



Probability Space

Nancy Kress

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Nancy Kress cemented her reputation in SF with the publication of her multiple-award-winning novella, "Beggars in Spain," which became the basis for her extremely successful Beggars Trilogy (comprising *Beggars in Spain*, *Beggars and Choosers*, and *Beggars Ride*).

And now she brings us *Probability Space*, the conclusion of the trilogy that began with *Probability Moon* and then *Probability Sun*, which is centered on the same world as Kress's Nebula Award-winning novelette, "Flowers of Aulit Prison." The Probability Trilogy has already been widely recognized as the next great work by this important SF writer.

In *Probability Space*, humanity's war with the alien Fallers continues, and it is a war we are losing. Our implacable foes ignore all attempts at communication, and they take no prisoners. Our only hope lies with an unlikely coalition: Major Lyle Kaufman, retired warrior; Marbet Grant, the Sensitive who's involved with Kaufman; Amanda, a very confused fourteen-year-old girl; and Magdalena, one of the biggest power brokers in all of human space.

As the action moves from Earth to Mars to the farthest reaches of known space, with civil unrest back home and alien war in deep space, four humans--armed with little more than an unproven theory--try to enter the Fallers' home star system. It's a desperate gamble, and the fate of the entire universe may hang in the balance.

Probability Space Details

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From Reader Review Probability Space for online ebook

Steven says

The beginning chapters bode poorly...several focus on Amanda Capelo, who was unimportant before and remains uninteresting now. The absence of World characters early on is surprisingly noticeable.

Halfway point:

Amanda Capelo is a boring and useless character - I'm sure that plot will go somewhere eventually but it sure hasn't yet.

Midway plot twist: brilliant. The setup is slightly clunky in terms of strange character behavior. It's marred by a huge and unnecessary factual inconsistency with book 2.

Ending: the ending is energetic, but fairly nonsensical. It gets heavily political. There is an action that introduces drama between two characters that's treated, literally, as "irreversible"...except it's an easily correctable problem.

The "space tunnels" never do make sense logistically in terms of where they lead.

Doug Dandridge says

The third book of Nancy Kress's series about a new fundamental particle and the ancient artifact that uses it, it ratchets up the tension while introducing a new menace that could end space as we know it. Throw in a coupe in the solar system, and a new commander who wants to end the war with a victory at all costs, a child trying to find her kidnapped physicist father who holds the key to understanding the alien tech, and a rescue mission to World, which is learning to adjust to new cultural imperatives without share reality, and you have another winner. The only real problem I had with the book was the military tech, ie, if a small ship could destroy a battleship with one blast, why not only build small ships. However, that is just my take as a writer of military science fiction, and in no way detracted from the overall story. Highly recommended.

Jacqui-Lou Read says

Consider this a review for the entire trilogy: I started reading because the first book seemed like it could be a Le Guin-esque anthropological first contact story, which is a sub genre I'm really into. Then I got hooked, and needed to read the following books... despite my understanding they would be underwhelming at best. The characters are two-dimensional. The prose is dull and inspiring. Constant exposition makes for a tedious read: there are passages of info-dumping that are repeated verbatim in each book. I am talking several consecutive pages of cut-and-paste in each book. Not sure if that was lazy writing or an editing decision, but I was pretty appalled. There's also a sexist undercurrent that surfaces occasionally, which was weird and jarring. I seek out sci-fi books by women so I can avoid that kind of thing, but I guess anyone can internalise misogyny.

Anyway, I only have myself to blame for continuing to read this entire trilogy!

Linda says

I'm a fan of Nancy Kress' novels. I enjoyed the first book in this series quite a bit and enjoyed the second book, though not as much. This one, however, fell flat for me.

The people of *World* that made the first two books so interesting are only a footnote in this story. This is almost entirely concerned with human politics and maneuverings and it just never worked for me as that sort of story.

That isn't to say I hated the story. I didn't, but I didn't really like it either. If it weren't the (apparent) end of the series, I'd be inclined to stop reading any more after this one.

David Cain says

This is the concluding volume in the *Probability* trilogy and it was the most entertaining. It includes a nice mix of familiar and memorable new characters and is the strongest story of the three. In an effort to make this work as a stand-alone novel, Kress repeats numerous passages from the first two books in the series - sometimes verbatim - which became old quickly. The last several hundred pages were the only time in the trilogy where I felt a sense of momentum and that the plot was consequential. This focuses almost entirely on the war with the "Fallers" and the implications (via a game theory analysis) of whether and where to trigger the artifact weapon. Just like the previous entry in the series, there was minimal discussion of the boring flower ceremonies on World. The series is concluded nicely in the final chapters. Although I would categorize this in the "hard sci-fi" genre, it is relatively slight entertainment and not among my recent favorites.

Paige Ellen Stone says

Read the summaries that are on the page for this book on Amazon. I can add little other than that, unlike some, who find some of the characters and situations improbable, I found this to be the best book of the three and an excellent wrap-up of the trilogy. Suspension of disbelief is required of readers in this genre and I did not find mine tested at all. The characters are wonderful, fascinating, confused, irritating, frightening and everything in between. I admit that the warrior for hope who lives within me was thrilled that Kress developed characters who saw that peace won out. She is one of our living Masters and this is another masterpiece to stand beside the "Beggars in Spain" trilogy.

Excellent read, highest recommendation, so long as you read the first two books; if you don't, you'll be hopelessly lost as to the significance of the actions of various characters.

Gwyn says

After reading the *Probability* series, I have come to the conclusion that Nancy Kress' greatest strength is getting the reader to turn the page. This is an important skill, because without it no one will read your books, but it doesn't necessarily make your books good. And Kress' *Probability* books have some major holes.

The biggest hole is character. Kress seems to feel the need to include an extremely annoying character in each book. Some people are annoying, and it stands to reason that some characters will be annoying as well, but if that character makes the reader want to put the book down, the author is doing something wrong. Character inconsistency is another problem, especially in *Space*, where Kaufman, previously my favorite, acts completely out of character and becomes a real ass. But the *coupe de grace* is that the big finale--the destruction of space-time as we know it--depends on two completely unbelievable characters: Admiral Pierce and the Fallers. One, supposedly intelligent enough to gain control of the entire empire, is too stupid to believe in science; the others are so spiteful they would rather destroy space-time than see one of their systems in control of the enemy, despite the fact that they were previously so desperate to preserve space-time that they handed over important military secrets.

Perhaps the unbelievability of the Fallers should fall under the heading of anthropology, which is Kress' other major hole. Humans know an unusually large amount about Faller psychology, despite the fact that they've never (!) intercepted a single Faller transmission and, prior to *Sun* never had any kind of meaningful interaction with them. But the issue of the Fallers pales in comparison to the issue of World and the creators of the artifacts.

Most of *Moon* is taken up by interactions with Worlders, as is much of *Sun*, yet in *Space* they are almost a no-show. Considering how much ink was dedicated to them in the first two books, the reader might assume that they are actually important to the plot. Not so. In fact, World is only important because it contains the two artifacts; if you strip away all the interactions with the natives (which are now revealed to be superfluous), you could probably fit the entire trilogy into a single book. Why include so much of World, including a very major POV character, when the people of World really don't matter? It will remain a mystery--along with the creation of the artifacts that are the driving force behind the trilogy.

The two artifacts found on World, as well as the space tunnels, were created by a mysterious and long-gone race. The constructions are absolutely key to the books; without them, there would be no story. Yet almost nothing is told about the people who made them. In *Moon* the reader learns there is some rudimentary knowledge of their language, apparently gleaned from the space tunnels alone. There are apparently no other relics of these people, no archaeological sites, and no theories about what happened to them. Worst of all, *no one seems to be at all curious about them*. Throughout the entire trilogy, people use the space tunnels and examine the artifacts without sparing a second thought to the race that built them. Apparently, in Kress' universe, humans have evolved past curiosity, which perhaps explains why no one would bother to wonder why a planet like World, which rates only a single space tunnel, had two enormously powerful artifacts that no one had ever seen the likes of before.

The *Probability* series is interesting. It keeps the pages turning. It is not life-changing, but it passes the time. But by the end, the holes have become so large they begin to interfere with the suspension of disbelief, which is a dealbreaker in sci-fi or fantasy book. I would not dissuade someone from reading this trilogy, but if someone asked for my opinion the best I could say would be "It's OK."

Karen Heuler says

The best so far. Clearly, what appeals to me are the quite human and complex characters in a story with wide-ranging repercussions. Technology gets abused, from both the alien and human sides, science still surprises, and consequences always catch up.

Megan says

Yes I'm giving this two stars. I wish I liked it more but I was annoyed that Amanda was one of the main characters and I don't much feel any kind of empathy for any of the others. I liked the action on World in the first two books, but other than a brief glimpse into the Fallers ship here, this third book didn't keep me interested. I didn't connect with anything that was happening and the weird coincidence of Amanda meeting her Greek boyfriend was a little too convenient for me. I liked the culture on World but this book dealt more with the 'space travel' aspect and war and military strategy. Kind of disappointed, I was hoping for a bit more explanation about some things.

elidemelnibone says

J'ai un peu décroché dans la première moitié de ce troisième volume de la trilogie : conflits dans l'Alliance solaire, aventures d'Amanda 14 ans, et enlèvement de Tom, le physicien atrabilaire (j'ai un petit faible pour ce personnage) qui disparaît du récit. Heureusement, dans la seconde moitié, Tom est retrouvé par Lyle (le soldat) et Marbet (la sensitive) avec l'aide de la dérangée et dangereuse aventurière Magdalena qui a ses propres motivations (j'ai aussi un petit faible pour elle) et ce groupe essaie d'éviter la catastrophe d'une déchirure spatio temporelle. Les faucheurs sont impliqués. Et la fin est à mon avis très bien amenée et satisfaisante.

Ian Lewis says

This is a 3 1/2. It's a page turner and kept me interested the entire time. On its own it's a 4 star book. Not earth shattering, but a highly enjoyable, well written adventure that doesn't beggar belief too much.

However, as a sequel to the first two books, it falls short. It has almost nothing to do with the major characters and events on World. I would have enjoyed reading the conclusion of what happens to the Worlders, which is not what this book is. The problem is the other two books are not human centric, but this book doesn't care about anything except humans and sometimes Fallers. All the other alien races that supposedly exist do not appear here. To the point at which the one major non-human, Essa, is an afterthought (to bother Kauffman and Kress.)

That being said, if you like exciting, page turner sci-fi, this is a solid book and a solid series.

Karen A. Wyle says

I'm rounding up a bit, but I'm very pleased with this series conclusion (or what appears to be a conclusion, at least for now).

Kress continues, in this book, to explore the physics she established in the earlier books. She makes excellent use of the characters, human and other, and in particular the one truly alien species in the series (the Fallers). The plot resolution is unexpected, yet appropriate -- though how satisfying the reader finds it will vary with the reader.

Melanie says

I didn't find out until now that this is actually the third book in a trilogy. Nevertheless, I enjoyed it very much. There were only few instances where I had the feeling that the author could have explained things a lot more in detail, other than that I could quickly follow the conflicts without knowing the first two.

Brianna says

Didn't realize this was book 3 of a trilogy when I picked it up at the library, but I read it anyway. I didn't feel out of touch with the world, but I didn't enjoy it that much either. (Other reviewers seem to indicate this is the weakest book in the series)

I had little interest in the teenage character (the smart but slave-to-her-hormones daughter of a brilliant missing physicist) which drove most of the story.

Dev Null says

I liked the first two in this series, but this was barely ok. The best bits were the carry-overs from the previous books, and the world that its set in; the story itself is mostly a dead loss. Its pretty much a long rambling narrative where things happen to people beyond their control; noone really seems to do anything. One of the two main narrative focus characters is a fairly shallow teenager whos not terribly interesting to watch be acted upon. And the main premise / twist - the space gates left by an ancient lost civilization (wow, hadn't seen that one before) - are inadequately and yet over-complicatedly explained, don't make sense where they are explained, and suddenly act as a deus ex machina to ring the plot artificially crashing to a halt at the end. And the moral of the story ends up being "we're not ready for the stars, so powerful (dead) beings will protect us from ourselves and put us back in our cribs." Combined with the straw man argument against atheism message earlier in the book (where the daft ignorant 14-year-old presents the case for atheism vs the wise old self-sacrificing priests... until the boy she has a crush on asks her to go to church at which point she crumbles immediately), this is a little heavy-handed.

The book is also badly edited; there are sections where a character's description of what just happened flatly contradicts what we just read... and there's no evidence that the character was actually lying for any particular reason, nor does anyone notice. This happened at least twice that I noticed.

In the first book we see a fascinating alien culture that results from an artificially shared worldview across an entire planet. In the second book we see what happens to their culture when that sharing is taken away. In the third book the sharing is brought back... and no mention is made of the consequences to their culture at all. And barely any mention is made of the effects of a similarly wide-reaching change to the basis of human culture; instead we watch teenage mating rituals. Yay.

Dorothea says

I didn't realize until I was far into *Probability Space* that this is the third book of a trilogy. I suppose that's a good sign -- I was able to understand everything perfectly well without the earlier two books. Perhaps, though, I would have liked more of the characters and been more interested in the worldbuilding if I had already been accustomed to them when starting this story.

Of the main characters mentioned on the back cover --

an unlikely group: Major Lyle Kaufman, retired warrior; Marbet Grant, the Sensitive who's involved with Kaufman; Amanda, a very confused fourteen-year-old; and Magdalena, one of the biggest power-brokers in all of human space

--I only really enjoyed reading about Amanda. "An unlikely group" is misleading; Kaufman and Grant don't join forces with Magdalena until more than halfway through, and Amanda's story is (apparently) separate -- she's only connected to the others because she's out in search of her kidnapped physicist father, and their adventures are related to him too.

In the sections focused on Kaufman and Grant, the perspective is usually limited to Kaufman's. Kress says some interesting things about how different Kaufman's military way of thinking is from Grant's (a Sensitive is someone who's genetically engineered to be able to read even the slightest social cues), but in most of the situations they're in here, Kaufman seems like a jerk and Grant seems impractical. If one of the earlier books in the trilogy focuses on Grant's perspective as she works as a Sensitive -- for instance, to communicate for the first time with an alien being -- maybe with Kaufman as contrast and companion, I'd like to read that instead.

Magdalena is an interesting character who's ruined mostly by being described from other people's perspective. She's an extremely powerful woman who originally rose to power by using her physical beauty. She copes with her secret traumatic past by seizing more and more power. I liked most of the narration from Magdalena's point of view, but all of the other characters who dealt with her fixated on her sexuality. Kaufman lusted after her and felt ashamed about it (apparently mostly because Magdalena was older than him, but also because Grant could tell), and Grant couldn't stop calling her a slut, basically. (This made me like Grant a lot less.) Kress also decided that Magdalena's plot-driving point of weakness would be her pathetic playboy son -- I didn't like this at all.

Then, there's Amanda! I loved reading about Amanda. Kress does a really good job (according to my memory of being a teenager) of showing how Amanda is just beginning to be able to focus on bigger things than her immediate world. At the very beginning of the book she's thrust (or actually, she thrusts herself, in

response to witnessing her father being kidnapped) on a dangerous world containing many powerful factions that all want to use her as a pawn. Her responses to the people who threaten, rescue, patronize, coerce, woo, and proselytize to her are a lovely mixture of naivete, common sense, and bravery.

Reading about Amanda was all that kept me going through the Kaufman-and-Grant sections of the first three-quarters of *Probability Space*. But when I got to the final quarter, the novel finally took off for me: the adult protagonists end up in an obstacle race of physics, game theory, and politics, against human and alien foes. The system of space tunnels and the uses of the Protector Artifact (which previously had just irritated me whenever it was explained -- *why* do you need to say "setting prime three," "setting prime eleven," etc., that's *redundant*) suddenly became the parameters of a very exciting conclusion.

On page 279, I wasn't even considering reading *Probability Moon* or *Probability Sun*, because Amanda wouldn't be old enough to be a protagonist in those books. Now I do want to try them.

Rachel says

This book finishes up the series, and I can't quite say whether it's with a bang or a whimper, but the ending is unexpected and satisfying. There's plenty of action. We get a brief return to World, and see how it's faring without shared reality (fairly well, considering). And that's it for World; as this is the last book, we'll never know how things turn out. We have our solar system's political intrigues and upheaval. And it's all moved along by the war with the hostile aliens who won't talk to humans, and of course the probability artifacts, including the tunnels that let humanity go to the far reaches of the galaxy, from some long-gone civilization.

As in the other books, the characters were a bit flat. There's the ex-military man, Lyle Kaufman (yay for a Jewish last name; we don't see them enough in books) and the genemod Sensitive woman (all I could think of was Deanna Troi). They're the best-drawn characters, but they don't totally jell for me. We have the physicist, kidnapped and still trying to work out the physics behind the artifacts. And, separately, his fourteen-year-old daughter, searching for him. She is written in a way that kept making me cringe; sometimes she sounds more like an eight-year-old. And the rich Greek boy she meets, whose poor English was even more cringeworthy. Then there's Magdalena, highly sexualized (and aging) power player, who seemed not like a real person, but written in because the plot needed someone to do some things.

Another reviewer mentioned "a sexist current that surfaces occasionally," which she found jarring, and I saw and felt that too - disappointing in a book by a female writer.

All that aside, this is Nancy Kress, after all. Not her best, but still good reading I plowed right through the three books and found myself staying up too late reading, engrossed.

Christopher McKitterick says

A fine SF novel capping an excellent trilogy. I loved the characters, the range of conflicts, the scope of Kress' vision, the "hard-SF-ness" of it. Best of all, it's a satisfying conclusion (with ever-higher stakes!) to a great series. You can't get bigger stakes than the potential destruction of all space-time!

Recommended, as with most Kress work.

Sheryl says

I greatly enjoyed re-reading this series - although this last book was my least favorite. The action moved away from "World" and shared reality (or dealing with the loss of shared reality) and turned more into a space opera.

Alison C says

Probability Space is the final book in Nancy Kress' "probability trilogy," with the action taking place a couple of years after the previous book in the series, Probability Sun. Here, we follow retired Major Kaufman and his partner, a Sensitive named Marbet, as they travel back to World to rescue the humans who remained behind at the end of the last book; there, they encounter Magdalena, a major power-broker in the human universe and a force unto herself. Meanwhile, physicist Tom Capelo has been kidnapped and his 14-year-old daughter Amanda is on the run, hoping to find out what happened to him. These four are all pursuing their own agendas in the context of the interstellar war with the Fallers, a race that shows inexplicable, genocidal hostility toward humans, and that war is not going so well.... As the final book in the trilogy, this both satisfies and does not; Kress keeps the plot racing along (indeed, it's quite action-packed in a way I've not seen with her work before) and we do reach a conclusion to the larger situation that is both interesting and unexpected. But she has her characters leaving World again early on, and we never return there; I would have liked to have had a scene visiting that planet one last time because it was such an interesting place. So, I'm a bit disappointed, although I still recommend the book, and the entire trilogy.
