



The Wreck of The River of Stars

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Michael Flynn has written the best SF in the tradition of Robert A. Heinlein of the last decade. His major work was the Firestar sequence, a four-book future history. "As Robert A. Heinlein did and all too few have done since, Michael Flynn writes about the near future as if he'd been there and was bringing back reports of what he'd seen," said Harry Turtledove. Now, in this sweeping standalone epic of the spaceways, Flynn grows again in stature, with an SF novel worthy of the master himself. Indeed, if Heinlein's famous character, the space-faring poet Rhysling, had ever written a novel, this would be it.

This is a story of the glory that was. In the days of the great sailing ships in the mid-21st century, when magnetic sails drew cargo and passengers alike to every corner of the Solar System, sailors had the highest status of all spacemen, and the crew of the luxury liner *The River of Stars*, the highest among all sailors.

But development of the Farnsworth fusion drive doomed the sailing ships and now *The River of Stars* is the last of its kind, retrofitted with engines, her mast vestigial, her sails unraised for years. An ungainly hybrid, she operates in the late years of the century as a mere tramp freighter among the outer planets, and her crew is a motley group of misfits. Stepan Gorgas is the escapist executive officer who becomes captain. Ramakrishnan Bhatteji is the chief engineer who disdains him. Eugenie Satterwaithe, once a captain herself, is third officer and, for form's sake, sailing master.

When an unlikely and catastrophic engine failure strikes *The River*, Bhatteji is confident he can effect repairs with heroic engineering, but Satterwaithe and the other sailors among the crew plot to save her with a glorious last gasp for the old ways, mesmerized by a vision of arriving at Jupiter proudly under sail. The story of their doom has the power, the poetry, and the inevitability of a Greek tragedy. This is a great science fiction novel, Flynn's best yet.

The Wreck of The River of Stars Details

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From Reader Review The Wreck of The River of Stars for online ebook

Andreas says

The cover looks magnificent. Flynn is back with a near future tale mirroring the twilight days of the age of sail. "The River of Stars" has long ago furled it's magnetic sail in favor of a more modern engine. The past glories of the ship are almost forgotten as she plies her trade as a tramp freighter. But an engine failure forces a difficult decision. Her crew want to use the sail to save the ship in a last tribute to her old days of glory.

Incidentally, the story is set in the same universe as the Firestar series, with quite a few inside references sprinkled around for the avid Flynn fan.

It took me more than a month to read this book. Flynn's prose is unusually fine, but it takes a long time to get through it. The title says it all, I guess, and the ending is more or less foretold from the beginning. This novel concentrates on the characters and their interactions. Long gone are the glory days of The River of Stars, and her crew is made up of a collection of misfits and losers who cannot find another berth. The Captain dies in the very first chapter, and things go downhill from there. Gradually the flawed crewmembers dance out their dance of death, and maybe they know their fate all along, which makes the drama even stronger.

I should point out that this book is intensely psychological, and does not, despite the setting, move very fast at all. Descriptions of feelings and motivations and interactions are drawn out almost to breaking point. It is a tribute to Flynn that he manages to hold the reader's interest. So be warned, this is not a light summer read, but its majesty will captivate you.

<http://www.books.rosboch.net/?p=181>

Jim Mcclanahan says

Despite critical acclaim, I found this plodding narrative to be impossible to finish. All character development, no real story.

Jeff Miller says

Not often do I so like the title of a book, but this one really caught my imagination and also gives an idea about the book.

The "River of Stars" is a spaceship that carried both passengers and cargo and flew the routes on magnetic sails. She is long past her glory days and her magnetic sails are an outdated technology and she becomes a hybrid retrofitted ship using new engine designs. Though she is now like a magnificent sailing ship that now runs only on diesel engines.

The fact that the title of the book starts with "The wreck" gives you the storyline in that you know the direction of the plot and that there is a disaster coming. Though knowing this there is still all the needed plot tensions in the book and the enjoyment is getting there.

What I so enjoy about Michael Flynn in that while his stories and world building are great SF, it is his characters that truly add flesh to the bones of the SF plot. His skills at character dialog are delightful and have a depth that does beyond so much SF, or really so much of any genre. The crew of The River of Stars are a hodge podge of people who like the ship have fallen on hard times. They are an assortment of hard luck stories that have been gathered together as the crew of this aging ship. Put all together this novel just works on every level.

Jay Glickman says

Unless you are a serious devotee of science fiction you've probably never heard of Michael Flynn; I hadn't until a couple of years ago, and I take my science fiction very seriously. He tends to fly beneath the radar, eschewing melodramatic space opera, in favor of highly detailed, very plausible multi-threaded stories, spread out on a very large scale. Unlike many authors of the genre, he publishes only once every several years, and the level of skill, commitment and imagination that goes into each novel makes the wait worthwhile.

I lucked onto Flynn with a novel called In The Kingdom Of The Blind, a fabulist present-day thriller about a plot (actually several plots) to control world events via the science of Cliology, or the mathematical analysis of recurrent historical trends (Clio is the traditional Greek Muse of history). I then went backwards, into Flynn's Firestar quartet; four sequential novels illustrating how one woman with a great deal of money (and a severe phobia of asteroid impacts), can seed an entire generation of high school students with the inspiration to reach for the stars, as well as the education to get there.

The saga follows several of these students (and some of their adult mentors) from the present to the near future, as they build a private fleet of commercial spacecraft and eventually develop the technology to open the solar system to paying customers. What makes the Firestar books unique is the hyper-realistic depiction of the enormous economic, political, social and especially personal costs of such an extraordinary effort. Lives are lost, reputations ruined, businesses destroyed and the world forever altered by the struggle to colonize space - but the benefits are equal to the price.

Flynn followed this series with The Wreck Of The River Of Stars, set decades after the Firestar protagonists have established the interplanetary trade. The title is the name of a legendary spaceliner, using magnetic sails to ply the interplanetary spacelanes between the inner planets and Jupiter's moons, carrying high-priced freight and glamorous passengers.

But the book begins long after the decline of the great sailing ships, inevitably replaced by faster, fusion-powered vessels. Once glorious, The River of Stars is now a lowly tramp freighter, her sails stowed, her passenger decks largely mothballed, and her sleek beauty marred by a quartet of retrofitted fusion motors. Worse still, her ranks of spiffy officers and cabin stewards have given way to a scruffy, mismatched skeleton crew of misfits and losers, held together solely by the grace of their remarkable captain, Evan Dodge Hand.

We never see Hand in action; the book opens with his untimely death. Simultaneously, a rogue pebble impacts the ship's fusion system, shutting down two of the engines. Depending largely on gravitational largesse to make its rendezvous with Jupiter, the ship needs at least three working engines to avoid missing port, and flying out into the eternal darkness. As the members of the crew try to work together to address the problem, they uniformly fail to see the more important issue: without the Captain to mediate between them, their individual failings, idiosyncrasies, and emotional baggage doom the effort from the start.

With a necessarily limited cast of characters, confined to a single locale, Flynn creates an unforgettable

group of damaged personalities, each with a full complement of prejudices, recriminations and tarnished hopes and dreams. A ship's doctor sublimates her romantic and sexual needs with a drug addiction. The First Officer (now Acting Captain) with a horrible episode of indecision in his past, spends his time replaying old military battles on the ship's computer, abandoning any pretense of leadership.

Meanwhile, the ship's engineer trusts his own inflated ego (inflamed by the sexual rejection of his young and fatally inexperienced assistant) to repair the damaged engines before the deadline. And two other crewmembers, associated with the ship's halcyon sailing days, plot to outfox the engineer by hatching a daring plan to unpack the rigging, and fly into the Jupiter roads triumphantly, under full sail.

There are other crew, and other equally fascinating stories, aboard The River of Stars, and each has a vital part to play in the making of an avoidable disaster. In Flynn's world, character is destiny - each individual's flaws create an inescapable trap, all interweaving together in a blind inexorable march toward doom. This is epic tragedy, rendered on an intimate, almost tender scale. And the emotionally wracking "if only" moments of missed opportunities, failed communications, and personal hubris resonantly emulate such nonfictional catastrophes as the Titanic and the Hindenberg.

This is a dense, subtle, nuanced, and above all, human story - brimming with fallibility, questioning the possibility of redemption, examining the latent darkness of the human soul. I've had to read three times to see into its depths, and I do not plan to review the two unrelated books that Flynn has since written, Eifelheim and The January Dancer, until I have reread them thoroughly. On first acquaintance, though, both show themselves to be just as thoughtful, as imaginative, as realistic, and as moving, as The Wreck Of The River Of Stars.

Jennifer Petkus says

I started reading "The Wreck of the River of Stars" because someone on Amazon said it read like Jane Austen and that intrigued me.

The book by Michael Flynn wouldn't automatically make you think of Jane Austen. It's set aboard a former luxury liner the MS The River of Stars that plied the Earth-Mars route on solar sails. But the Farnsworth engine removed the need for sail and the once glorious ship has been turned into a hybrid tramp freighter that retained its MS designation -- Magnetic Sail -- only as an afterthought. The ship still carries its sails, almost forgotten and unused for years, but which may save the ship when the Farnsworth engines fail en route to Jupiter.

It's a ship of ghosts and the most recent ghost is Captain Evan Dodge Hand, who dies at the beginning of the book but whose presence, and most keenly his absence, is felt throughout the book. Captain Hand has assembled a crew of misfits, from the acting captain Stepan Gorgas to the engineer Ramakrishnan Bhatteji to the third in command Eugenie Satterthwaite. There are so many ghosts in this book, from all the captains of The River of Stars to the previous engineer who never it made to the ship after an EVA to the ship's artificial intelligence seemingly on the brink of self awareness.

There are few innocents on board and most of the characters are so damaged and so carefully examined by the omniscient narrator that there is no hero or heroine. I found it difficult to read and yet I read this 480 page novel in a few nights because beyond the Austen comparisons, and yes I will explain that, it evokes so many other wonderful stories. I've always had a fondness, you see, for the Great Eastern, the giant ship built by Isambard Kingdom Brunel, the engineering genius of the Victorian era. It was supposed to be so large that it could easily reward its investors by ferrying the emigrant trade to America, but a series of disasters brought it

low until it ended its days as little more than a giant floating billboard, although it had one shining moment laying the trans-Atlantic cable that bridge the Old World and New. There is such a beautiful sadness in a ship made obsolete by time and technology.

And I've always had a fascination with sea stories that almost end in tragedy because good people fail to communicate, such as "The Caine Mutiny," or where obsession leads inexorably to tragedy, like "Moby Dick." In Flynn's book, the now first officer 'Abd al-Aziz Corrigan begins the tragedy when he thinks to use some of the long stowed solar sails to buy time until the Farnsworth engines can be repaired, but then Satterthwaite and cargo master Moth Ratline complicate matters when they suggest bringing the ship safely to port under full sail. And they carry their plans out in secret, not telling acting captain Gorgas who is too lost in memories of his lost wife and his lost career and drowning his sorrows not in drink but in endlessly replaying historical battles with the ship's artificial intelligence. And they fail to tell the engineer, who has no truck with sails, of their plans. And because they do not work openly, they work long hours in secret exhausting themselves.

Now as to Jane Austen: this book obviously isn't a Regency England costume drama, but the characters all suffer from an excess of pride and prejudice and sense and sensibility. Jealousy and anger and resentment and compassion and love fuel the dynamics of the people on the ship just as if they were in a Regency house party. Admittedly, the price of failure in Austen generally means you spend your life as a spinster instead of being doomed to a hyperbolic orbit that sends you out of the solar system.

All the characters here make incorrect assumptions. The crew believes that if the acting captain really wants something, like the position of a asteroid, he'll ask for it repeatedly. A young girl feels rejected by the engineer Bhaterrji, unaware his taste tends more to young boys. The ship's only passenger falls for the awkward ship's doctor, unaware that it's a chemical romance.

It's tragedy and I hate tragedy and yet some of the best lines in literature come from tragedy. One of the great lines in this book, and the most Austen like, is: "She was the sort of person who, like God, creates others in her own image and, when they fail to behave as the image ought, labels them as disingenuous." This line sums up the tragedy of the book rather neatly. Everyone has an image they think they project but it's rarely the image that others perceive.

It almost makes you believe that any group of people can't help but fail in any endeavour, especially when you realize the roots of the tragedy can be traced all the way back to the dead captain Hand, who brought together a crew of damaged souls but like a king who fails to plan for his succession, fails them by dying.

I would highly recommend reading "The Wreck of the River of Stars" and I highly suspect you will feel rewarded for having read it. I can only warn you that I will likely never re-read it because I hate tragedy.

Tom says

Very interesting to read in terms of the writing itself. The way situations or feelings are described is clever, for example switching subtly between viewpoints of characters between sentences.

The characters have some depth and colour, but more important are the interactions between the characters. It's a novel about a spaceship but really it's about social conflicts in a small ship alone in big space.

The plot arc moves quite slowly so I found it easy to put down. However, I never wanted to leave it on the bedside table for too long, because the overall story is engaging enough that I wanted to find out how it

would develop.

I enjoyed the science themes, they were credible and well described, but not overwhelmingly technical. I never felt lost or confused about the setting.

Summary: Clever writing, creative story, and focus on social interactions in tight spaces.

Michael Battaglia says

Some characters are such that you have no choice but to look up to and identify with them, keenly sharing their hopes and dreams and fears while reveling in the exciting adventures they're undergoing. And while that's one way to tell a story, author Michael Flynn decides on a different tactic, crafting a story in such a way as to make you look at the characters and go, "Geez, I'm awful glad I'm not these people."

Its not that they're bad people, they're just on the wrong ship at the wrong time making the wrong decisions at the wrong moments, all at once, existing in a novel called "The Wreck of the River of Stars" and not "The Unexpected Last Second Heroic Salvation of the River of Stars". So you can see what the chances are of this ending well. The question will be how much you want to see these people blunder forward to their tragic and inevitable doom.

It takes place on the titular River of Stars, a former space sailing ship converted to engine propulsion and making a run out near Jupiter with a full crew and single passenger. Er, make that a full crew minus one as in nearly the first chapter the captain Evan Hand decides to finally succumb to some strange illness, leaving the rest of the ship to ponder in the wake of events whether he was an awesome captain or they're a really incompetent crew.

Even knowing that doom is going to eventually wrapping its vaporous tentacles around events, its clear that its not going to be happening right away as the book is over five hundred pages and very deliberately paced. In fact, for anyone without a nautical background the beginning may be rough going as he introduces character after character that seem to go out of their way to not win over your heart with their various off-putting flaws and the fact that very few of them seem to like each other very much, peppering their thoughts with various jealousies and slights real or imagined. Its very much an ensemble cast without much in the way of standouts and until the actual plot starts to accelerate like a barrel heading for a waterfall you're stuck learning about the workings of a future spaceship as various characters reminisce about when the ship was more important or prestigious back in the good old days when it had sails everywhere. Its not bad and Flynn's writing is quite lyrical in spots but his tone is strangely flat for long stretches and since the characters are not that dynamic (or hate each other) it can make for some tedious writing due to how dense the material is. And having made it through several volumes of William Hodgson stories set on actual sailing vessels its not that I'm somehow allergic to terms like "mizzenmast", its just that Flynn's presentation is such on a slow burn that it might as well be in a crock pot.

Still, while a number of writers have captured what it might feel like to be on spaceship, he's probably in a genre of one in terms of setting here as he seems to be shooting for reenacting that old Gordon Lightfoot song but in space, with all the scientific accuracy it requires. And much like the beloved Canadian folk singer's seven minute epic, Flynn appears to be in for the long payoff, layering character developments and motivations while taking his sweet time in doing so in the hopes that people will stick around long enough to see the culmination. He seems especially interested in tracing out the rivalries and mistrust that exists among the various crew members, whether its philosophical differences, ego, or the age old problem of when you can't be with the one you love trying to love the one you're with (and while the approach pays some

dividends later there is enough of a focus on who is thinking about sleeping with who that you wonder how any actual sailing gets done) . . . in the process he starts to lay down the building blocks for what will end up being a lot of things going wrong at once.

So an engine goes and the egotistical engineer confidently takes his time. Members of the crew from the glory days start to plot using the ship's sails instead without telling anyone else. The new captain decides to play in an outer space version of "Hamlet" and make zero decisions whatsoever. Meanwhile people make mistakes, withhold crucial information from each other, make the wrong estimates and generally prove that there's never any situation so bad that people can't go and make it worse.

And weirdly, almost despite yourself, you start to care about what happens in the story. Not so much about the characters, although one or two odd ones here and there tug at our sympathies, but as it becomes clearer that almost none of these people seem fated to survive the novel engenders this weird fascination as you wait to see what the final straw is going to be for their hopes. You watch the collision of carefully laid down plans that counteract each other when a little trust and communication would have saved the day. You watch simple errors compound and come back to haunt people. You watch the lone passenger, a dude from Luna, look at what he's surrounded by and wonder if the crew of the Enterprise ever had these problems.

In its own way its effective, conveying the bones of a tragedy that didn't need to happen and giving the cast just enough time to realize how profoundly they've screwed this up before letting cruel fate have its way with them. Once events have accumulated enough weight to make it clear that the book title isn't being ironic things start to pick up and all the sea chickens come home to their roosts the book develops a car crash aspect to it as you watch people who were very confident that not only survival but glorious victory was in their grasps not only come to terms with the idea of utter futility but also the reality that they tied their own ropes around their necks in the process. And because you've spent so much time with the characters you do start to feel for them . . . you may not like them that much but there's no outright villains, just people driven by pettiness and self-interest and an unswerving confidence that they're more right than anyone else. Even so, none of them deserve to die any more than your neighbors do, but some wrong choices you pay for with money and some you pay for with much more.

The sheer feel of the downhill slide of the back portions of the book rank with some of the most funereal and inevitable passages I've ever heard and while its easy to garner sympathy in people faced with the reality of not leaving the ship alive, its harder to do without being maudlin. Flynn pulls it off and while I was skeptical when starting the book he does eventually justify almost every narrative and structural decision he's made when crafting the novel. His reliance on the nuts and bolts of sailing, his curiously even prose and emotional distance from the characters are going to make the early stages rough going and a decent number of people aren't going to be convinced its worth the slog. And maybe it was just me settling in and getting used to the style but I think he pulls it up and brings it home. It won't outrank that classic of doomed seaman Hodgson's "The Ghost Ship" in terms of "oh boy these guys are screwed" but while Hodgson's story pivoted on a sort of cosmic "ghosts are killing you because you're there and nothing matters" this one does one-up that by giving everyone a chance to put their hands on the steering wheel and sail the ship right over the edge. If nothing else, its a five hundred page lesson in the value of communication with your coworkers.

Connie Hensler says

Wow! What an amazing book. Intelligent, complex, shining, heroic and poignant. Hard SciFi - space travel at it's best.

Sharon says

At first glance, this looks like typical hard science fiction. But once you get into it, you realize it's not really about spaceships at all. It's a lovely character study of the crew of a doomed ship--their inner demons, their secret desires, and the odd but curiously touching little community they create. It could just as easily be set on a sailing ship in the 1700s. Flynn is a top-notch writer who uses SF tropes to tell compelling stories about people.

Elizabeth K. says

I wanted very much to love this book: first, because *Eifelheim* is one of my favorite books ever, and second, because I think the title is so very great. It just *sounds* like an awesome book, the River of Stars being the name of a (space) sailing ship.

I was probably ignoring the obvious (in hindsight) fact that this really isn't my thing in the first place. I love the concept -- so the ship was originally a luxury cruise space ship, but now it's outdated so it's been retrofitted with some sort of fusion engine (I think, I saw the word fusion a few times, but more on that later) and is hauling freight with a skeleton crew. But this is also the kind of book that has A LOT of information about fictional technology, and you have to at least moderately pay attention to it because it factors into the plot. And even worse, a frightening amount of space slang. I'm sure some people get it right, but usually I find too much space slang (or any kind of fictional world slang) very cringy. As this was.

On the other hand, I did get a kick out of how the author indulged a bit in some cute literary references in the narrative voice. As well as puns. If you're writing a book this long, you might as well have some fun with it, so hats off to Mr. Flynn (although there was one pun that clearly and disgracefully crossed the line into Unforgivable).

It's the kind of book that assumes a future where men and women are equal to the point of non-comment -- they have equal potential for roles in running a ship, which was nice. At the same time, I was a little surprised to see that this came out in 2003, because there was a gay character whose being gay seemed associated with an attitude of, okay how to describe this? Like being gay was perfectly all right, but still seemed to come with a feeling of being fated for disappointment. It's a view that always reminds me of the mid-1990s.

By the last 1/4 of the book, it had gotten very exciting, but it's a long 3/4 of a book that comes before. And the hardest thing for me to overcome with this book is something that I read in the acknowledgements. I know someone who refuses to read the acknowledgements before reading the book, on point of principle, which I always thought was a little dramatic. I mean, what's the worst that can happen? Maybe the author mentions his/her love for someone completely awful, but how often can that happen? Now I'm thinking maybe that person has a point, because in the acknowledgements I read that the author first had the idea for this story after learning about (view spoiler)

That sounds like a lot of trauma for a book that I still enjoyed well enough. And I think that someone who already likes this kind of techy space book would enjoy it even more. This is also the review, though, where at the end, I strongly recommend that people go read *Eifelheim*.

Marthe Bijman says

This sci-fi work has been said to have “tour de force character development” and “masterful writing”. I was looking forward to devouring all 480 pages of an interesting proposition – a space ship powered by both Farnsworth nuclear fission engines and sails made of superconducting hoops.

It’s worth noting that neither of the two technologies is new (see notes below on superconductivity and the Farnsworth engine.) How Flynn applies and expands on these concepts as a narrative device, is quite original though.

He juxtaposes the energy source of levitation at the level of space flight (with sails tens of kilometers in length and masts made of aerogel), which has echoes of ancient sea-faring vessels and seamanship, against the modern (in outer space flight terms) Farnsworth engines that replaced the “old-school” form of sailing though the galaxies. This is the core theme and tension of the novel – progression versus recollection; the old crew vs the new; even the ship’s current AI being disconnected from the old systems and the locked, deserted, once-glamorous parts of itself.

The drama amongst the crew is played out when the ship hits some space debris – rocks, basically – which rips out the external parts of its engine. The chief engineer, who is hell-bent on solving the problem, no matter how many crew members’ lives it takes, battles on to regain power while the ship drifts dangerously close to an asteroid field and sure destruction. The old captain dies in the first few pages of the story, and his reluctant replacement is more interested in playing battle simulations in his cabin than on being captain. Some members of his crew, who have memories of how the sails used to work, find, borrow and steal materials to get the sails up and running as an alternative power source, leading to mutiny. They have visions of the ship sailing gloriously into her destined harbour, with everyone that sees her gob-smacked with amazement. In the end, the adversarial relationships and plotting (including the ship’s AI sabotaging itself) cause the journey to end in death and disaster. “He stared mournfully at the viewscreen where The River of Stars receded from him into the Void and he wiped away a tear, for he did love beautiful things, and wept to lose them.” The reason for the unraveling of the systems and everything going awry turns out to be the dead captain who had picked up refugees, odd-balls, fleeing suspects and loners and made them into a crew. For a brief moment it worked, and then it did not.

The characterization in the novel is – as people have said – masterful, and Flynn creates intriguing beings, from long-limbed, spidery types who were born into low-gravity worlds, to clones and an African in an ongoing conversation with her forefather spirits. He invents words to match his creations, or reinvents them for his own purposes, for instance “sysop”, the term for the operator who senses the universe outside the ship though her own neural net – a derivation of the actual meaning of the term which is an administrator of a multi-user computer system. His description of outer space in the 2080s, the ship, and the sails are probably the most fascinating, and plausible, parts of the book.

However, it is Flynn’s lauded writing style which is a problem, or perhaps it is the editing of the work. Granted, 400+ pages is long, however, recurring stylistic devices do become noticeable and irritating. Flynn’s plot is that of a classic “sea-story” or sea story – no surprises there. A sea-story features the enclosed setting of life on board a ship, in which a social world is portrayed in miniature, with characters cut off from the outside world and forced to interact in cramped and stressful conditions. In this instance, Flynn used the typical sea story themes such as differences between seamen and officers, bullying behavior, mutiny, exotic locales on shore/planet, naval activity and battles, struggles against treacherous weather, shipwrecks and explorations of inhospitable areas where no-one has gone before, etc. etc. Even sea shanties! Think of it as “Master and Commander”, sci-fi style. He therefore uses the basic plot components of classic story-telling,

particularly repetitive language and indications to the reader of the time-line:

- P. 154 – “There is a story told about Corrigan the boy. This is the story.”
- P. 211 – “Fife thought it the most lonely death imaginable, although he was to learn otherwise later.”
- P. 15 – “And so it was that in 2084 of the Common Era...”
- Pp. 15, 300, 306, 346, 413, 414, etc. – beginning a sentence with “Now, ...”

Too much of a good thing gets tiresome, but even more so is the self-indulgent phrases he comes up with. It would have been the job of an editor to prune them out. Notable ones are: “Corrigan enjoyed the play of numbers...They gamboled. There could be no other word for it. [His words, not mine!] Sometimes, in the gyre, he forgot that they were to align themselves for some purpose...” (p.387). This is a nod to Lewis Carroll’s 1872 “Jabberwocky”, which begins, “’Twas brillig, and the slithy toves / Did gyre and gimble in the wabe”, and a pun on a ship’s maneuver of a doing a gybe or a jibe. On p. 291 he has another Moment of Indulgence: “She was peering at the bends in the corridor, but Miko had vanished tangentially, not circumferentially, and was now watching her from the peepery.” And on p. 299: “But by then damsel, drink, and danish had vanished alike.” Alliteration overkill in all instances.

And sometimes his word choice is just plain obscure, sending the reader to a thesaurus. P. 448 – “stannic light” (containing tin?) and “something chthonic” (earthy); p. 441 – “asymptotic path” (direct line), etc.

Normally I don’t mind reading Sci-Fi if, like with Iain Banks or William Gibson, I know the words have no semblance to real-life concepts and I’m happy to drift in a fog of incomprehension and supposition. However, it irritates me when I know the word exists but I don’t understand the context and have to look it up. That is like Julian Barnes’ writing – just a tad too superior for the common reader to comprehend. Despite the language issues, the book is engrossing and entertaining. As Sci-Fi, it has moments of sheer genius. It takes skill to stretch a reader’s suspension of disbelief to such lengths, literally and figuratively. I’ll probably read more of his writing. I just hope his publisher sorts out the style issues and the typos.

Dan says

I enjoyed this hard sci-fi novel more than many I've read recently.

Flynn explores many of the themes of space adventure and flips them on their head: a disaster in space, a rag-tag crewing working to fix it, people acting like heroes. But nothing comes out quite right.

Very moving at the end (just like his other great book, Eifelheim).

Simon says

Slow to pick up, but powerful when it does.

Jamie Collins says

Excellent book! I fell in love with the way Flynn uses words.

This is hard sci-fi, but mostly it's a character study. The author used the Myers-Briggs personality types to

create 15 disparate characters and placed them on an interplanetary spaceship - a former luxury cruiser now serving as a cargo freighter.

We observe as they squabble, or make love, or isolate themselves; as they project their own desires and inadequacies onto the motivations of others; as small mistakes and misunderstandings slowly add up to a tragedy.

I'll admit that in the beginning of the book the character analysis almost gets in the way of the story. By the halfway point, though, the stage was set and I began to get a sense of where the story was going. The author is skilled enough that I was never once confused by the multitude of characters.

Peter Tillman says

The MSS "River of Stars", the grandest of the great magsail liners, was launched in 2051. But the new Farnsworth fusion thrusters rang the death-knell for the magsails, and the now-obsolete liner was converted to fusion power in 2084. Two decades later, she has become a tramp freighter, bound for Dinwoody Poke, Jupiter space, on what will be her final voyage....

The Middle System -- Mars, the Belt, Jupiter space -- has not developed tidily, and the crew is made up of casualties of the great 21st-century space boom. The Wreck of the River of Stars is their story.

The Wreck of the River of Stars is a tour de force of character development. We watch, riveted, as these motley misfits squabble, beef and try to cope, in the hermetic isolation of a ship becalmed in space -- two of her four Farnsworth engines have been ruined in a freak accident. The ship has 19 days to rebuild the engines, or she will pass the balk line, the point of no return, and drift endlessly away from settled space.

The repairs go slowly, but the ship's Engineer is a master of improvisation, and no one doubts he will fix the engines in time. No one, that is, but the oldest magsailors, who remember that the River of Stars still has her original sails, unused for decades. They decide to fix them up, just in case. No one likes, or trusts, the acting captain, so they don't tell him (or the Engineer) their plan -- which has a large share of nostalgia for the lost Age of Sail. And there isn't enough superconducting hobartium on board to repair both engines and sails....

The Wreck of the River of Stars is a classical tragedy. Hubris, small mistakes, misunderstandings, mishaps and personal conflicts collide, echo and feed back in a downward spiral that will ultimately wreck the great ship. It wouldn't be fair to reveal the ending, but it's not a happy one. There are no real villains here, just flawed people trying to cope, at times heroically. But the Fates are not on their side.

Michael Flynn tells his story in the third-person omniscient, with dry asides as he develops his characters. The omniscient narrator is the Greek chorus to the inevitable tragedy, which develops with an awful majesty. Flynn's writing is masterful. His pacing is grave, controlled, ironic. His characters will break your heart as they work, love, fight, grow, grieve and die. This is a wonderful book, easily Flynn's best. The Wreck of the River of Stars is set in the future of Flynn's popular near-future "Star" tetology (also recommended), but is a stand-alone novel. This is the best hard-SF tragic novel of character yet written (though this is an uncrowded niche). And the cover art, by Stephan Martiniere, is just flat gorgeous. Highly recommended.

Reviewed for SF Site, <https://www.sfsite.com/07a/wr155.htm>

