs. This is a very different humanity than what we would recognize-- as the Mech threat has grown, so has humanity's need to adapt themselves to counter mech encroachment. So we now see great tall humans who can run ceaselessly with their mechanized boots and consult digital personality chips called Aspects which ride on their own personal network interface and sensor suite called a Sensorium. For most of the story Killeen and the rest of the Bishop Clan are on the run from a disturbing new kind of mech called The Mantis, which seems to have an agenda beyond Mechanoid pest control.

Benford invests a lot of effort and creativity into this series; one gets a sense of the different kinds of mechanoids- from the lower order Navvies to the middlin' threat Crafters to the higher order Mantis Marauder class. Mechanoids are not homogenous, they fight amongst themselves and rebel against the higher order mech minds all the time. One gets a sense of history from the dialogue, a glum feeling of loss and regret as mankind muses on its impending extinction and fall from great heights.

I enjoy this series tremendously and find it worthy, fast read. Highly recommended.

David Gullen says

Benford is one of the SF greats and Great Sky River one of his great books. As an act of imagination it's a triumph, as a piece of storytelling and writing it is by turns soaring, lyrical, and poetic. And sometimes it falls a bit flat on its face. That's OK because in the main Great Sky River works very well and the failings are because Benford seems to be pushing his considerable talents as a writer to the limit - and those sorts of failings you can easily forgive.

So sometimes he over-indulges himself with explanation, and sometimes he doesn't quite break free of the preconceptions of his own era. As a result the narrative can meander or jerk in a few places. On the other hand his views of machine intelligence, its struggle and failure to understand organic life and the catastrophic consequences that result, all told through the story and characters of this bold novel, are as thoughtful and profound as anything you'll find in fiction.

It's his gifts as a writer, his empathy with the human condition and universe-building that make me think of him as a kind of Ian Banks of his era. Except in Benford's universe humanity lives in no perfect culture. The glory days have long gone, mankind is flat on its face and struggling to rise again. Still bold and brave, still striving to understand, broken, bloody, and in its beaten and bested way still magnificent.

Jim says

The setting is a planet named Snowglade near the galactic core. Small groups of humans, the remnants of a once great spacefaring civilization are now forced to live a life on the run. They are hunted by an advanced civilization of mechanized beings who have taken over their planet. The humans steal what they can from the mechs and the mechs in turn seek to exterminate humans like the pests they have become. Things look bleak indeed until a being of magnetic force, finds Killeen and tells him to seek the Argo....

Benford has written a fast paced work of hard science fiction that will keep the reader looking forward to the next page and wanting more when the last page has been turned. GREAT SKY RIVER should please any fan of the genre.

Lauk says

The third book in the saga. It's different from the first and second book and has some interesting ideas. The writing styles are less experimental and this makes the book more a page-turner. Although the language of the characters is a kind of Orwellian New-speak it feels natural somehow and does not interfere with the storytelling. Personally i liked this book better then the second book and even the first book. Every writer has his or her strengths and weaknesses and at times i found the writing describing exterior environments a bit "fuzzy". The strength for me lies in the overall scope and the innovative and speculative ideas. I totally recommend it!

Mike Bruce says

Not near as good as the first two books in the series (In the Ocean of Night & Across the Sea of Suns). Hope the rest of the books get better

R. Michael Duttera says

While entertaining the initial part of the book was a rather straight-forward tale of a fallen human civilizations losing struggle against an encroaching machine civilization on a single world near the galactic

center. A group containing the leadership of the last humans seemingly gets tracked down and captured by the feared "Mantis" and it seems all is over but then the plot twists in an unexpected fashion and suddenly the scale and stakes of the story take on galactic proportions and the story took off in my opinion in a much more interesting fashion to me and became very exciting and how I like my Space Opera, it became epic and makes me look forward to the next book in the Galactic center series. Kind of neat how Benford shifted things there. Anyway, after starting to think this book wasn't going to be as good as the last one in the series I think now it's the best one yet. Quite good and Benford has stopped by now with some style and human relationship elements he tried to tack on in earlier volumes in this series that didn't really add much, at least for me. Recommended.

Stephen Case says

Warfare between man and machine has become something of a trope in science fiction, from the future apocalypses of the original *Terminator* (which scared me to death as a kid) to the more recent, sexy and subtle conflicts of *Ex Machina*. Often these man-vs-machine dystopias play out against the ruins of our own civilization, with landmarks or blasted-yet-familiar vistas driving home the fact that our own creations have destroyed what we had previously built. Gregory Benford's classic science fiction novel *Great Sky River* takes these tropes but adds a layer with an exotic locale and far-future setting that manages to be an even more effective backdrop to the conflict than the near-future alone.

On a world called Snowglade near the center of the galaxy, the remnants of a thriving human civilization eke out a desperate existence in the shadow of a mechanical civilization that has displaced and now disinterestedly hunts them. The machines are not, as in the *Terminator* and many other incarnations of this story, consciously seeking humans out for extermination. Rather, human cities have been destroyed as one would destroy the infestation of a pest, and the survivors are haphazardly hunted like you would a few remaining cockroaches. Over the course of the novel though something begins to change, and the remaining bands of humans realize a new mech is beginning to take a special interest, herding and harvesting the remaining human population. (You might get glimmers of *The Matrix* here, though you wouldn't be *quite* right.)

What makes this work especially fascinating and haunting is that we learn the history of the human rise and fall on Snowglade along with the main character, Killeen, through memories and legends. The knowledge is as foreign to us as it is to him, who grew up when humans were confined to a few remaining Citadels and is now on the run after the last human strongholds have fallen. It means we start to see the wonder of this far-future, now-fallen civilization through his own eyes as he, for instance, gets his first glimpse of the now-abandoned orbital space stations humans occupied when they first came to the planet centuries ago. And the vistas glimpsed here are immense: humans voyaging across tens of thousands of light years to settle these new worlds near the galactic core, a legacy only now remembered in a few lingering cultural artifacts.

It's atmospheric elements like this (apart from a gripping plot) that make this novel work. Another example is the lexicon Benford develops for his characters. It's a language atrophied in some ways, and it fits with a band of desperate warriors who have been struggling to survive against a mech encroachment for generations. It also contrasts nicely with the voices in the main character's head: digitalized Aspects of humans of past generations who live on in embedded electronics and serve as sources of information regarding Snowglade's past.

Which brings me to the technology: Killeen and his band belong in a well-crafted first-person video game. They're more or less cyborgs themselves, unthinkingly using exoskeletons, downloaded personas who ride in their minds, enhanced vision, and implanted radio transmissions. This is all blended seamlessly into the

narration of Killeen's experience, making it feel as natural to us as it does to him, a society that has lived with such modifications for centuries but is running out of the knowledge to keep it functioning. It feels like the gritty technology of weaponry and heads-up displays that would translate well into a first-person shooter or rather that the creators of games like *Halo* had Benford's descriptions in mind.

Benford also brings his expertise as a professional astronomer to the fore in describing the celestial backdrop upon which this all plays out: a world orbiting a star that orbits the supermassive black hole at the galaxy's center. Like Snowglade's history, this isn't spelled out explicitly: it comes in pieces through Killeen's observations of what for him is a standard sky by day and night. Benford uses this exotic stellar locale for a far-flung *deus ex machine* that I can only trust will be explained (and probably very scientifically and rigorously) in a later volume.

I was gripped from the first chapter. The gritty, desperate situation in which we find the characters, coupled with the unfamiliarity of a far-future dystopia simply worked. I was hooked the entire time and couldn't stop reading. (He uses the tried-and-true method Cormac McCarthy uses in *The Road*, another gripping dystopia, of a man's overriding concern for his son in this dark future.)

That said, I didn't like the way Benford's book ended. It wasn't the parabolic ending that disappointed me. You could see it coming for quite some time, and it flung our heroes into even wider and broader vistas that Benford certainly explores with success in the later volumes.

No, what disappointed me and seemed to sap much of the urgency of the survivor's plight was the ghost in the machine that was revealed as their ultimate antagonist. Without giving anything away, I'll just say that after spending the first half of the book constructing a scenario in which the mech civilization was utterly non-human and obviously hostile, it felt strange and somehow deflating (and also just sort of weird) in the way the primary antagonist was eventually revealed. Part of what made the book compelling was how un-anthropocentric it was: even though it followed the story of these humans, we were seeing them in a world that didn't care at all about them and had almost unthinkingly wiped them out. But of course, it turns out that humans are actually quite special and central. (Who would have thought?)

In all, Benford is definitely worth keeping on my "too read" list, and I'm eager to dig into the rest of his novels set in this universe and answer the riddles of humanity's fate at the center of the galaxy.

Linda says

The third novel in Bedford's Galactic Center series takes place some 35,000 years in the future. It follows the life of a human, Killeen, who is one of the relatively small number of humans surviving on a distant world. Their civilization has been all but destroyed by the mechanical civilization and they fight to survive.

This is better than the first two, mostly because the main character is far less irritating. It focuses on what humans have had to become to survive and how alien the mechanical civilization is from our own. Overall it is an interesting, though not really spectacular read.
