



Impossible Things

Connie Willis

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Winner of six Nebula and two Hugo awards for her fiction, Connie Willis is acclaimed for her gifted imagination and bold invention. Here are eleven of her finest stories, surprising tales in which the impossible becomes real, the real becomes impossible, and strangeness lurks at every turn.

The end of the world comes not with a bang but a series of whimpers over many years in "The Last of the Winnebagos."

The terror of pain and dying gives birth to a startling truth about the nature of the stars, a principle known as the "Schwarzschild Radius."

In "Spice Pogrom," an outrageous colony in outer space becomes the setting for a screwball comedy of bizarre complications, mistaken identities, far-too-friendly aliens--and even true love.

The last of the Winnebagos --

Even the queen --

Schwarzschild radius --

Ado --

Spice pogrom --

Winter's tale --

Chance --

In the late Cretaceous --

Time out --

Jack --

At the Rialto

Impossible Things Details

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Ron says

Connie Willis seems to be a one-trick pony. She does that trick very well (as illustrated by her recent Hugo for *Blackout/All Clear*), but reading her novels leads one to believe the only story she can write involves attention deficit morons beset by monomaniacal monkeys (usually the protag's friends and associates).

But no, there's more. Read *Impossible Things*. Connie is capable of so much more. Yes, the one-trick pony is still in evidence, but at least one needs only wade through twenty pages of that silliness, not six hundred. But she can do more! This collection of her 80s and 90s short stories covers a wide venue of science fiction, fantasy and good-old-fashioned storytelling. Some are genuinely funny, others so poignant they hurt, but most thoroughly entertain. (For a change, the introductions are worth reading, too.)

Now, if she'd write novels like these.

Brian Rogers says

Short story collections can be so hard to rate. Connie Willis is an outstanding writer - there are few better at either farce or building up tension inside a social story - and there are some outstanding examples of that in this collection (*Last of the Winnebagos*, *Even the Queen*, *Winter's Tale*, *Jack*). Unfortunately to do this she relies on several repeating motifs, and seeing too many of them in a row tends to dilute their impact. It's likely best to read a story and put the book down for a week, then read the next.

Willis is also an example of why we need different voices in fiction: while she spends time in this kicking against 1980's shibboleths (*Ado*) which now read as dated and tiresome, her ability to speak for the middle age suburban wife and mom in science fiction is one of the things that makes her great. It's not the only thing, but there was no one else in the 80's and early 90's who produced things like *Even the Queen*, *Chance*, or *Time Out* when we obviously needed them. (We also clearly need more lovers of classic movie farces, where she channels her sense of timing, sharp dialogue and absurdity, even if I think *Spice Pogrom* goes on a little too long and *At The Rialto* is a little too on the nose - that's likely just me.)

Thinking over the stories again made me go up and boost my review by one star. Willis is like that.

Ashlan says

This one sits between a 2 and a 3 for me, and has the weird distinction of being one of the only books I've dropped as much because of the author commentary as the fiction. The stories themselves were hit and miss for me (which I expect in an anthology, a bit less from a single-author collection). *The Last of the Winnebagos* and *Schwarzschild Radius* were solid, slightly unsettling science fiction that will stay with me for a while. *Spice Pogrom* was an exercise in gritting my teeth to finish something--but I can't fault the execution, since it was a well-done take on a genre of movie that drives me crazy.

What finally finished the book off for me was how the author kept complaining in her pre-story notes, over

and over, that the world had become too politically correct and isn't the idea of "women's issues" ridiculous and just... really? When I look at the feminist science fiction that was contemporaneous with this work, it makes me wonder who she's arguing with, and why it consumed so much of her attention that she ignored the interesting things that were happening in her own genre. The third time it happened, I decided to stop ignoring other things in my to-read pile for something that felt like such a slog to finish.

XX Sarah XX (former Nefarious Breeder of Murderous Crustaceans) says

I don't usually enjoy reading short stories and bought this book only because I'm a Connie Willis fan and want to read everything she's ever written:) Surprisingly enough, I found myself enjoying these short stories very much. I especially liked "Spice Pogrom", "Even the Queen" and "Ado". As in *Fire Watch* (another collection of short stories by Connie Willis, but one I didn't enjoy much), what I found very interesting is the preamble to each story, in which Willis explains her motivations. It gives the reader much insight into the stories.

August says

I started this book this morning while waiting for vital laundry to dry. It's a collection of short fiction from the author of the *Domesday Book* (a personal favorite) so I knew I'd most likely adore it. As it turns out, it was almost entirely love at first read.

As an aside, when moving, be sure the bulk of your clean clothes are not left 300 miles away. It gets... untidy.

And now I've finished it. I'm not really sure I can do this one justice with a straight review. I should probably go down the list of stories and say a bit about each of them. Not every story in here caught me the way that *Domesday* did but some managed to be even more endearing.

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"The Last of the Winnebagos" -- It probably says something sad for my grasp of cultures in my own country that I saw this title and just assumed it was about the RVs and not the native tribe the vehicles were named after. Turns out I was right, but I'm sad it never even occurred to me. This story took one reread to grow on me but that was all it took. Willis' gift for humor and her ability to truly touch dark issues can collide for me and it did in this troy of fascism in a future society. After the second read, however, I feel good and truly touched. This one's a favorite. (Poor dog...)

"Even the Queen" -- Probably my favorite piece in the whole book with 'At the Rialto' being a close second. I'm not sure exactly what appealed to me here more - the lighthearted way it's written or the rather serious topics that manage to get serious attention in that style. It's funny, pithy and very woman-centric (but not so much so that I could not both appreciate and relate).

"Schwarzschild Radius" -- I majored in Engineering Physics. Because of that, Willis' forays into physics

fiction (phyction?) really work for me. This story was not as humorous as many of the other pieces in the book and while that worked for me, I can see how it might not for others. Not in my top three for this collection but a good read.

"Ado" -- This one seems like it was probably funnier at the time in which it was written. Some of the humor does not quite work today. That said, I adore anything that skewers political correctness and this absolutely does. Ado gets bonus points for being able to make dueling biblical passages funny.

"Spice Pogrom" -- This one is a misconception story based around the fun literary saw of culture clashes. The fun misunderstandings on the packed-to-the-gills space station (if you want to dignify it by calling it a station) are really enjoyable to muddle through along with the characters. This one does make my top three, just under Rialto.

"Winter's Tale" -- I admit it; I am one of the people who has always harbored a fondness for the 'Shakespeare didn't die' theory. Winter's Tale expounds on that fantasy and takes it to a place I never would have imagined. Witty and imaginative, it ties with Rialto for my list of loved stories in this book, That makes my Top Three a top four, I suppose.

"Chance" -- Ah, Chaos Theory, how I love you. I saw that this story originally published in Asimov magazine. I'd say I am surprised, considering its very relationship-oriented subject, but as an avid reader of Asimov in college? Not so much. This fits right in. I liked it, though it did seem like the Chaos Theory aspect was made to fit the story, not the other way around.

"In the Late Cretaceous" -- Whenever an intelligent, imaginatively written story works in evolution, academia and dinosaurs, I am eight again, staring up at the T-Rex in the British Royal Museum and dreaming of riding one. Yeah, I know, riding a T-Rex is not a great call. First issue; where would you keep one? (And this story even has a constant gag about parking, so double win!)

"Time Out" -- A time-travel story that focuses more on the 'time' than the 'travel', which I very much like. Throw in Chicken Pox (which nearly killed me when I was a child) and you have the makings for a fun little romp. Not a favorite, but probably only because there was a lot of great competition in this book.

"Jack" -- Jack plays heavily on something that I learned to adore with Lovecraft's early work - perceived horror. Set during the Blitz in London, Jack may (or may not be, from your point of view) a vampire story. I have my own reasons for loving undead tales set in World War II but suffice to say? This is a good one.

"At the Rialto" -- This story about a physicist desperately trying to find the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle lectures had me laughing from the first page to the last. It was only after finishing it (and therefore the book, as this was the last story) that I realized how much it reminded me of one of my favorite movies - Clockwise with John Cleese. This is a very good thing.

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And there you have it, a story-by-story rundown of my impressions from this book. There was never a 'least favorite' in the lot and while I could pick one if I had to, it's my review so I don't.

Jeffrey says

'I daresay you haven't had much practice,' said the Queen. 'When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.'

If there is a *raison d'être* for genre fiction, it is summarized in the above quote from *Through the Looking Glass*. But the book "Impossible Things" also rekindles my anger at the fact that things people like Connie Willis write is even classified as anything other than fiction and so shelved away from the areas where "normal" people browse for books. I think Neil Gaiman put it best (summarizing yet other people)

"I sometimes really wish that all fiction books of all genres for any people over the age of about 12 were simply filed alphabetically by author, because as Patrick Nielsen Hayden once pointed out to me, shelving by genre simply tells people the places in a bookshop that they don't have to go. And Sturgeon's Law suggests that they'll be missing out on some good stuff that's shelved in those places."

But, I really haven't told you anything about the book. It is a collection of short stories, some involving the future, some involving aliens, all involving characters trying to deal with their lives. Connie Willis has this skill in conveying empathy that makes you want to weep for dogs in "The Last Winnebago", feel guilt in "Jack", and wish Cary Grant could have filmed "Spice Pogrom".

I'm three books into reading Connie Willis, and while this collection is the most uneven thing I've read yet, I'm still enamored with her wit, humor, and writing.

Illyria says

Is it just me, or women do write more fluid dialogs in their SF stories? After reading McCaffrey, and then Bujold, and then finally reading Connie Willis, it came to me that while authors like Theodore Sturgeon, Greg Bear, even Asimov and Clarke, came up with mindblowing plot and intergalactic sweep, dialogs between their characters might seem stilted and perfunctory. Compare them with the dialogs between the characters of McCaffrey's "Pegasus in Flight" for instance, or Bujold's "The Warrior Apprentice", and especially with the characters in Willis' short stories, and you'll see the difference.

Willis wittily, and with a wry sense of humor, expounds on womanly woes in "Even The Queen". She cleverly, and comically, wrote about how love bloomed in unlikely situations, a space center embroiled in a negotiation with aliens ("Spice Pogrom") and a science convention in Hollywood ("At The Rialto"). She drew, in rich detail and with deep sensitivity, WW II London, with its unique band of bomb wardens, and a most civic-minded, patriotic, creature of the night ("Jack"). She waxed beautifully about loss ("Chance" and "The Last of The Winnebagos"), and spun a cannily authentic-sounding theory about the true author of Shakespeare's great plays ("Winter Tale"). She hurled barbed critique at censorship ("Ado") and corporatespeak ("In The Late Cretaceous").

I think, if you're just starting to read SF, and especially if you don't care that much for science, and you think your life as a housewife or a nine-to-five worker is too ordinary, this is an excellent introduction to SF--one that brings science and life and emotions and fantasy together in an effortless, natural, funny, and sensitive way.

Julia says

Connie Willis writes amazing novels and, as this collection shows, equally compelling short fiction. The stories in this collection cover a wide variety of stories, although all of them settle some place within science fiction. Willis' characteristic humor and way with words shine in these stories.

Julie says

A collection of short stories by Connie Willis. I thought I'd read more of her short stories than I had, but there was only one story in here that I'd already read. "Even the Queen", which I like. I'm envious of the characters in it.

The stories have themes you'll be familiar with if you've read other things by Connie Willis. Time travel, the Blitz, Christianity, hectic goings-on, Hollywood.

One type of story she writes that I find uncomfortable is ones in which characters can never seem to sit down and talk to each other. The main character can't achieve the simplest of goals because she's too busy being interrupted by other people and circumstances. It creates a tension in me that I don't like. I'm not reading on to find out what happens next; I'm reading on so the out-of-control situation will finally END. It's rather like being overwhelmed by too much, prolonged, multitasking. In the stories, it makes for comedy, but I can't fully appreciate the humor, because I'm too irritated.

Absolutely none of the stories bored me, though. And I couldn't even point at flaws in them. Which is why she's a master.

Saara says

Excellent collection of shorter and longer stories. Before I picked this book up at a thrift shop (mostly because of the interesting cover and a little because of the blurb at the back) I had never heard of Connie Willis, but now intend to get my hands on as much of her work as possible. Gardner Dozois was right in his introduction: Willis writes about People, just like Jane Austen, and that is a big part of what makes her stories work so well.

Annalisa says

Crepuscolare e somnessa, la Signora della sci-fi, in questa godibile raccolta di racconti.

Althea Ann says

An excellent collection of Willis' short fiction, this book gathers together 11 of Willis' short stories, all previously published, however.

"The Last of the Winnebagos" – Willis' intro says that she has been criticized for this story by people who find it too "sentimental." However, it also won both the Hugo and the Nebula awards, so not everyone agreed with that criticism! The book gives us a future scenario that is similar to that of Bradbury's 'Fahrenheit 451' in some ways - the highways are super-fast, walled off from the scenery around them. A photojournalist on his way to an assignment to document a minor tourist attraction, an old couple who claim to be driving the very last Winnebago motor home around the country, sees a jackal run over in the road. This causes him to remember his dog, one of the last of the species, which was wiped out by a deadly virus – but his dog was killed in a car accident. In a case of too much, too late, the Secret-Service-type 'humane society' investigates, putting both the journalist and the woman who accidentally ran over his dog years before under dire suspicion. Willis does a superb job here talking about the various kinds of extinction, different kinds of rights and freedoms, and the priorities and values that people assign, and why. Excellent story.

"Even the Queen" – A humorous story, which pokes a bit of fun at extremist feminism. The women of a family are up in arms because their teenage girl wants to join "The Cyclists." What could this group espouse that has them so horrified?

"Schwarzschild Radius" – Set in the trenches of WWI, soldiers are beset by deprivation, cold, violence and illness. In this situation, how did a brilliant physicist come up with theories regarding black holes that are respected years after his death?

"Ado" -- A comedic piece dealing with political correctness, which talks about what you have left if you try to eliminate everything that might possibly offend someone. (Answer: not much.) Not the most brilliantly earth-shattering concept, but done well.

"Spice Pogrom" – This sci-fi tale shows Willis' obsession with classic Hollywood, which I didn't go for too much in her novel 'Remake.' However, I did really like this story of an alien ambassador visiting Earth's space station. Quarters are tight, and a NASA rep asks his girlfriend to put up one of the alien visitors in her apartment. Mr. 'Okeefenokee' has a disconcerting love of shopping sprees and strip shows, and his comprehension of English is questionable. Mobbed by unwanted roommates, two particularly awful aspiring starlets, an unsympathetic landlord, etc, the tension grows to an almost unbelievable point... (and Willis conveys this amazingly effectively – it was stressful just to read!) But things wind up in a really cute and romantic way...

"Winter's Tale" – I agree with Willis' introduction here – she says that, in general, she finds conspiracy theories about Shakespeare's real identity annoying. However, this story, which speculates on who the Bard might have been, was really amazingly good – and almost believable! I cried.

"Chance" – An aging housewife moves back to the town where she went to college, at the urging of her self-centered husband, who only cares about the job he has waiting there. She reminisces about the choices she made in college, and reflects on how a decision doesn't necessarily have to be "evil" to ruin your entire life, and that of those around you.

"In the Late Cretaceous" – Here, Willis' wit. Again, skewers the academic milieu, when the latest disaster striking campus is the Dean bringing in an unqualified consultant to do observification and restructurification of the Paleontology department. Very funny, probably more so if you're a professor.

"Time Out" – Some similar themes here as to "Chance," but a much less hopeless take on them. Here, the

housewife does get her second chance, and things work out in the end. Also brings in the academic setting, as a researcher is reluctantly recruited to work on a seemingly ridiculous experiment involving time travel.

"Jack" – Set during the Blitz of WWII, when normal British citizens organized to put out fires and rescue victims of bombings on a nightly basis. One team gets a new member who seems to have an almost preternatural sense for discovering where people might be trapped under rubble, and rescuing them. But one man suspects menace – is it just paranoia caused by war and stress.. or is there something more to his suspicions?

"At the Rialto" – Here, Willis applies ideas of quantum physics to researchers attending a conference in Hollywood. The weakest story in the lot, I found it somewhat annoying. Oh well, can't win 'em all!

Elizabeth K. says

What I learned from this book: I either love or hate Connie Willis short stories. Despite being a big fan of *To Say Nothing of the Dog*, I am going to have to pass on Willis doing comedy in the future.

I'm not sure what aspect of her humorous writing is the most annoying. Candidates are 1. it feels like there is a (pause) at the end of each zinger (and they are very self-consciously zingers) for the benefit of the reader to schedule time to guffaw; 2. her targets are often one of these knee-slapping topics: doddering professors, red tape (gosh, isn't it silly?), and Idiot Manchild Husbands (did she have a bad divorce or something?); and 3. the relentless stupidity and obtuseness of others, which makes me sad that she has to go through life thinking so many other people are stupid and obtuse.

On the plus side, I very much enjoy her stories that aren't trying to be screwball comedies. In this collection, there was a terrific one about Shakespeare conspiracies and a really good one about the London bombings (although, interestingly, not exactly a *Firewatch* story).

Grade: Meh. C+? B-?

Recommended: if I had this to do over, I would have ditched the stories I wasn't enjoying and skipped ahead to find ones I liked better.

Marie says

I had high hopes of enjoying this since I simply adored "To Say Nothing of the Dog" and "Doomsday Book" but I guess Connie Willis' short fiction isn't as appealing to me. The first story "The Last Winnebago" was dated in amusing ways - you know how it is. We can foresee all these future tech advances - her characters have ring tones that identify callers, but their phones are tied to their homes and cars, not carried around. The main character is photographer and has FILM. Actual film. Wow. I forgot that used to be a thing.

BUT... of course it's easy to snicker at failures of prognostication in science fiction. The story has a very tight plot, complex and neatly tied up at the end, which I think is Willis' strong suit.

My favorite story was the second-to-last one, "Jack", a tale of London during the blitz that doesn't pull any punches - also considered a Willis strong point.

Terence says

Not being a big fan of humorous SF (*The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* was good but the subsequent books got less and less interesting), I found most of the stories in this collection...meh. To be honest, I couldn't even bring myself to finish some of the stories.

That said, "Winter's Tale" is a wonderful answer to all the "who was Shakespeare" conspiracy theorists and alone deserves 4 stars.
