



# Hellburner

*C.J. Cherryh*

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## **Hellburner** C.J. Cherryh

Lt. Ben Pollard thinks he's traded the perils of the Belt for security as an Earth-based computer jockey for United Defence Command. Then he's forced to perform a mission of mercy - and lands on an isolated, intrigue-riddled space station. In *Hellburner*, her newest novel, Hugo Award winner C. J. Cherryh returns to the best-selling universe of *Heavy Time*, *Cyteen*, and *Downbelow Station*, and creates a story of multi-global conspiracy, power politics, and military in-fighting. Here the stakes are nothing less than the future of humanity. When Pollard finds himself stranded on the Sol II battle installation without his orders, I.D., and possessions, he discovers something equally disturbing. He's been named next-of-kin to a man he never wanted to even see again: Paul Dekker, a young pilot who attracts crises like dead flesh draws flies. The centerpiece of a top-secret war project, Dekker has just lost his entire crew in a mysterious freak accident and lost his mind to amnesia from an attempted suicide. Or attempted murder. Suddenly two more faces from Dekker and Pollard's past are shanghaied to Sol II: their occasional lovers, renegade pilots Meg Kady and Sal Aboujib. Together they had once smashed the criminal cover-ups of a mining cartel. Now, they're all caught in a shadowy, deadly maze of power-mongering rivalries between UDC and Fleet Strategic Operations, the Senate and Peace Lobby, and the corporate lords of both Earth and Mars. In this subtle, dark contest with mysteries that deepen by the hour and rules that change without warning, Pollard, Kady, Aboujib and Dekker must survive kidnapping, sabotage, ambush, riots, kangaroo courts, conspiracy, and treason - only to become lab animals in the frontline of an endless war for humanity's soul. The two couples are being programmed to crew an experimental deathship no one has been able to control. And to escape the quagmire of manipulation, Pollard and his companions must master and wield the awesome power of - Hel

## **Hellburner Details**

Date : Published September 1st 1992 by Warner Books (NY) (first published 1992)

ISBN : 9780446516174

Author : C.J. Cherryh

Format : Hardcover 343 pages

Genre : Science Fiction, Fiction

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## From Reader Review Hellburner for online ebook

### Kirk Lowery says

It's okay, but not Cherryh at her best. The plot and themes just aren't compelling.

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### Jeff F says

This is my favorite Company Wars novel, a sequel to "Heavy Time." Very tense and jargon-rich, but Cherryh builds characters like nobody else.

Favorite quote: "You're meat, until you prove otherwise. Now prove it, or die trying. I don't care which." - Lt. Porey

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### Dan Hyer says

Enjoyed it more than Heavy Time. Told from a first person perspective it's sometimes hard to follow. There's a lot of casual references to the technology and political in this universe which can sometimes be hard to follow

Cherryh does a good job of breathing life into here characters, and making them much more human than characters in novels by other authors.

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### Louiz says

This is the second book in the series, and you do need to have read the previous book Heavy Time.

Another paranoid, claustrophobic dystopian book, following very closely on the previous one, with the same characters, in a different situation.

The start of the Company/Union split, with the Fleet shown as becoming the Mazianni and showing the possibility of why and how they did so - although Downbelow Station shows it in actuality, and so does Merchanter's Luck.

First appearance of rider ships, first (I think) mention of tape and how Union train their troops.

I've just thought while typing this out - if you read it in order the first time you read it, you see nothing from Union pov for quite a few books, but they're being built up into a big evil baddy who mess with people's minds, and I can't remember the first book where they appear in pov other than in Downbelow Station and that's a small bit or Merchanter's Luck and that's merchanters so I don't think it counts. I'm looking forward to the first one - it's been so long since I last read the series I can't remember any details at all.

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## **Sandra says**

4.5 stars. A hell of a ride. As usual, Cherryh reveals the story up close and personal, showing us what's happening from the points of view of four or five main characters, in bits and pieces, building tension and suspense, despairing of a good outcome, until finally the whole jigsaw comes together in a complete whole. Cherryh writes fantastic science fiction from a very human perspective, with all the realities of politics, lies, sweat, insanity, and incredible pressure. What a writer.

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## **Shaz says**

This was really very good. It happens to be the one exception to the fact that you can read the books in the Company Wars in any order and on their own. In this sole case, you should read Heavy Time before Hellburner.

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## **Marianne says**

Can stand alone okay, being, I believe, second in a series, but makes more sense if you've at least read Downbelow Station.

This book has a lot of action and flurry and confusion! But it just didn't seem very crucial to anything. I think I just didn't care about the characters. Perhaps if I'd had the first book, I would have been more invested.

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## **Lian Tanner says**

Cherryh's books can be hard to rate. This one for example. It's tech-heavy, frequently hard to understand, full of internalised angst and labyrinthine politics. Plus which I hadn't read the book before this one, which meant I was playing catch-up a lot of the time.

But ... the human stories inside all that stuff are gripping. That's why I keep reading her, even when it means not knowing what's going on half the time. She does space opera like no one else, with all the complex humanity and bitter divisions that dog our species no matter where we go.

In this particular novel, the story of the pilot who has lost touch with reality, and the friends who have been brought in to haul him back, while inter-planetary politics implode and the test program of a new ship unwinds around them, is deeply satisfying.

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## **Ken McDouall says**

This is a rather disappointing follow-up to the prequel "Heavy Time." It lacks the intensity and momentum of the first book, and expends most of its energy detailing the mental state of a somewhat unbalanced test pilot.

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## Wesley says

In the sequel to 'Heavy Time' and prequel to the Hugo award-winning 'Downbelow Station', Paul Dekker is a skilled pilot with the Earth Company Fleet - a new militia being under construction and tasked with suppressing the colony uprising on the planet Cyteen. Dekker is a part of the Hellburner program, a high-speed piloted weapons platform designed to protect its home carrier and deliver ordnance. A joint program between the Fleet and Earth's United Defense Command it's a political hot-potato and accusations of wrongdoing toward Dekker by his late partner's mother, an influential MarsCorp executive, are causing headaches for all involved including Lt j.g. Jurgen Graff, Dekker's superior. After an attempt on Dekker's life, UDC Lt. Ben Pollard, Dekker's associate from Refinery 2 and one of his original rescuers from an accident in the Belt, is brought in for support along with his girls Friday, Meg Kady and Sal Aboujib. Meanwhile Graff, a Fleet loyalist, is butting heads with Col. Tanzer, the program's UDC R&D director over whether the Hellburner platform should even be piloted.

The second prequel to 'Downbelow Station', 'Hellburner' sets up several of the players who will appear in the series' first published novel including Graff, who becomes Signy Mallory's XO, and Edmund Porey, the captain of the Earth Company Ship Africa. The story is political power play and CJ Cherryh's writing is so crisp that courtroom hearings over munitions requests become engrossing. Like all the 'Company Wars' novels before, there are very few 'good guys' and 'bad guys' - only loyalties and history. While the Fleet in earlier novels is portrayed as a glorified pirate force, at this stage of history they're the line between the vat-grown Cyteen rebel forces and Earth.

If you've read 'Heavy Time' I highly recommend the sequel.

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## Nathan Trachta says

Having just completed Heavy Time I decided to return to Hellburner, Ms. Cherryh's sequel to Heavy Time. Have to say a very favorable book, pushing the well past 4.5 stars. Where Heavy Time dragged to get us to feel the character we now know the main chapters Ben and Decker and any new characters or recurring chapters that weren't developed are easier to accept due to not being lost in the chatter/thoughts of the main characters. Rising to main character levels is Lieutenant JG Graff, future 1st officer of ECS 5 (Norway. Btw, for those interested there's another name listed from Heavy Time/Hellburner/Devil to the Belt, Almarshad. Feel free to look it up, interesting with the listing). Others of interest include Porey (future Captain of Africa), Mitch, and Tanser. As with many of Ms Cherryh's books Hellburner continues Heavy Time's people coming together with the main characters being non-conformist. Ms. Cherryh does an excellent job blending this in since there are really three cultures being blended at once (Blue Skyers, near spacers (Belters and Shepard's), and deep spacers. These cultures have similarities but differences forced to be together due to the ultra extreme of Union.

Because of Ms. Cherryh's blending of cultures, story telling, and doing a good job of showing projects in trouble and the interactions there in I'll raise this on to 5 stars. I'll also say that readers of this review should consider Devil to the Belt since I believe Ms. Cherryh intended Heavy Time and Hellburner to be one story, all be it a longer one (she's never been afraid of a bigger book). I'll row down one more time on James S.A. Corey (Mr Franck and Mr Abraham) for leveraging a lot of their depiction of Belters from Ms. Cherryh, to

many similarities gents.

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### **Lance Springer says**

I don't know why I'm so enamored of Cherryh lately. She really take a long time to get going but when I'm done I'm kinda interested in how she got there.

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### **James says**

This is science fiction at its best. It contains lots of futuristic technologies and uses scientific terms without losing you. Cherryh has a masterful way of weaving together social commentary and attacks on corruption into her stories. This book, its direct predecessor *Heavy Time*, and the next chronologically - *Downbelow Station* all are set against the earth clinging to its old ideas as being the centre of the universe and how more advanced colonies are throwing off this yoke. While all this is going on private companies and power mad individuals are still playing their own private power games thinking no further than the end of their nose. Sound familiar?

The main character of this book is Paul Dekker who has suffered traumas in the previous book, and has again suffered trauma while as a test pilot for the top secret hellburner. His associates and friends from the previous book are brought in to help him get over the trauma. One of the members of this group, Ben Pollard, does not really like Paul and sees him as a threat to his plans. This antagonism between the two characters is interesting and adds a dimension to the story as there is not only conflict against hidden antagonists.

Power games, and political abuse always gets me wound. It shows how good at weaving this type of story Cherryh is as it got me as wound up as it does when I see politicians abusing their power and misusing public funds for their own good.

I don't think this is as good as *Downbelow Station* which at this time I think is her finest work, but is definitely excellent and worth reading.

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### **Michael Battaglia says**

Various mini-series like "Chanur" or "Faded Suns" aside, Cherryh has never struck me as someone completely interested in direct sequels to her novels, even if most of them take place in the Alliance-Union timeline and are thus telling stories about different points in history (although I've got the sequel to "Cyteen" coming up in the next month or so, so maybe that theory is already shot to hell). But of all the novels she could write sequels to, "Heavy Time" would not have been the one I'd chosen. A decent novel featuring one of her more opaque plots and a cast of characters that were somewhat difficult to relate to, there wasn't much about any of them that I felt needed revisiting. But Cherryh did, obviously, and honestly the shift in setting makes the characters work much better, although amusingly you need the context of the first novel to really let them sink in, like friends of your friends that you keep being told are super cool despite very little evidence to suggest that's true.

This one brings back our favorite "oh get a room already you two" couple in Ben Pollard and that magnet for trouble Paul Dekker. At the end of the last book the two of them had left the Belter life and entered the military. When the book opens they haven't seen each other for over a year and Pollard is about to land his dream job, a cushy programming gig on Earth where he'll get to roll around on beaches and eat real food and most importantly not get blown up in space. All that goes out the window when he gets a summons from the Fleet that Dekker has been in an accident with mysterious circumstances and has listed him as the next of kin, requiring his presence to see if he can get through to Dekker to figure out what's happened. Pollard, as you can imagine, doesn't take this well.

The early chapters, despite the inherent odd couple comedy, are somewhat rough going as they seem at times to repeat the setup of "Heavy Time" when a crazed Dekker and Pollard were trapped in a ship for a month heading back to base. Pollard hasn't lost any of his abrasiveness (heightened by his desperation to have the problem solved fast before he loses his soft landing) and the initial encounters are almost carbon copies of the first go-round . . . Dekker yelling incoherent stuff over and over while Pollard screams back at him in an increasingly unhinged manner and comes close to inflicting bodily harm on him. You know, like the news every night.

Yet while that was most of the plot for "Heavy Time" Cherryh actually does something interesting and goes way deeper here. The accident that hurt Dekker was in a simulation that the authorities assume was a suicide attempt because his entire time was killed after his position was swapped out but in that timeless tradition of "A Few Good Men" it becomes clear very quickly that what happened might not have been an accident and even if no one ordered the Code Red its possible people have reasons to be less than friendly.

I think a lot of people were disappointed with how little action there is in this one (beyond some punches being thrown) but to me this is Cherryh at her most intoxicating . . . while spaceship fights are nice, what fascinates me about her universe is all the political maneuvering and we have that in spades here, as we follow another Fleet soldier Lieutenant Graff as he tries to hold off his UDC counterpart and deal with the shifting Earth politics that both straitjacket him and give him very little guidance at all. Cherryh has a way of writing military conversations like every single one is a sparring match between two people who aren't moving at all, making every encounter feel like the participants are not just playing with fire but have soaked their hands in gasoline first. At stake is a new weapons project that require intensely trained teams and that everyone seems to want a piece of. Graff has to protect his men and deal with the constantly changing situation, weaving his way through hearings and confrontations while striving to keep the program on track and the various troop factions from going for each other's throats.

Her best novels for me are chamber operas, intensely packed situations unfolding in confined spaces and this is where her clipped and super narrow third person style shines, for Graff and Pollard and Dekker especially you get into these people, you feel their frustrations and hopes and all the places where their own flaws are going to trip them up. The addition of some other cast members from "Heavy Time" form a core team and what's interesting is watching everyone pulling around Dekker despite him not wanting friends at all. He doesn't want anyone to stay but they do (even Pollard) out of a sense of loyalty and maybe duty and a desire not to see him thrown to the wolves and sacrificed.

But its the wider jockeying that gives this the feel of a thriller and what's amazing is how lived in it feels, how natural the interactions between Fleet and UDC come across, shaped by years of events that we haven't even seen, and how she can depict people at the mercy of politics all the way down on Earth that there aren't even privy to except in rumors and edited dispatches. It feels like a world that breathes, where all the parts are jammed so close together that even the smallest twitch sends ripples across the surface.

Is it mostly talk? Oh heck yes. But its the kind of talk where its important to follow what people say versus what they mean, where everyone has to choose their words with a careful precision lest they start a trouble they don't want, where even the spaces between words and the silences locked inside are just as crucial as the back and forth.

She gets people, or more specifically these people, and every conversation, every gesture, the weight of every act is informed by how they think and all the history that they've experienced to bring them here. There's a toughness to it that only comes from pure desperation, where you believe in what you're doing and you believe in the dire consequences of failure and how they'll hurt people who aren't you, and it sings across every page.

I wasn't a big fan of these people when I first them in "Heavy Time" but the time this was over I wouldn't have minded spending another hundred pages with them. If the book has any flaw (other than the slow beginning) its that she has the lens focused so narrowly that few of the characters (and thus us) understand the big picture and how they've affected it but that's something to be expected in her books and frankly, its a minor flaw indeed. She creates a world where the list of things the people who live there can control are far outweighed by the list of what they can't, and the only way to live with the imbalance and not go mad is to rely on each other.

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## **prcardi says**

Storyline: 3/5

Characters: 3/5

Writing Style: 2/5

World: 4/5

Hellburner is the best Company Wars book since Downbelow Station. That series' first - Downbelow - was perhaps the most approachable and conventional book of the series. It had a bigger scope and cast than most of the others, more action and subplots. The sequels have all had a different character. The plots are clipped, the cast small, the worlds uniform, the writing even more stilted and jagged. In Hellburner Cherryh finally seems to have harnessed some of the mechanics she's been working with, but they're hardly tamed. She paints with dull colors and often in monochrome. There's nothing pretty about the sentences. The jargon is mumbled, the grammar incoherent. Paragraphs, pages even, go by without making sense. It always coalesces later in the book, however. The phrases, the pieces, the impressions and tones all fit together in angular forms that are never beautiful to look at but which bring out a bigger picture. That picture is never dramatic or surprising; one knows before it coheres what is going to come out and how the parts all fit. And I still liked the bigger science picture with this one. This was the most ambitious story since the first in the series, and as it and Heavy Time together serve as a prequel to those events, some of the foreshadowing and backstories give an additional dimension of entertainment. I'm also comfortable with the idea that this is remarkable only because the last three were not - that Cherryh set the bar so low with Merchanter's Luck, Rimrunners, and Heavy Time that even a moderately interesting narrative makes Hellburner exciting in comparison. I think, though, that the more direct engagement with hard science fiction and the more complex plot makes this a good book regardless of the context. One has to suffer Cherryh's writing, of course, but there's something redeemable about that this time.

This and the last book are also all the more noteworthy for how prescient they've proved. The drama generated from the nature of a market economy defense industry is a drama that played out in the United



States over the last few years. It is essentially a problem of principle-agent relations, but Cherryh contextualizes it in a way that's not only relevant for the later Cold War era and our present era, but surely for our space future as well. The inner-system/outer-system divide, and especially the gravity/non-gravity divide is a speculative form of discrimination that has been picked up by a contemporary series - one that has gone on for a successful multi-season television series. There's a somber point that we - humanity - are never going to move past discrimination; we're just going to adjust the targets. The use of "tapes" aside, this all makes for a book that still reads as visionary.

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