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Castaways between the stars...

Trapped in the confines of their fragile lifeship, a tiny band of aliens and humans faces the awesome challenge of survival after the mysterious explosion of a giant spaceship.

Giles Steel, a member of Earth's master race, assumes responsibility for erupting tempers, the dwindling food supply...and the saboteur whose ugly work has already begun!

The Lifeship Details

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From Reader Review *The Lifeship* for online ebook

Scott Holstad says

I so thoroughly enjoyed this small sci fi novel that I was and am completely mystified as to its horribly low online rating. I found it action packed, tension filled, and a unique mystery that was hard to uncover until the very end.

Giles Steel is an Adelborn, one of the earth's select and selected ruling class, overseeing the many millions of common arbites, laborers who are taught to obey and live as slaves. Steel is helping to oversee taking a group of arbites to a colony world from Earth on an alien Albenareth space ship when the ship is rocked by an explosion, apparently by a bomb some saboteur has placed on it. Steel helps some eight arbites get to a lifeship with two Albenareth, a captain and an engineer, and they take off, and then the trouble really begins. For the Albenareth, Heaven entails space going, and ultimately dying in space. Thus, these two aliens were denied their shot at Heaven by these humans, which doesn't sit well with them. Then, some of these arbites seem a little too ... independent ... for Steel and at some point, he has to deal with near mutiny. One turns out to be a World Police plainclothes cop, another an underground troublemaker, another a drug addict, etc. They all turn out to be more complex and more human than Steel had ever thought possible, however, and he becomes close to them all as day turns into night turns into day.

The Captain is determined to go to the original ship's destination, which is over 100 days away, even though there's an alternative destination less than halfway there. It's a matter of "honor," of delivering her (cause the captain is a female) humans -- dead or alive -- to their destination no matter what since her ship was blown up in order to save some honor. And the engineer has to go outside to make repairs on the engine and doesn't survive, but makes it back into the ship before dying. The captain feeds his body into the communal food trough, a recyclable vine of some sort that produces fruit and liquid and the arbites go nuts. Steel decides he has to set an example and tells them to man up, this is part of survival, life and death, just deal.

What no one knows is Steel is going to the Colony worlds in search of an old Adelborn buddy, Paul, who is trying to create an arbite revolution and destroy society as it exists, even though Steel and his younger buddies are ultimately in long term favor of providing arbites with their freedom and education and opportunities. Just not overnight. And he's come to assassinate Paul. And Paul is on this planet that is halfway between where the lifeship is and where their original destination was. In other words, where he is trying to unsuccessfully convince the Captain to take the lifeship. How did he know they'd be in that area of space? How could he have known there'd be an explosion crippling the ship, sending it near that planet? Finally, in desperation, before it becomes too late, he offers the Captain his last card -- he offers to give the Captain the person responsible for bombing his ship after the Captain has taken the humans to this alternative planet. He does so out of a sense of humanity and responsibility for the arbites onboard, as he has come to view them as real, legitimate, worthwhile people and not just nameless slaves. He's willing to give up his mission and his life to save them. Because it was he who placed the bomb. The Captain relents and adjusts course. However, the captain is pregnant and is growing weaker, believe it or not, all the time. Within a day or two, she goes into a coma. Before she could make the final course adjustment. There is absolute panic aboard the ship and everyone looks to Steel to save them while he tries to tell them that interstellar navigation is a scientific art. You can't just DO it. But he sits down with a computer whiz arbite and they start trying to work out some details as to where they are, where they need to go, what adjustments and corrections to make, and over the course of time, they do, even as their poisoned food supply runs low and then runs out. Just as they are passing out from lack of fluids and food, they are contacted by an Albenareth ship, are brought water, and are saved!

On this planet, at last, Steel makes arrangements to travel back to Earth in a couple of days and goes to see his contact while in search of Paul. However, he's been told his contact died a week or two ago, but his contact had a companion and that companion may be of some help. So he goes. And when he gets there, he goes in and, surprise, is met by someone holding a laser gun -- one of "his" arbites! He tells Steel he's there to help him while the others are out looking for him, but Steel is nervous because this man is rather simple, even though he's generally good. And soon the others come into the house, led by the police woman also carrying a laser gun. She shoots the other man and kills him and Paul, the Adelborn Steel is seeking, appears. He and Steel speak and continue to disagree, but it's clear that Biset, the police woman, is telling everyone what to do and she tells Steel of a plan by the "Association" to kill ALL of the Adelborn and manager-level arbites within six months all in one day and establish a new arbite-only world, led, of course, by she and her cronies. He's aghast at the suggestion that many millions of people would all be killed in one day by this plan, but then she shoots him, wounding him, and he feels some pain. She then tells another woman to shoot him again, and this woman does, even though she's a "friend" and clearly doesn't want to. Steel wakes to her tying him to his vehicle, complete with his two gunshot wounds, and the corpse of the man Biset killed a little while ago. She tells him to go to a hospital and sets the vehicle off toward the main city and with what little strength he has left, he tells the vehicle to head for the Albenareth section of the city. When he arrives, he is asked what he wants and he asks for the Captain and asks that she come to see him at the gate. She does, even though this is a little odd, as they were constantly at each other's throats during their travels and his successful piloting of her ship to the planet while she was in a coma is more personal humiliation for her. It's one of the more unbelievable aspects of the book. Nonetheless, he asks for her help. He tells her both Albenareth and Human races lack something the other has and can help each other by helping each other and if she helps him now, she can save a huge number of humans and can conceivably help kick start a new type of relations between the races that could lead to saving each race. A big speech with big ideas, sure, but why not swing for the fences? She asks him what could they possibly have in common that they currently lack and he says "friendship," a term she is unfamiliar with. The irony is, he grew up without friends himself, taken from his family and trained for his duty and life since age four and best student/friends with Paul back in the day, which doesn't say much. But it's his only hope. He describes human friendship and she is interested enough to decide it's worth the risk, so she goes with him back to the house where he was wounded. They enter and the group is still there and then rather than take them by surprise and use the alien's size and strength to disarm them, the Albenareth announces that Steel has told her of human friendship and she would like to hear more of this. Um, disaster. Everyone is staring. Steel immediately appeals to Paul, who ironically is now tied up and bleeding. But Paul coldly blows him off and tells him they were never friends. Biset then tells the others they should kill Steel, but one, an arbite woman Steel befriended on the lifeship named Mara, comes over to him and announces her friendship. So then do two others, one of whom he saved from drug addiction, the other of whom he used as a peer to help them guide the ship to safety with the use of his computer and his head for numbers. Then two more come over to his side. Biset loses it and raises her gun, but the alien captain heads for her and before she can do any real damage, she kills her and then the room is full of both human and Albenareth police. They were followed and now all is known and presumably, all will be better.

The book ends with this scene and it could have ended better. For instance, Steel had told the arbites on the lifeship that if they just worked at co-existing and surviving, he'd buy their indentured contracts and free them all when they arrived on the planet and I longed to see that and see what would happen to them. But I was denied that and it was disappointing. Moreover, the thing that actually led to saving Steel and the plot was somewhat weak, in my opinion. Friendship between races. Maybe. But really, it was the killing of an arbite police woman in an underground plot, which still has thousands, maybe millions, of people involved, that Steel told the alien would save possibly millions of human lives. I don't know if killing this one human accomplished that. I'm not sure it did. It feels a little weak and hollow to me. I wonder if the authors couldn't have thought the ending out a little bit better and come up with something more solid, because everything up

to that point had been tight -- everything had been covered, all angles, all plans, all plots, all details. It was a good, entertaining, tension-filled story. To end it so weakly just forces me to drop my rating from five stars to four, which is unfortunate, because I enjoyed this book so much, but if the ending is weak, it can't be a five star book, no matter what. Nonetheless, it's certainly a short, fun book to read. I read it in one day. It's entertaining and light. And it's certainly recommended.

Roger says

Excellent, very suspenseful while exploring relationships between different castes of humans and their alien captain, potential conflicts suppressed as they cooperate to survive.

colleen says

read 07.05.84

Sean Randall says

Torpid in spots, lacking much of Harrison's distinctive input. Nonetheless interesting, I was reminded a little of James White.

Foxtower says

I couldn't imagine creating a story that almost entirely takes place in one small space, yet Dickson manages to weave an interesting tale of human conflict, human/alien conflict and challenging cultural assumptions for both aliens and humans in a tiny ship far from anywhere.

John says

1983 grade C

Harry Harrison was the author I read this under.

D.J. Sylvis says

The storytelling is kind of muddy, but it's pulled together in some interesting ways toward the end.

L. says

Very good--a random SF novel from the seventies, out of print for decades==it's awesome. A hidden gem.

Scott Harris says

I read this book in high school and got an urge to go back and re-read it. Although the social differences between humans and the aliens was interesting and obviously the main point of the book, I found the technological speculation to be very good. Hidden flat panel displays in the walls of the lifeship? Scrolling back through route information on both the life ship and the dune buggy, and on the dune buggy giving it voice directions and having it follow them. That's all stuff that can be done now but hard to imagin in 1976.
