



Absorption

John Meaney

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'Absorption' is the first novel of the 'Ragnarok Trilogy', a space opera trilogy of high-tech space warfare, unitary intelligences made up of millions of minds, the bizarre physics of dark energy, quantum mechanics and a mindblowing rationale for Norse mythology.

Absorption Details

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Author : John Meaney

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From Reader Review Absorption for online ebook

Roddy Williams says

Blurbs loaded with overhype are ultimately self-defeating since the reader, expecting something (as in this case where Stephen Baxter of all people, gushes on the front cover 'Meaney has rewired SF! Everything is different now!') quite extraordinary is instead provided with a novel which is an enjoyable enough read but breaks no barriers at all. There are some elements in fact which remind me a great deal of Hamilton's 'The Reality Dysfunction.'

The narrative is split between four timelines; 8th Century Europe, Germany and England in the years leading up to World War II, the 23rd Century and the 27th Century.

Crystalline humans of the future are co-ordinating a 'coming together' of various characters who themselves have resonances with Norse legend.

Some of the chosen individuals have discovered that they can communicate with each other when in danger and can see flapping shadows of darkness surrounding certain individuals (such as Hitler) who are usually up to no good.

In the 27th Century Roger Blackstone is starting college, and begins to see the dark shadows manifesting around his tutor, Ms Helsen. He has to wear contact lenses to hide the fact that his eyes are completely black, which means he is a pilot. Pilots are a separate human community who have a base in another universe. When someone is born in space, their eyes acquire this total black effect, although now it has become an inheritable trait and the children of Pilots are born like this. Meaney, perhaps wisely, glosses over any scientific basis for this phenomenon.

Roger's father Carl is essentially a spy who has been living undercover for years in mainstream human society.

Characters in other timelines, who have evocative names like Wulf begin to see and hear each other.

In Roger's timeline a posthuman Luculentis has been tricked into finding one of her ancestor's implants hidden in her estate. The implant contains some of his memories and the vampire code programme which allows her to absorb the lifeforce of other Luculenti.

Once one gets into the flow of the narrative it is an enjoyable enough tale, although Meaney clearly has a problem handling such a large cast of characters and managing to develop them sufficiently as rounded individuals.

Roger's father, Carl, for instance, and Max Spalding, are barely fleshed out as characters at all. Roger's tutor Ms Helsen, has an important role to play in the novel and barely says five words.

Admittedly, this is the first of a trilogy and no doubt things will be further developed in the subsequent volumes, but there does seem to be a great deal of hyperbole at the expense of character development.

It might be just a case of far too many characters.

Less is more, as they say.

Simon Mcleish says

Originally published on my blog here in February 2011.

When does hype become unbelievable? John Meaney, according to Stephen Baxter (as quoted on the cover of Absorption), "has rewired SF. Everything is different now". Absorption also had nothing but five star reviews on Amazon at the time of writing. So this is a book which should be spectacularly good: this is the sort of praise associated with classics of the genre such as Neuromancer. In Absorption's case, the hype is

somewhat at odds as the rather pulp style cover, which suggests that the contents will be more E.E. "Doc" Smith than William Gibson. It's a lazy piece of design which will hardly do the book any favours, no matter how good it is.

Absorption is a fragmented narrative, with chapters concentrating on characters from the eighth century AD to the twenty seventh. These are people living more or less normal lives, for their times, until they discover something which they have in common and they are mysteriously brought together. It's quite slow, and it takes about 150 pages for the reader to find out anything about what it is, which makes the story quite an unfocused read. I suspect that anyone who isn't a fan of the genre will give up fairly quickly and consider Absorption incomprehensible and boring (it is certainly rather slow moving in places, and the fragmentation doesn't help Meaney move things along). It does eventually make more sense, though it is clear that there will still be unanswered questions right to the end: this is, after all, volume one of a trilogy. However, I don't think that Meaney chooses the best way to reveal information; stories in which everything seems to be revealed only for deeper secrets to become apparent work better for me than ones in which we keep on being told that there are secrets, but details are revealed extremely slowly: much of Absorption seems to tantalise for the sake of it, and this is irritating as well as dull.

Another aspect which is surprising, given the description by Steven Baxter, is just how much is owed to older genre classics. There is some distinctly Heinleinesque banter in places, while the use of the name Jed for one of the characters makes it particularly easy to pick up Star Wars similarities, which (perhaps unfortunately) are mainly apparent in the dialogue. The main feature of Absorption which is derivative is the plot, which is basically a "superheroes-discover-their-powers" one, with the twist that the group of superheroes is separated by time and distance. The elements of the novel have appeared before in the genre, and have been better done; however, I can't think of any other book which combines these ideas in this way, so there is at least originality in that.

Most of what I have said suggests that I didn't like Absorption. I found it hard to get into, enjoyed the middle, and was frustrated by the ending. I object more to the way it has been over-hyped than to the book itself. I might go on to read Meaney's earlier books, but I don't think I'll bother with the rest of the trilogy. Interesting, more or less readable; but not especially significant and certainly not worthy of the praise it has garnered, is my verdict.

Snowlynx says

many different times and characters and when switching between them you could get the feeling of reading a totally different novel but for the common bigger picture which is also ever looming at the horizon.

a slight downside in my opinion is the high-sci-fi parts are a bit hard to get into as it is so often because the author is torn between explaining everything to give a smooth transition and letting the reader discover for himself. but it gets better some way into the book and then you just cant put it away.

Adrian Leaf says

Hugely ambitious and complex with big ideas by the bucket load. Admittedly, how good this series ends up being will depend entirely on how well John Meaney is able to pay off these complex ambitions in the latter

books, but it is an incredibly intelligent and exciting start. The one proviso I would make is that I think it would be rather difficult for a new reader to follow what is going on if they haven't read Meaney's Nulaperion Sequence and To Hold Infinity. There is a lot of different narrative threads to contend with and a lot of them refer to events that happened in previous books.

Mrs. Watermelon says

...what the hell did I just read? I mean, the fantastic writing earned this book a solid 4 stars, but I can't even begin to describe what it's about. It's so surreal that I feel slightly dissociated after finishing it.

Martin Rogers says

Absorbing

Very strong story-telling. Engaging characters embedded in hard sci-fi. Disciplined use of multi-strand narrative. At times felt language could have involved a little more poetry given the deep themes and stunning vistas.

Guy Haley says

Slightly unfocussed multi-timeline space opera shenanigans.

John Meaney is proving a versatile author. After the weirded-out dark fantasy of the two Tristopolis books, he returns to high concept space opera with the first in the Ragnorok series, where bold individuals from across the aeons fight against a darkness that threatens to undo the universe. Space-time, with bonus Norse gods!

It's all a bit too ambitious. The A story of Absorption is the coming of age tale of young Pilot (post-humans who reside in the core reality of the multiverse) Roger Blackstone, as he helps foil the plans of a Luculenta (upraised human) to devour a world. This is rollicking fun, packed full of good ideas, if heavy on infodumps.

However, the dashing back and forth in time is distracting. It's as if Meaney's absorbed by his dazzling, 27th century future, yet feels obliged to visit these other eras to establish plot points for the rest of the series. Not to say that these other ideas are poor – there's a good first contact story, and the Viking segments are exciting, yet the protagonists of these parts are ultimately left hanging with little to do, while Nazi-era Jewish physicist Gavi Wolf has her life unceremoniously trotted through, included solely to meet a host of historic characters and provide a love-interest-with-a-quirk for future Roger. We'd have happily seen Roger's story run on its own and could easily have enjoyed the rest else time. As it is, what is intended to entice us back for more instead draws our attention away.

Still, undernourished elements aside, Absorption's core story is well worth the cover price alone. Better too ambitious than not ambitious at all, we say, there's not enough stuff like this out there.

Rebecca says

The story is separated into several threads, each one running in a different time - some are in the past, other threads are in the far future. Certain people in these times can see dark shapes around certain people and sense a growing evil. The question then of course is: What can they do about it?

I found the future sections engrossing, but also a little overwhelming at times in terms of the sheer amount of technical and technological jargon that we are expected to cope with all at once. Some of it you can guess, other times you just let it go over your head and figure that we're meant to work it out as the book continues. I assume the author was aiming for something like "Dune" where the reader gradually understands the universe and the technology as they get further into the book, and it mostly works in this case, but not 100%.

The historical sections were interesting as we see characters try to deal with these odd sensations that they are having - are they going mad? Is it some kind of religious experience? Each one of them interprets it in their own way. The story in this first part wraps up certain elements, but leaves others that will presumably be continued and explained further in the next book. I look forward to finding part 2!

Liviu says

A very ambitious series but quite mediocre execution so far; Absorption is not really a novel but more a collection of snippet threads that never coalesce and late in the book seem very rushed to boot; it is the first volume of a series true, but still I expected more coherence - maybe the number of pages allotted to the novel just does not support its presumed depth, problem encountered in another ambitious but even more flawed series (Cobley - Humanity's Fire); I did a quick pass through Resolution in which universe Absorption takes place since I remembered vaguely some stuff from there that takes place here and indeed some of Absorption events are mentioned there, but I was struck how much superior Resolution was as writing style, leaving aside coherence; still there were enough goodies in Absorption to keep me interested till the end and I am curious where it goes, but a step back for the author from his superb Nulapeiron series and I hope book 2 will get back to form

Jamie Revell says

I'm not at all clear why Stephen Baxter, according to the cover blurb, apparently believes that SF will never be the same again after this book... there's nothing particularly different in it. Hype aside, it's main problem is that it consists of a string of different stories, only one of which really goes anywhere, and which don't appear to be particularly connected. There clearly *is* a connection of some sort, but it's vague and presumably waiting to be explored/explained in the later volumes of the trilogy.

Of the separate stories interleaved through the book, potentially the best is that set in Europe in the run-up to World War II, but that turns out to be (I assume) no more than a prelude to whatever happens next. More significant is the story on a far future world with incredible technology, much of which is genuinely interesting, and is arguably the only section with a real plot. It ends on a cliffhanger, which is fair enough for a trilogy, and really provides the only reason to want to read book two.

Of the remaining plot threads, one has a sort of resolution, but feels rather flimsy, and mainly seems to serve as an explanation of how humanity gets from where it is now to the far future world with the main plot. Nothing much happens in the other one, set in 8th century Scandinavia, at all.

I dare say all this is going somewhere, but, if so, a trilogy does not strike me as the best format for what the author is (presumably) trying to do. Too much of this book is establishing the groundwork for the setting, rather than actually telling a story; most of it is just set-up. The format may have been pushed on the relatively new author by the publisher, rather than allowing a single, longer, volume that would have made more sense. If so, it's a misstep.

Finn says

A little difficult to get into, but once I got to grips with the different worlds it was fantastic. The author's imagination was brilliant, the plot exciting and the characters very likeable. Glad I stuck with it and will be reading the second book.

Marcus Gipps says

I enjoyed Meaney's other recent books with Gollancz: *Bone Song* (<http://marcusgipps.livejournal.com/43...>) and, to a slightly lesser extent, *Dark Blood* (<http://marcusgipps.livejournal.com/51...>). So when this arrived, even though it was the beginning of a new series and not a continuation of the previous one, it seemed worth a punt. So I took it on holiday with me over New Year, figuring that it would keep me going for a bit. I don't often read proper hard SF - don't know why, used to love it, but rarely seem to feel the urge - so this was part of my normal 'take things on holiday that you wouldn't normally read' pile.

This one was cheating a bit, though, as I knew I liked Meaney's writing. Plus I'd been caught up in a very very long fantasy novel that I wasn't enjoying as much as I'd hoped (more on that some other time), so it made sense to go to the other end of the spectrum. Well, the SF/Fantasy spectrum, anyway. The description from the back cover was interesting enough, although quite clearly suggested that this was going to be one of those trilogies where you really needed to read all the books, preferably quite soon after each other, in order to know what was going on. Well, that's OK - I may never get around to reading the rest, and by the time I do I may have completely forgotten what happened in book one, but that doesn't mean that I can't enjoy the journey.

Luckily, I did find the book enjoyable. It has a pretty wide variety of viewpoints and protagonists, which sometimes can lead to a slight disjointed feeling, but in general they were well-portrayed and different enough to keep me guessing as to what linked them all. There are a few characters who pop up again and again, and it seems clear that they will be the focus of the series, but the diversity works well. Even if one wasn't enjoying a particular strand, the next will come along soon enough. Perhaps that's not fair, though - there were no sections that I didn't enjoy to some extent, and some of them were excellently written. Everything builds up to a sort-of cliffhanger, and to be honest this was the ending was the one thing that I thought felt wrong about the book. Not bad, by any means, but just a little bit too mid-narrative for my liking. Obviously things will come together in the next volume, but I'd have appreciated a little more cohesiveness. I'll be back for the next one, though.

I read a proof on holiday over the New Year, and the book came out in February, Hardback ISBN: 9780575085336.

arjuna says

In some ways I have no idea what to make of this book - the big ideas and connections all seem to make sense in a way I can't quite yet reach - but whatever the hell it's doing and wherever the hell it's going, I want to tag along. The characters are all engaging, the visualised world/s are emerging clearly and finely, and while I normally hate "to be continued" endings, this one managed to satisfy but tantalise equally. Bought it originally because the second book looked good; now kicking self that I didn't buy both at once because What Happens Next demands to be known. Highly recommended on literary, creative, original and unusual grounds. (I may not have grasped why it's supposed to be as groundbreaking as its reputation suggests, but that makes no odds to me - it's still a great, unusual piece). Recommended.

Matt says

John Meaney deftly handles a complex multi-threaded plot that takes place over multiple time periods from 777-2603AD.

The action moves along at quite a pace and he manages to drip feed the revelations of what is going on very skilfully; I never once had the feeling of an ungainly SF "info dump".

It is the first book in a series so not all plot threads reach closure and not everything that is going on is revealed...

Willy Eckerslike says

I'm always cautious about anything labelled 'epic'; it is often an excuse for an overly long, rambling shambles that should have been condensed and published as a single volume. In this instance, the first part of the Ragnarok trilogy, I'm happy to be wrong. Meaney is an accomplished wordsmith weaving a complex multi-threaded narrative through five time periods with hints of a single, all-encompassing primary plot. A few minor things let the story down very slightly; the hugely ambitious narrative is at the cost of character development and this, compounded by occasionally clunky dialogue, invokes little empathy for the various main characters; the Luculentus code snippets are a bit naff and I found that the eighth century Norse narrative dragged a little. On the plus side, the main Roger Blackstone / Labyrinth thread is brilliant and there are no huge info-dumps or showing-off of the author's grasp of esoteric mathematics or physics to ruin the narrative flow.

The minor criticisms aside, though, I thoroughly enjoyed 'Absorption', I'm looking forward to 'Transmission' and, thanks to another reviewer, I'm going to track down a copy of 'To Hold Infinity', effectively the prequel to this novel. It's great to see another up-and-coming British SF author with the potential to stand alongside Alastair Reynolds and Iain M. Banks.

