



## Barsk: The Elephants' Graveyard

*Lawrence M. Schoen*

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## **Barsk: The Elephants' Graveyard** Lawrence M. Schoen

An historian who speaks with the dead is ensnared by the past. A child who feels no pain and who should not exist sees the future. Between them are truths that will shake worlds.

In a distant future, no remnants of human beings remain, but their successors thrive throughout the galaxy. These are the offspring of humanity's genius-animals uplifted into walking, talking, sentient beings. The Fant are one such species: anthropomorphic elephants ostracized by other races, and long ago exiled to the rainy ghetto world of Barsk. There, they develop medicines upon which all species now depend. The most coveted of these drugs is koph, which allows a small number of users to interact with the recently deceased and learn their secrets.

To break the Fant's control of koph, an offworld shadow group attempts to force the Fant to surrender their knowledge. Jorl, a Fant Speaker with the dead, is compelled to question his deceased best friend, who years ago mysteriously committed suicide. In so doing, Jorl unearths a secret the powers that be would prefer to keep buried forever. Meanwhile, his dead friend's son, a physically challenged young Fant named Pizlo, is driven by disturbing visions to take his first unsteady steps toward an uncertain future.

## **Barsk: The Elephants' Graveyard Details**

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Author : Lawrence M. Schoen

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# From Reader Review Barsk: The Elephants' Graveyard for online ebook

## Lyn says

Zootopia for adults and telling a SCI/FI story.

Kung Fu Panda in outer space.

Good speculative fiction where anthropomorphic animals are the main characters and have colonized space. The author draws from classic SF inspiration from authors like Philip K Dick, Frank Herbert, CJ Cherryh, and Orson Scott Card.

While a SF story with animals as the characters could put off some readers and leave others dismissing this as a kitschy Dr. Moreau knock off (oh yeah, add Wells to the above list) author Lawrence M. Schoen fills this with mature writing and provocative allegories about racism, cultural identity and regulating development and behavior of a society. In his way, Schoen uses this cool sci-fi story with animals as a vehicle to explore ideas about the morality of genetic tomfoolery. Just because scientists can do something, should they? And if so, what might be the end result?

Most compelling for me was the idea of nefshons. These subatomic particles of saved memory sort of obliquely reminded me of the Star Wars midi-chlorians. But these are not little bits of creation but rather the essence of stored commemoration whereby a talented "speaker" can call up and converse with dead folks, even those long dead. In this way a character can even go back in time, discovering origins and disproving carefully maintained myth.

This starts slowly but Schoen is just taking time to do some seriously Wayne worthy world building and all builds up to a very satisfying end.

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## Gregory Frost says

What would you get if you put Orwell's Animal Farm, Adams's Watership Down, and Kipling's The Jungle Book into a blender with David Brin's "Uplift" series? You might well get Lawrence Schoen's novel Barsk.

Rich in texture, full of great dialogue, and terrifically realized creatures, Barsk is ultimately a simple story of one character's quest to find out why the world has gone wrong. For the first 300 pages it is anything but simplistic. It's complex, fun, dramatic, emotionally compelling, and as layered as the very jungle in which his central characters, the Fants, dwell.

I realize that Schoen has released other small books from micropresses before this, but Barsk is truly his debut novel, and he nearly hits it out of the park. The engaging story is marred by a resolution that's just far too easy and convenient for the central character given all that's come before and that seems to lose its emotional core. It is nevertheless well worth the read for the rich texture of a remarkable invented world and creatures.

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## **Lata says**

I really enjoyed this story of uplifted, anthropomorphic animals. And as the main characters are elephants, animals that I love for their intelligence and social dynamics, I was happy!

Just a note about the cover: I LOVED the image! The artist, Victo Ngai, has created other covers for various short stories and novels published by Tor, and I'm very fond of this artist's work.

The story starts with the interrupted voyage by an elderly Fant (as the elephant-like species is known) on his voyage to a Fant graveyard. Elderly Fant get a sense of when they're ready to die, and leave across the ocean to this graveyard. The story continues with Jorl, who is a Speaker, who, with the aid of a drug called koph, can speak to the dead by accessing and gathering the individual nefshon (memory) particles for this person. Jorl is a sort of uncle to a young Fant named Pizlo who is an albino and has various other issues and is seen as an abomination by the other Fants on Barsk, the Fant planet. Pizlo is a very curious six-year old and is fascinating.

Jorl begins investigating when he hears of elderly Fants going missing, and wonders if the disappearances are connected to an ancient Fant prophecy. There's a lot more going on in the story, centred around the Speaking ability and the drug koph.

The characters are interesting, there's commentary about racism and acceptance of those that are different. There are ethical quandaries, and I just loved little Pizlo. When I finally finished the book, I was left with a big smile.

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## **Christina Pilkington says**

\*4.5 stars

This is a book unlike I have ever read before. Almost the entire cast of characters are different types of sentient animals who live and thrive in worlds they rule themselves. And yet, while reading the book, I would often forget they were animals. They acted, spoke, thought and dreamed like humans.

And because of that there are such deep and thought provoking themes explored throughout this novel. I read this because it was short listed for the Nebula this year and I can see why. I read this book slowly, even though it was a short book, simply because I kept stopping to think about what I had just read.

It was beautifully written too, something not that common in a science fiction novel. It read a lot like literally fiction in the best sense possible.

I would have given this 5 stars, but the plot didn't always captivate me as much as I would have liked. I LOVE philosophical discussions and ideas - and there were plenty of those in this book. However, at times I felt the plot suffered a little because of that. Just a little though. Overall, it was an excellent read. I'd highly recommend it!!!

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## Mogsy (MMOGC) says

4 of 5 stars at The BiblioSanctum <http://bibliosanctum.com/2015/12/29/b...>

**UPDATED:** US/Can giveaway 12/29/15-1/8/16 <http://bibliosanctum.com/2015/12/29/b...>

We're just about nearing the end of the year, but apparently 2015 had one last big surprise for me. It came in the form of *Barsk: The Elephants' Graveyard* by Lawrence M. Schoen.

I confess, I had absolutely no idea what to expect when I started this book because I dove in blind, and that's actually the way I wanted it. When I first looked upon this novel in my hands, I was struck by this feeling that the less I knew about it, the more I would enjoy the experience. So I swore off reading any previews or early reviews and simply let go. I wanted this story to take me where it would.

Well, what an amazing adventure it turned out to be! *Barsk* was a mysterious and captivating journey from the very first page to the last, featuring a puzzle that begins with the novel's title itself. According to a well-known myth, an elephants' graveyard is a place where aged and dying elephants instinctively know to go when they reach the end of their days. There, they stay until they die, alone and far away from the herd.

This is how the story begins, in a distant future where humans have long since died out. Instead, walking talking anthropomorphic animal species dominate the galaxy. On an isolated planet named Barsk, a Fant named Rūsul receives a message in a dream telling him that his time is near, and that he should start making his way to an island whose location is only revealed to the Dying. Fant are a humanoid sapient race, but their features resemble those of an elephant—grey and furless skin, big flapping ears, and the distinctive long trunk. They're also a species with deep-rooted cultural values, and they prefer to keep to themselves. The only contact Barsk has with the rest of the Alliance is through the trade of specialized pharmaceuticals developed and manufactured by the Fant.

The most desirable of these is koph, a drug that allows gifted individuals called Speakers to summon and interact with the dead. Meanwhile, a shadowy faction in the Alliance government wants control of koph for themselves and are willing to destroy Barsk and all its inhabitants in order to learn how to manufacture the drug. They begin kidnapping dying Fant on their way to the final island, disrupting the natural order of their lifecycle. A Fant Speaker named Jorl notices these disturbances, but gets captured himself when he goes to investigate, becoming the linchpin in the enemy's grand scheme. He is subsequently blackmailed into Speaking with his dead friend Arlo, a koph researcher who committed suicide years ago to protect an earthshattering secret.

*Barsk: The Elephants' Graveyard* is a novel that is unique in so many ways, I don't even know where to start. I suppose a good place would be the setting, a galaxy home to not just Fant, but also dozens of other alien races referred to by the common names of the animals they resemble as well as an adapted form of their Latin genus, like the Ailuros (Giant Panda), Bos (Yak), Cans (Domestic Dog), Brady (Three-toed Sloth), Cynomy (Prairie Dog), Lutr (Otter), Taxi (Badger), Urs (Bear), and many, many more. It's a veritable zoo of different species, and the appendix in the back of the book implies there are even more races beyond the ones that appear in *Barsk*. Schoen brings these anthropomorphic beings to life using a very interesting approach, making them speak and behave like humans while also giving them their respective animal traits. For example, the Brady are an even-tempered species that likes to take things slow and steady, while the Lutr are more excitable and move about with agile grace. In a sense, characters are given the impression of being alien but also familiar, making it easier to connect with them.

Barsk is also a science geek's dream, touching upon a number of different disciplines and bringing their philosophies together. One of the central themes of this book is the question of Instinct vs. Learned Behavior, and the development of culture and social norms. It's worth noting that all the species of the Alliance look down on the Fant, discriminating them for their lack of fur and overall unusual appearance. Fant themselves are highly reclusive, having negotiated a Compact hundreds of years ago that would forbid visitors from ever setting foot on their planet. The relationship between Barsk and the rest of the galaxy plays a vital role in the way things play out, not to mention it also highlights the sheer ingenuity behind the world-building as it relates to our own understanding of sociobiology.

I was simply in awe at how well everything came together in the end. Barsk is a strange book indeed, but it was weird in a wonderful, unexpected way that really appealed to me, due in part to the creative handling of the science fiction elements. A few sections involved very abstract concepts, but it was smooth sailing thanks to Schoen's easy yet expressive style. This is a story that enticed me, pulled me in and kept me enthralled until I reached its conclusion. If you're looking for a sci-fi novel that's truly innovative and different, I highly recommend picking this up.

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### **Jenny (Reading Envy) says**

I had not heard of this book or author when this book was announced on the Nebula Award list, although I did recently realize that the author and I are friends here in Goodreads. I did not go to great lengths to seek the book out, but the local branch of my public library had it available when I looked at the titles, so I figured it couldn't hurt. In a recent book speed dating project (which will post later on to my podcast,) I read the first 50 pages and was surprised to find I wanted to keep going. This is all to say that based on the description, I did not expect to finish the book, more of a "not my thing" kind of vibe, but I am pleased to be able to say I was wrong.

I do not like anthropomorphic animals.

I do not like them in animated films (or maybe I do not like animated films.) I do not like them as a metaphor (Watership Down.) I do not like them in fantasy (I often do not like fantasy.)

Except. The reason these elephants walk and talk is complex and, with a little suspension of disbelief, believable. They aren't the elephants of 2015. And they are living on an isolated planet where they have been somewhat ostracized by the other groups. They are known as the Fant, and not only do they walk and talk, they have created a complex society. Some are scientists, chemists working on a drug that the rest of the society uses.

And some are Speakers. These can talk to the spirits of the Fant who have passed on.

Here is where I need to say that I did not used to know much about elephants. But my in-person book club, of the International Center of the Upstate, recently read *Elephant Company: The Inspiring Story of an Unlikely Hero and the Animals Who Helped Him Save Lives in World War II*. This is a non-fiction account of elephants in Burma between the world wars, but I learned a lot about elephants from it - how they communicate, how they form relationships, and even some Burmese elephant mythology.

That's why I knew that Pizlo was going to be special, because he was white. In Buddhist belief, the Buddha entered the world as his first incarnation in a white elephant. When that little tidbit of this obnoxious six-

year-old elephant was revealed, I had to know where that storyline would go. A lot of the other details about the Fant show a lot of knowledge about elephants on the author's part, and I commend the way he pulled that research into this unique and compelling story.

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### **Sarah says**

This was such an unexpected pleasure. I absolutely loved the level of detail that went into the Fants and the character development was exceptional. Somebody told me that he had been thinking about this novel for 20 years and I think that really shows. This is a world that seems like it's alive. Surely this really exists somewhere? He did an excellent job of explaining these strange animals, as well as the lack of linguistic drift. IT WAS BRILLIANT!!!

The audio was good, although not exceptional. I think it would be just as enjoyable in either format.

4 stars on a reread.

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### **Gary says**

Barsk has quite a unique premise, in which the galaxy is populated by uplifted animals who have no cultural memory of the humans who engineered them 60,000 years before. The Fant (uplifted elephants) manufacture a drug that allows certain gifted individuals to speak to the dead, and distribute it to the other races in the Alliance in exchange for being left alone. An ambitious Yak senator decides he doesn't want to abide by this agreement anymore, and maneuvers to steal the secret of the drug from the Fant, even if he has to exterminate their entire race to get it.

I was drawn to this book because of the originality of its setting and plot, and ultimately found that was the best thing about it. The book is perfectly fine, with well drawn characters and nice details and fascinating explorations of the nature of death and memory. The story is engrossing enough and moves at a steady pace. But it doesn't quite "turn the corner," so to speak. It lacks the kind of dramatic urgency it seems to imply, and a lot of little things that bothered me started to pile up as the book went on. It reminded me of my reaction to another novel I read recently, Planetfall - another book with a weird and fascinating premise, possessed of many of the qualities that normally grab me in a story, in which the end result was strangely unexceptional.

While I was reading Barsk I was rooting for it to be a great novel, and I kept wanting to give it a more enthusiastic recommendation, all the while knowing that I just couldn't. Still, a pretty good effort overall. I think I can see some people liking this book more than I did, so if you are also intrigued by the premise, please give it a shot.

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### **Lindsay says**

An interstellar society of different species of anthropomorphic animals grapples with psychic powers, collective memory, prejudice and a trade monopoly on a critical resource. The comparison with key elements of Dune is stark.

Barsk is the home planet of the Fants (anthropomorphic Elephants) who have a Compact with the rest of the Alliance. The Compact preserves Barsk for just the Fants at the cost of ensuring a supply of the critical drug koph to the rest of the Alliance. This mostly suits the Alliance, because there is racial prejudice against Fants by most of the other species of the Alliance. The story begins with members of the Alliance breaking the Compact by kidnapping Fants in the hope that one of them will be able to share the secrets of koph manufacture.

We follow Jorl, a Fant who is also a Speaker, someone who can summon ghost particles to allow him to communicate with dead people. Also Pizzlo, the outcast son of Jorl's best friend who committed suicide a short while ago for mysterious reasons. These two get involved in the plot to break the Compact and face a threat to the Alliance, as well as the entire planet of Barsk and all Fants.

This is a beautifully crafted book. It has a really interesting interstellar civilization with loads of familiar, yet alien, different races. The psychic powers are also well conceived, as is the biology and civilization of Barsk itself. There's also some fascinating concepts at play, like the ability to redesignate a citizen to a resource, a powerful Council of Information and the sort of influence that people actively using precognition can have on present events.

The characters are also compelling with Jorl's quiet brilliance in the face of unjustified prejudice and his willingness to act for his beliefs as well as Pizzlo's innocent use of his precognition.

I really enjoyed it and Schoen will be on my watch list for future books.

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## **Bradley says**

This Nebula-nominated novel has a very strong aura about it, bringing uplifted races of animals and main characters who are elephants in the far future.

Perhaps I should have done a bit more research before reading this novel, or perhaps the nature of the novel should have been telegraphed just a little bit better from the start, because I suffered a bit of aimlessness as I plodded through the initial sections of the novel. Where was this going? What's the purpose? Where should I expect this story to take me? I honestly didn't know.

Hell, it seemed almost as diffuse as the nefshons in the hands of a novice Speaker.

Huh. Well maybe that was the point, and maybe it wasn't, but unfortunately, I kept losing interest. I'd come back to it, repeatedly, because I'm a stubborn cuss, and that's good, because the novel *\*eventually\** takes off.

The end is quite satisfying, and as long as you, dear reader, don't get overly bogged down in the generally and almost completely inexplicable revulsion and prejudice that every other race holds toward the Fants, then you will, much later, be treated to an actual reason for the psychosis. I'm not entirely sure I *\*buy\** the reason, but there is a reason for it, and it even ties in to the main plot!

The good parts are very good, mind you, and I like how the implications are turned directly into actualities, but I get the weird impression that this entire novel could have been shortened to the second half, alone, and left as a stronger novella rather than a full novel. I had too many "why"s floating around that took away from



my enjoyment as a whole, including the knee-jerk prejudice, the wandering and seemingly pointless early plots that seems to do little more than establish our two main characters, and the shockingly pure-evil-out-of-the-blue recommendations for genocide. I mean... is it just due to greed? Did I have to wait until the 90% mark to have an alternate reason for it? Of course, when we do have the reasons, it's all tied back into the other super-powerful reveals that is very superman and mythological.

Of course, I'm sure that isn't an accident, from actual references to kal-el and a scientist who really digs northwestern mythologies, to a borrowed nostalgia of Dune, Startide Rising, and even The Foundation Trilogy, at least in scope and history manipulation. I liked all of that. :) It's a good homage.

If you like novels that end strong even if they aren't awfully impressive in the beginning, BUT they start with an awesome premise that seems to hold a lot of promise, then definitely check this one out.

There's a rather interesting galactic empire waiting for you.

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## **Emily says**

First - All I could picture the entire book was this - (from a favorite childhood book series - The Story of Babar

Anyway - 3 stars. I didn't hate it, but I didn't love it. This isn't a book I would proactively recommend to my friends, and if there were any follow up books, I probably wouldn't read them.

The best thing about the book was little Pizlo, the 6 year old albino elephant-person. His own people shun and ignore him for being different (and it's never explained exactly why they feel that way about him), but he's really cute. Best thing about the book.

As for the rest... The story meandered, got bogged down in a lot of details I really didn't care about. It was pretty slow in parts. I also don't really care for all the mystical mumbo-jumbo about reading people's minds and calling up the spirits of the dead. Also not a fan of prophecies. I'd love to see someone write a prophecy book where the prophecy was 100% clear and not obscure and missing important pieces.

I find most of the main storyline just convoluted and not believable. The ending was anticlimactic. There is almost no action in the book. No guns, swords, magic fireballs, space battles etc. Overall this book was just too slow for me. I can definitely see how other people would have liked it though - it just wasn't my thing.

I had this as an audiobook and the narrator was fantastic. He sounded exactly like you'd expect an elephant man to sound...so there's another plus.

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## **Donna says**

This book caught my attention because of the beautiful cover and the intriguing title. And after I looked at the summary, I decided to read it because the story sounded interesting and certainly different than any book I'd ever read before. Because I'd never read a book that had human-like animals as characters, ones that walked upright and spoke, had hands and feet, were intelligent, wore clothes, and were basically like humans in every way except they weren't human. They were still for the most part, in looks at least, whatever animals they were such as elephants, bears, yak, badgers, and otters, complete with tails, trunks, horns, fur, etc. I know it sounds strange and not a little bit weird, almost too weird for me. But they were presented in a completely straight way that made this into no cute animal tale. These creatures were historians, scientists, politicians, military personnel, doctors, teachers, parents, students, and so on. And they had ambitions, hopes, and dreams for their future that some of them were to learn was in peril.

But what of the past? How did these creatures become this way, half animal and half human, and what happened to the humans since they were nowhere to be seen in this universe? And why were the elephants, who were known as the Fant, loathed by everyone else to the degree that the Fant were allowed to have their own planet where no one but their kind could reside or even visit? These and many other questions kept me turning the pages, looking for answers. I will tell you those answers were long in coming, though, and it tried my patience, as did the slow pace of the story with few climactic moments. Even so, I had to admire the imagination and heart that went into this book that was as humanistic as any featuring humans.

In this story, the Fant consented 800 years ago to live in exile from the rest of the universe so they could live with dignity among their own kind on Barsk, a planet no one else wanted to reside on due to the constant rain that had turned it into one gigantic rainforest. But the environment made it ideal for growing many items sought after by the rest of the universe. The most valuable item was Koph which only a small number of Fant knew how to produce from materials native to their planet. It was a drug that allowed most of those using it to trip out, while allowing those few with a special talent to speak with the dead. Those individuals called Speakers could, with the aid of Koph, summon molecule-like particles of those who had died and coalesce them into an interactive living image.

You can imagine how sought after this drug would be for those mourning their dead and for those in business and the military wanting to learn their secrets, especially since Koph was expensive and only a small percentage of the population could afford it. And the fact that the loathed Fant controlled its production meant trouble for them when certain powerful individuals sought to control it themselves, which is where this story took off.

But what kept me reading when the pace slowed wasn't really the questions I wanted answered or the cool world the author built. It was the well developed characters, mainly Jorl, a Fant who was a historian and a very special Speaker among his kind. He was smart, brave, sensitive, loving and loyal. He and Pizlo, the young son of his late best friend, who was an outcast from the circumstances of his birth and his appearance, were the best part of this book. They formed a great team when drawing upon their special talents as forces beyond their control closed in, threatening their peaceful people who had no malice toward those who had ostracized them.

This book had some really interesting things going for it, so I had really hoped to like it more than I did. But unfortunately, as the story progressed, it became more and more convoluted to the point that I gave up on understanding everything. Adding in the slow pace and attention to details that became tedious, I grew tired of this book before it ended, and disappointed that the author missed out on a great opportunity to make a point about the senselessness of prejudice. I was sad he took the story in a whole different direction. But I can't bear to give this book less than three stars for an original story set in an imaginative universe populated by memorable characters.

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## Justine says

Jorl is a Fant historian who is also a Speaker. Once he ingests a drug called koph he can speak with the dead by making a construct of the person using particles of memory called nefshons. Pizlo is the son of Jorl's deceased best friend, but because of the circumstances of his birth, Pizlo is not recognized as a person in Fant culture. But his mother and Jorl care for him regardless. It soon becomes clear that Pizlo has a kind of gift of his own, and living in the wilds as he has probably helped to cultivate it.

All the Fants live on Barsk, one planet in an Alliance of planets populated by uplifted mammals of various species. For reasons which later become clear, the Fants are universally reviled, and so the rest of the Alliance is happy to leave them on Barsk. But Fants are also the species from where Speakers originated, and while other species have been able to develop their own Speakers, none have been able to replicate the required drug. At least some elements of the Alliance eventually grow tired of relying on the reviled Fants of Barsk to supply koph, and of course the result is not a good one for the Fants.

The story is one that seems simple on the surface, but delves deep into questions of social engineering, racism and cultural bias. There are parts of this book that literally raised the hair on my arms and brought tears to my eyes.

*"There's really only one choice you ever have to make in any act of creation. Will you be the instrument or the artist? If you're only now coming to realize that you've been a tool all your life, there's no one to blame but yourself. If you don't like that state of affairs, then act! Impose your will upon the world and walk your own path. If you don't, you'll just end up being a token in someone else's game; you'll continue to be used as they see fit. That's how the universe works. You don't have to like it, but you'd do well to get used to it."*

The characters make the story here, and the author did a fine job of making them extraordinary in an ordinary way. Pizlo remains a child throughout; gifted and wise but simultaneously and brilliantly unjaded in a way only children can be. Jorl behaves as one would expect a historian asked to rise to the occasion, but also demonstrates a quiet inner fortitude that every one of us hopes to possess.

*"No, maybe that's the way the world looks once you've already decided to take your path. Or maybe it's just you're so jaded, or you've bought into your own delusions. I don't know which, and I don't care. Those aren't the only choices: use or be used. There is more than being tyrant or servant."*

This book is going on my favourites-2016 shelf. I definitely recommend it.

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## Ctgt says

**There's really only one choice you ever have to make in any act of creation. Will you be the instrument or the artist? If you're only now coming to realize that you've been a tool all your life, there's no one to blame for it but yourself. If you don't like that state of affairs, then act! Impose your will upon the world and walk your own path. If you don't, you'll just end up being a token in someone else's game; you'll continue to be used as they see fit. That's how the universe works. You don't have to like it, but you'd do well to get used to it.**

I saw this title bouncing around a few of those end of the year "best of" lists and happened across it at my library. Other than the book being well received, I knew very little about the actual story and sometimes these "blind" borrows from the library end up right back in the library a few days later, not this title.

I loved this story. Some interesting concepts, new ways of looking at old ideas, a fascinating world and several interesting and likable characters. Set in the far flung future where humanity is gone from the known universe, there exists an Interplanetary Alliance made up of various forms of sentient animals. The Fants are ostracized from most other races and live on the planet Barsk from which they supply many natural resources found only on this planet.

*Our history tells us that we started on the world we call Dawn, but the actual record only begins with our Expansion and the formation of the first Alliance of Worlds, a ring of eight planets that were colonized just over sixty-two thousand years ago.*

Jorl is a Speaker, by using a substance found on Barsk, Speakers can communicate with the dead, although not in the way you are thinking. This is the first of the concepts I really loved;

*The nefshons she manipulated were subatomic particles of personality that dispersed upon their creator's death. But during the long course of a life, everyone transferred hundreds of particles with every touch. These in turn became the stuff of memory.*

After ingesting the Koph, Jorl is able to reform these nefshons and speak with whoever he is trying to summon. I found this idea of shared memory, the uses of memory and what might happen if all memories are removed very thought provoking.

Jorl is in the middle of a personal crisis, his best friend was recently killed in a research accident and Jorl is suspicious of the circumstances. This accident and the reasons behind it are the driving force for the rest of the narrative.

In the process of getting to the truth, the author builds a fascinating world using the physical makeup of the planet as well as cultural mores that have been created by this particular species. There are prophecies of The Matriarch concerning the Silence that lie at the heart of the story and we are also introduced to the practice of the offspring of non-bonded parents being shunned by society at large.

The author uses Pizlo, just such a child to illustrate this practice. Pizlo has basically been ignored all his life by everyone, except for Jorl and his mother who both go against this cultural norm and continue to treat Pizlo as they would any other child. It is impossible not to like Pizlo, who rises above his situation and uses the fact that he is mostly invisible to everyone to explore and take advantage of the "perks" of being ignored even though deep down he still longs for acceptance like any other child would.

*The old man sure liked to talk. It bothered Pizlo that he could so hunger for more people to talk to him only to have that need by someone who had nothing to say.*

Lest you think Pizlo is just an insert to build the world he becomes a major part of the rest of the book and his desire to seek out all the moons of Barsk so he can hear what they say to him leads to a startling revelation.

So many other ideas in here, the Fants exodus when an individual feels their death coming on, the anthropomorphic characters that actually have an explanation beyond "oh, the cute animals can talk" and the

whole history behind the beginnings of the Alliance. Mash this all together and it made for wonderful story.

Initially I was thinking a high 4 star for this but as the weeks have gone by I continue to think about this book so that is usually a sign for me.

Highly recommended

10/10

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### **Viv JM says**

This book was a real treasure - great worldbuilding, fascinating characters, and an immensely satisfying ending.

I listened to the audio version of this, narrated by J.G.Hertzler, and I think he did a really great job of the different voices, so that each character was completely distinct.

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