



# The Highest Frontier

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## **The Highest Frontier** Joan Slonczewski

One of the most respected writers of hard SF, it has been more than ten years since Joan Slonczewski's last novel. Now she returns with a spectacular tour de force of the college of the future, in orbit. Jennifer Ramos Kennedy, a girl from a rich and politically influential family (a distant relation descended from the famous Kennedy clan), whose twin brother has died in an accident and left her bereft, is about to enter her freshman year at Frontera College.

Frontera is an exciting school built with media money, and a bit from tribal casinos too, dedicated to educating the best and brightest of this future world. We accompany Jenny as she proceeds through her early days at school, encountering surprises and wonders and some unpleasant problems. The Earth is altered by global warming, and an invasive alien species called ultraphytes threatens the surviving ecosystem. Jenny is being raised for great things, but while she's in school she just wants to do her homework, go on a few dates, and get by. The world that Jenny is living in is one of the most fascinating and creative in contemporary SF, and the problems Jenny faces will involve every reader, young and old.

## **The Highest Frontier Details**

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Author : Joan Slonczewski

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## From Reader Review The Highest Frontier for online ebook

### Catherine Siemann says

Academics in literature departments write novels about academics, usually satirical. Academics in science departments possibly write hard science fiction. Slonczewski, chair of the biology department at Kenyon College, has written something that's both, and political satire besides.

As far as plot and characterization goes, it's decent but not exceptional. However, the narrative successfully plays with multiple strands of speculation, ranging from genetic engineering and 3D printing to climate change and alternative energy, the impact of the Internet on our everyday lives and the unwillingness of politicians to take an actual stand on anything, religion in its various aspects (in a future with space stations, gene spliced babies and a conjoined-twin presidential candidate, there's also been a resurgence of fundamentalist heliocentrism, while at the same time one of the book's most positive characters is a gay Catholic/Episcopal priest who's married to the college president).

The book's protagonist, Jennifer Ramos Kennedy, is good at almost everything, but, as the scion of a privileged political family, she's been genetically engineered to be that way. There's a potentially star-crossed relationship with a naturally-born scholarship student, but that is only one strand of the narrative, not its center. Politics, as well as the protagonist's coming of age, are more central. The most troubling thing about the book is a campus rape which is swept under the carpet a bit too easily -- the character suffers but moves on fairly quickly, and the reader is denied any closure, as the perpetrators are expelled rather than brought to trial. It would have been better to have left that out, if it wasn't going to be given its due. There were also some scientific references I couldn't puzzle out, like the anthrax strands which were used to transport people and property from Earth to the Frontera space station and back, or the medical uses of HIV. There was a lot more extrapolation, however, that the nonspecialist reader could follow quite easily.

I heard Slonczewski speak at the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts (2015), where she was one of the guests of honor, and she was witty and knowledgeable. Other reviewers have suggested this is one of her weaker books; if that's true, I quite look forward to her best.

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### Vicki says

I could not get into this book, so I will not be finishing it. I found it very off putting by all it's weird scientific technologies. Oh, well, we can't love them all.

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### Ove says

#### What If You Believe Your Roommate Is An Alien?

This is a story about a young girl going to college so it includes teenage love, dealings with teachers and unruly fraternity boys, the whole coming of age thing. But that is the simple part what if you believe your roommate is an alien? Or that your professor is trying to brainwash you? Or that you fear the space station will be flooded? Glad to know you are not crazy?

Joan Slonczewski is new to me so I did not have any preconceptions beyond the blurb which made me think of a strong girl going to college on a space station possible with some aliens involved.

Jenny comes across a sweet easy-to-like main character. She is a spawn of the Ramos Kennedy family which are deep into the politics of the time, on both sides. The political part felt a bit too true and reflects things easy to imagine of our own time. I am talking from the far north of Scandinavia here.

Let's talk about the elephant in the room. Yes there are small mini-elephants in Jenny's room now and then but I am talking about the aliens. Earth is to a large part devastated by ecological calamities but on top of that it is being infested by alien RNA based life, mostly as a thick layer over the Great Lakes but they are changing fast much like viruses. The Ultraphytes or Ultras are important to the story and the whole series. Jenny's parallel between smallpox decimating the Indians even before they saw a white man and the Ultra was fascinating and a bit scary.

I like reading about Jenny dealing with it all and doing ordinary teenage things too. The ordinary things make the futuristic world more tangible. And there lots of fascinating futuristic concept to take in. They have printers that can print out almost anything including real viruses. Hacks are frequently life-threatening and outbreaks of new tailor-made diseases are common. People don't pay taxes any more they are Taxplayers and gamble at a casino instead and the surplus fund the government. Some of the names of technologies and gadgets feel a bit juvenile like Toynet and calling bears for teddies. Teenagers of today would never use that kind of vocabulary but many things might change in a hundred years.

Jenny also does sports. She plays Slanball the game of mind force (See Slan a novel by A E Van Vogt about telepaths). It is a bit like that game in Harry Potter.

Joan is a microbiologist with teaching experience and that comes across in her writing. I particularly liked the way she used virtual worlds for teaching and anthrax for building the space elevator. It has been a pleasure to read this new-to-me author. Her last novel came out more than ten years ago and this is the first novel in the Frontera Cycle so I hope it doesn't take another ten years to write the next one because I want to read it and read it soon. The story has a young adult feel to it but worked well for me at my age. It is also stand alone if that is what you prefer.

Joan told me that the Frontera Cycle will continue with Jenny. She visits Cuba, and discovers that ultraphytes have evolved to grow in the ocean—but what are they up to? Meanwhile, back at Frontera for her sophomore year, the college faces an uncertain future because the casino is losing money—and proposes an alarming solution.

The Highest Frontier get my strong recommendation.

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### **Joshua Zucker says**

Good fun, with some good drama and a whole bunch of subplots.

Something about it felt a little odd, like I was walking on the surface of something much deeper, but the characters weren't giving me glimpses into what was going on. Maybe I should say that the characters didn't feel as real as they should; despite the protagonist's point of view, it often felt like it was the narration of a plot and she never really FELT things, only DID things.

Still, a somewhat updated, rather Heinlein-esque story, reminding me of some of his young-adult writing.

## Tamlyn says

From the dust-cover, I thought this might be my kind of book. I like futuristic novels and novels about colleges so this should have been my cup of tea. But I could only read about 10 pages and got so lost in all the verbiage and "newness" of the world the character lived in that I lost interest. Back to the library!

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## Alexa says

This was a perfect read for me. Slonczewski throws you right into her built world with no interpretation at all; just the intellectual challenge I adore. (Oh how I hate long-winded patronizing exposition!) It is a multi-layered satire of politics, academia, and environmental devastation. Her ability to poke fun at issues that deeply concern her amazes me. What truly caught my attention though is her exploration of gender roles. This is a story about a very shy young woman who prefers to work in the background. The questions raised are: is this a failure – a handicap that one should work to overcome, is it a respectable choice – just one of many ways to accomplish things in the world, or is it intrinsically part of some women's femininity?

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## Wealththeow says

Jenny Ramos Kennedy is the heir to two presidential families and a great deal of wealth. After her charming and extroverted twin dies, Jenny feels overwhelmed by the expectations of the world. Seeking to escape them, and to flee her fears of the increasingly frequent natural disasters on Earth, Jenny decides to go to college on a spacehub. There, her botany experiments, social life, and the upcoming elections all create a situation in which Jenny may either take the easy path of non-resistance, or agitate to change the world around her.

I liked the characters, but I thought there were too many view-point characters, with too little attention paid to each. I had the same problem with the plots and the future tech; there were just too many, all jostling for space. Slonczewski is fantastic at creating plausible but currently-fictitious creatures and technology, but I wish there had been better explanations of some of the tech (after numerous arguments between characters about what to do with the solarplates, someone finally explained what they were 200 pages in! Without knowing what they were, all those instances of discussion were meaningless to me.) and fewer biology lessons (I already know the differences between RNA and DNA, but even if I hadn't, that knowledge wasn't pertinent to the story). This felt a bit like a Connie Willis story, actually; I wish it had been a little more focused. My one other concern is that there are whole lines of dialog exclusively in Spanish, with no translation or guide in the back of the book.

All in all, though, this book features fascinating concepts with a likable but unique main character.

Trigger warning: a character is probably raped but doesn't remember it; no details are provided, one character talks about it in a victim-blaming way but the narrative does not support him, and it is not a major part of the book.

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## Crystal says

I made it about halfway through this book. I was looking for some new SF to try, which is unusual for me, and so I sifted through my "to read" shelf for something that looked a little different. This one certainly fits the bill. After reading reviews on Amazon and elsewhere, I was aware that many found the book lacking in plot but well written, and for me I usually prefer the latter over the former. Unfortunately, the complete lack of plot got on my nerves and I decided to put down the book when I found it too annoying to slog through the technical bits for no apparent reward. I will say this - the SF elements here are truly inventive and integrated holistically into the setting. If a neat setting and innovative technology concepts were all I needed to get through a book, this one has them in spades. The characters fell flat, however. I had no interest in Jenny or any of the other named characters. Except for her best friend in college, Anouk, and her transparently alien roommate, Mary, they all seemed relatively interchangeable. I also found it strange that no actual plot showed up because there were plenty of elements thrown in for conflict, such as Jenny's sadly departed twin brother, the alien invasion by the plantlike Ultraphytes, and Jenny's participation in the world's newest sport, slanball. None of it really felt like it was driving any of the events of the book, however, which is why I feel comfortable saying that the plot was lacking.

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## Sarah says

4.5/5 stars

Despite the minor frustrations some readers might find regarding biology speak and some confusing concepts that take time to figure out, *The Highest Frontier* is quite an amazing, thought provoking book about a dystopian earth and how society has evolved to fit that vision. Slonczewski's world is vibrant and well realized. Every detail of her future vision is well thought out in riveting detail. The plot is tight and quickly flowing and Jenny is a wonderful character to follow. Many reviewers predict this book to be on the short list for many book awards, and I wouldn't be surprised if that is the case. *The Highest Frontier* is a joy to read and highly recommended.

Read my full review here:

<http://bookwormblues.blogspot.com/201...>

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## Gin Jenny (Reading the End) says

Science fiction written by scientists, I tell ya! I enjoyed this, although there's a big reveal at the end that seemed really super obvious and also like the characters should have done something about it before and it was pretty irresponsible for them not to. But apart from that, it was good science fiction and good first-year-at-a-university, which is always fun.

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## Elliott Bäck says

I would give it 5 stars, but for the endless repetition of "DIRG" and "amyloid".

## Jessica Strider says

The Highest Frontier by Joan Slonczewski

Pros: interesting protagonist; fascinating world-building; thought provoking concepts

Cons: fair amount of repetition, especially at the beginning; several unexplained concepts and items, including one important to the plot

Jennifer Ramos Kennedy's culture source was her great-grandmother, President Rosa Schwartz. A few months after a family tragedy she's setting out for Frontera, a university on an orbiting space station. She chose it both because a family friend runs the school but also because it's free of many of the things plaguing Earth: mosquitos carrying disease, risk of flood and methane quakes, the expanding Death Belt, and the need for DIRG bodyguards. But university life isn't quite what she expected: her teachers are all a little crazy, her roommate is weird and has an unhealthy affiliation for ultraphytes, the alien plants that crave salt and spread from their landing site in Utah to be a scourge on the world, her slanball coach wants her well rested, a hard thing when she's volunteering for the understaffed EMS, and there's so much reading and work to do for classes.

Meanwhile, she's knee deep in helping the Unity party win the next Presidential election. Jenny doesn't understand how the Centrist Firmament belief is so strong when people live in space! But things on Earth have reached the point that if change doesn't come soon, it'll be too late for the planet. And yet the Centrists want to expand the solar array that's expanding the Death Belt, intending for people to leave earth in the coming Rapture, relocating to other space stations. Stations that couldn't possibly hold even a portion of the people on Earth.

And it turns out that Frontera isn't as free of Earthly disasters as she was led to believe.

There's very little exposition. You're thrown into the novel with limited explanations of what things are and how the world has changed from what we currently know. While it's an entirely character driven novel, something I'm not generally keen on, my interest never waned. There are plot points that pull the story into a thought provoking conclusion, but for the most part the book follows Jenny through her days, questioning the world and the politics that run it.

As a scion of a political family, Jenny knows politics, making her an excellent character to follow. Through her mother and conjoined twin aunts, she's connected to the upcoming Presidential election; she helps when one of her professor's runs for mayor; sees the struggle with personnel and supplies as she volunteers for EMS, and more. She also takes two politics courses, one on Teddy Roosevelt and the other on Aristotle and democracy, the lectures for which come up often in the text. The book's ending questions how politics is done, and if it's possible to fix a broken system.

The second point of view character, Dylan Chase, is President of the university, and through him we see the difficulties of managing his staff and securing sufficient financing. We also see him dealing with student problems: alcoholism, printer disease hacks, assault, and addiction.

The world-building is top notch: Spanish colloquialisms, tax playing at casinos, unique fashion trends, amyloid (sewage processed by hab shell microbes that's used to 'print' everything from food to clothing to the shelters everyone lives in), the anthrax cables that transport ships between Frontera and Earth, Toynet,

Kessler debris, I could go on. The sport of slanball is pretty cool too.

The supporting cast is wide and varied, though it focuses on Jenny's family, a few professors, close students (including the players of her slanball team) and some of Dylan's contacts (for his POV scenes). Jenny's experiences at the school are also varied, from class work to parties to helping build houses for colonists.

The first few chapters contain a fair amount of repetition, especially with regards to Jenny's family. Which makes it all the more strange that other concepts and terms are left unexplained. You figure out what DIRGs are pretty quick, but I don't remember the acronym being explained. Similarly, Jenny notices an object on one of her teacher's desks that affects the plot. She brings it up to another character, implying she knows the relevance of the object, but it's not until the end of the book that as a reader I figured out what the object was and what it meant.

If you like a lot of character development and world-building in your science fiction, this is a highly entertaining, and sometimes thought provoking, read.

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### **Liz Henry says**

I love this book and think it's hilarious. No one mentions the humor! Well, as far as a book about facing disasters can be funny, it is. I also love that so many of the characters end up revealing different disabilities - asking for and getting accommodations. There are super clear echoes of Hurricane Katrina here so if you are interested in people's responses to disaster (both long-unfolding climate disasters and short term crisis) you will get a good hard look at disabled university students in space figuring out how to work together.

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### **Stefan says**

It's been about a decade since Brain Plague, Joan Slonczewski's last novel, came out, but I'd bet good money that more people remember the author for a novel that's by now, unbelievably, already 25 years old — the wonderful and memorable A Door into Ocean, which won the John W. Campbell Memorial Award for Best Science Fiction Novel, and which Jo Walton wrote about on Tor.com here.

Now, ten years after her last novel, Joan Slonczewski returns with The Highest Frontier, another insightful exploration of hard SF concepts with a thrilling plot and fascinating characters.

Put simply: even after a decade, this book was well worth the wait.

Read the entire review on my site [Far Beyond Reality!](#)

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### **kvon says**

College in space. Lots of floated ideas about biology, politics, and history. Commentary on current issues-- instead of creationists, fundamentalists focus on the biblical idea of the Firmament and the iconology of Noah's Ark saving the select and holy. And instead of inevitable climate change is a spreading adaptable alien organism. The internet (toynet) is more pervasive, and private virtual worlds (think second life) are more alluring. Jenny is a shy scion of a politically major family (think Kennedys) who wants to

escape for a while from constant surveillance and adjust to her twin's recent death. She learns how better to manage her skill sets in college, as well as the usual perils of college life--crazy roommate, reckless friends, first love, and predators. Some of the endpieces were telegraphed early on, and it was frustrating waiting for the characters to catch up. I liked the characters and worried what would happen to them. Lots of details hidden in the background of the worldbuilding.

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