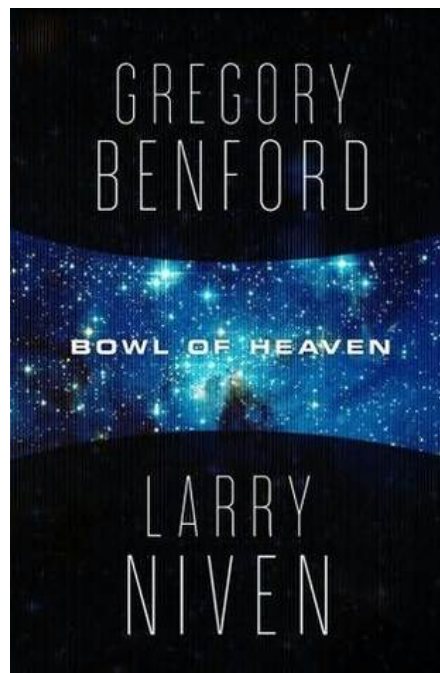




Bowl of Heaven

Gregory Benford , Larry Niven

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In this first collaboration by science fiction masters Larry Niven (*Ringworld*) and Gregory Benford (*Timescape*), the limits of wonder are redrawn once again as a human expedition to another star system is jeopardized by an encounter with an astonishingly immense artifact in interstellar space: a bowl-shaped structure half-englobing a star, with a habitable area equivalent to many millions of Earths...and it's on a direct path heading for the same system as the human ship.

A landing party is sent to investigate the Bowl, but when the explorers are separated--one group captured by the gigantic structure's alien inhabitants, the other pursued across its strange and dangerous landscape--the mystery of the Bowl's origins and purpose propel the human voyagers toward discoveries that will transform their understanding of their place in the universe.

Bowl of Heaven Details

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ISBN : 9780765328410

Author : Gregory Benford , Larry Niven

Format : Hardcover 416 pages

Genre : Science Fiction, Fiction



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From Reader Review Bowl of Heaven for online ebook

David says

Four problems with this book series:

1. Each book should stand alone as a story - but this book is just an introduction that sets up the situation. And a pointlessly loooooong introduction at that.
2. Ridiculous Action - A colony ship with thousands passengers and the captain decides to drive it up a dangerous plasma stream because its fun and faster? A ground crew is sent to INVADE the first ever encountered, clearly inhabited, alien ship with no recon or communications? And so on. Its impossible for me to suspend belief sufficiently to accept that the "creme of humanity, extensively filtered and trained for years" would make such ridiculous choices.
3. Stunningly Bad Science - for example the lead science officer estimates that a ground car going 600km an hour would travel the rim in a few weeks - not the correct answer of 306 years. For MANY more examples, see the reviews on Amazon.
4. No point to the book - This story, while set on a very interesting alien artifact, does little to explore the implications of the technology, the science implied, or reflect back on the human experience in any way.

As one reviewer put it, this is a Buck Rogers story - all mindless action, no science. In this case its a wilderness survival story that is incidentally set on an alien artifact. I recommend you buy a real wilderness survival story instead.

Donald Cook says

Larry Niven's offerings often, since after the Ringworld series, have shown weakness in editing. It's always the same thing: events are written in one way, and then within about a page appear in rewritten form later. But this book is so rife with error as to migrate a nuisance into a deep embarrassment. A character is captured by aliens @ p. 104, then reappears, patching up a wound at p. 106. This is the point where I got really tired of the sloppiness, not the sole example. Not to mention that the same wound is treated twice on a single page.

Should not have been published in this form. I may have to give up on this one.

More sloppiness, plus an uncompleted story "to be completed in a 'second volume'", which I bet will either never get written or will be pushed out solely to avoid breaching a contract. Meh!

In the end, I think I will not await Volume 2 with 'bated breath.

Ron says

Skip the introduction. Seriously, skip it. The story begins when the protagonist awakes from Deep Sleep in Chapter One. The rest is back story. Boring and unnecessary.

That they can't get the story opened (or closed) despite being famous, award-winning authors tips the reader to the rest of the problem: this is way below what they are capable of. Think: Ringworld in the half-round.

The story-telling is good, but the science is shaky. For example, they don't seem to understand that centrifugal force is perpendicular to the plane of rotation, as in gravity, perpendicular (sort of) to the surface of the mass. Therefore, near the pole where the pseudo gravity is near zero, it's also roughly parallel to the surface. No standing.

The solar system-sized hemisphere rotates to create artificial gravity. Okay, but if the period of rotation is nine days long, the pseudo gravity would be more than 0.8 g. A bone-crushing lot more considering the hemisphere is the diameter of either Earth's or Mercury's orbit. (I'll talk about their proof reading later.)

Clouds hundreds of kilometers high with a seven kilometer "ceiling" membrane?

Live pigs for food on an interstellar mission with resource issues?

"Expelling her lungs" Ooo. Ugly mental picture.

They spend pages and pages lecturing the reader about how evolution solves all problems, except most species of the Bowl of Heaven were genetically designed.

Lots of repetition. Leaves the reader to suspect no one read this all the way through after it was in final form. In fact, the whole thing seems dashed off.

How does the story turn out? No clue. It doesn't end, it stops. One of those "to be continued" books which authors and publishers love these days.

Why not one star? Because it's a great set up and interesting cast.

Ric says

<This wasn't as bad on the second read. A continuing sense of wonder and adventure, a rich and unimaginably huge playground full of aliens, and alien cultures and interesting tech. The story moves along with deepening sense and burgeoning understanding of what the Bowl is and was. Maybe I was just bummed the first time because the book stopped abruptly in an obvious publication split. The sequel is out, and I have it slotted, so all is forgiven. Upping the rating an extra star. It is quite lyrical and readable, not so dry or stiff, but just be sure you have the next book ready.)

Scenario: There's a strange megastructure artifact in space, and some curious folk want to take a look-see. The premise, quite a well-traveled science fiction road, recalls favorites such as the ring of Larry Niven's Ringworld, the cylinder in Arthur Clarke's Rendezvous With Rama, the sphere in Bob Shaw's Orbitville, the pipes in Alastair Reynolds's Pushing Ice, even the hole through the planet in Benford's own ~~Tides of Light~~ Furious Gulf.

The basic elements are the discovery, the trip, the entry, the exploration, the encounter with strange beings and the escape. Bowl of Heaven goes through discovery-trip-entry fairly quickly in the opening chapters, and here, the hard sf backgrounds of the authors certainly come to the fore and provide impetus for the story. Of course, one has to like hard sf to be able to tolerate all the physics references, otherwise this segment could be a chore. Then, the exploration-encounter phase sets in and this is where, perhaps, the story bogs down a bit.

Things pick up again as the aliens decide to focus in on the human escapees, and a hot pursuit begins.

However, just as soon as the action picks up than the book ends. This is probably a publishing quirk, splitting a book into two, increasing margins and whatnot, but quite annoying. I would still take a look at the continuation of the series just for some form of resolution.

Recommended for fans of the genre and of these authors in particular. The style may be too stiff for many readers, like listening to a training manual. That does say a lot about my personal likes though.

Gerhard says

With Old School, Hard SF like this, the characterisation is not that subtle: 57% into the Kindle version, we get this gem: "Ayaan was an Arab woman who dressed in deck uniform like everyone else, but occasionally at dinner wore a stylish veil and glinting emerald earrings." Cannot forget the bling.

At 85% we get this wince-inducing moment: "Long silence. Terry glanced at Aybe, and Cliff suddenly remembered that one of them was gay. Which one? For the life of him, he could not remember. Damn! All this time!"

So I had to knock a star off for what can best be described as perfunctory characterisation -- though only on the human side; the aliens are convincing and thrilling.

As for the rest, this collaboration between two Grand Masters of the genre is a triumph, a classic Big Dumb Object (BDO) yarn that revels in the speculation and science. Yes, the Curious Mammoth Object Orbiting A Star, Abandoned But Full of Alien Life, has been done before -- Rama, Eon, Ringworld, Helix -- but Benford and Niven bring a rigour to their high concept that is supremely entertaining.

And they are masters at plot, ratcheting up the narrative tension and revelations until the suitably Grand Scale, but sadly premature, ending ... we have to wait until 'Shipstar' is published to find out how it ends. At least it is only two books, I suppose ...

Barney! says

Felt like "Ringworld" meets "Rendezvous with Rama" but with very little of the wonder that made those classics. If you haven't read them, this might be a much more interesting read for you. Interesting mostly for the hard sci-fi concepts/thought experiments it puts out there, less so for the character interaction or plot action. I didn't find the world the authors have created to be super engaging, but I kept reading hoping that I would get swept up in it. I never really did, though. Biggest problem: this book sets several grand arcs in motion but ends abruptly with zero resolution of any plot threads. Most promising: the authors clearly have some good twists up their sleeves, but are holding on to them for the next book (presumably).

Derek says

I paid money for this???

I think I'm through with Niven. This is the second dud in a row (though at least I finished this one).

I bought this because I've always been a fan of Niven, and I've loved the few Benford books I've read. But this is probably the worst edited book I've ever seen from a major publishing house. I was suspicious. Right from the beginning, I thought "Niven's already written Ringworld, what is he going to do new, with a similar structure with only slightly different geometry." Trust me, ... nothing.

It reads as if Niven and Benford separately sometimes wrote the same scenes, and then nobody bothered to properly merge them.

So we have a situation where the Earth expedition sends a landing party to the "Bowl", and the party gets split in halves. First, *"Coiled tubes...reached Tananareve, caught her."* Then the rest of her half of the party get caught, while those who had already entered an airlock get away on the other side. But the next thing we see, Tananareve is providing first aid to one of the guys who escaped. Then, three paragraphs later, Cliff and Irma are providing first aid to the same guy... Later, we know that the people in command of the Bowl are known as Astronomers, but suddenly one is called an Astronaut—and it's only a couple of pages later that we're told that *"The Astronomers also included some called Astronauts."* Geez, can't you even do basic continuity? *"That seemed now like many days ago.... That was now a bigger problem for them all—telling when an Earth day had gone by."* Why? They're all carrying something very like a modern smart phone—it can't keep time? And really, why is it that important to know that an Earth day has passed—they'll never actually see another Earth day. Towards the end, they're in an elevator: *"They went on, Cliff limping."* Except, they're still in the elevator! Where's he going?

Motivations are completely suspect (which, to be sort-of fair, is a problem with Ringworld, too). When a generation-ship heading for a star 45 light-years (I think) from Earth, comes across an enormous bowl-shaped habitat with a star at its focus, apparently moving through space under its own power, they actually have to THINK about whether to stop and check it out. Even when they already know that their calculations were wrong, and they are unlikely to even reach their destination! Duh.

Later, one party finds the Bowl's transportation system: "The e-train zoomed on, at speeds Cliff estimated to be at least ten kilometers per second." What? How is he estimating that? It's a subway.

I'd give this one 1-star, except that I reserve that for books I couldn't finish. otoh, it breaks my cardinal rule for series novels: it's not self-contained. There is no conclusion to this story, everybody is just left hanging (though, it's not even suspenseful enough to be called a cliff-hanger—it's more like they submitted 1000 manuscript pages to the publisher, and the publisher cut it into three equal portions). So, I've talked myself into it: they haven't actually LET me finish this story, and I'm definitely not buying the sequel.

Metodi Markov says

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Michael says

Normally I enjoy reading about interplanetary exploration and the oddities of the universe- but Bowl of Heaven by Gregory Benford and Larry Niven was a struggle to read. To be honest, I really only enjoyed the first half- the rest of the book just fizzled under its own weight. It almost had a feeling like the authors started with a good idea but ultimately had difficulty working together.

Firstly, this book was filled with confusing and vaguely-described areas that seemed to depend mostly on the reader to already have an understanding of the concepts. For example, Beth, one of the main characters, and her team- while hiking through the alien world- decided they should "move along the tops of the trees" to avoid arduous struggles through the undergrowth (p. 269). So are they swinging like Tarzan from tree to tree? Maybe they have set up zip lines somehow? Unfortunately, we don't understand that they were actually 'swimming' through the trees due to the low gravity until nearly 100 pages later (p. 365). Sadly, this book is filled with plenty of vague descriptions just like this.

The authors of Bowl of Heaven did a terrible job with character development, or making characters that stand out and create emotional attachments. I didn't feel like I really knew any of the characters until the end of the book. By that time, I didn't care anymore. Seriously, the characters in this book could have been animatronic dummies from Disney World for all the personality they had.

What little I learned about the main character, Cliff, was seriously more disappointing than emotionally engaging. For example, at one point, we learn that in the future, the people of earth undertake a nature-restoration campaign to clear the planet of pollution and restrict the overabundance of certain animals and plants to their own natural region. While ruminating on this, Cliff reveals that he enjoyed clearing away pampas grass better than going after trout or deer (p. 325). Again, this may be one of those vague areas I mentioned before, but how could anyone enjoy pulling weeds more than hunting and fishing? This was the main character and already I felt like he was an idiot.

Also, another sparse tidbit we learn about Cliff: though he loves his wife, Beth, he also enjoys adultery. Okay, so they've touched down on an alien world and made an amazing escape. What comes next? How 'bout having sex with one of the talking mannequins in your crew, specifically- Irma? The part I found most disturbing, he didn't even think very hard about it. Would somebody please thump Benford and Niven on the heads? As the reader, I know extremely little about this main character (which is tragic in itself)- but now I learn that he will have sex at the drop of a hat with anyone. I hate this guy. This was completely in poor taste and unnecessary. And unfortunately, we learn that pretty much everyone is thinking about sex by the end of this novel. How old are these people? Don't they have cold showers in space?

Who is Carl? While Cliff's team is cruising through the alien terrain in a hovering magnetic car, Carl suddenly realizes he hears his own breath rasping in and out (p. 327). Uhh, so Carl was never mentioned before... In fact, if you look at the 'Cast of Characters' at the beginning of the book, there is no Carl. We can even see that there is no Carl in Cliff's team in the Cast of Characters. So where did this guy come from? How did he just appear and why doesn't anyone seem surprised? Is this the same Karl who stayed in the ship (p. 350)? I assume the authors and editor made a mistake and meant Cliff. Boy, this book just stunk of people who really didn't care about it. As mentioned before, it really seemed like the authors had difficulty working together- like they mainly just wanted to get it over with.

And one last note, the humor in this book may have been adequate for the soulless animatronic characters-

but it really wasn't funny. For example, "'Look, we're in a crazy place. But don't let your preoccupation with reality stifle your imagination. We're bound for Glory.'" In their peeling laughter he heard joy (p. 406).' So they were originally going to a planet called Glory- and this little joke never occurred to them before? Aren't these supposed to be really smart people?

Ultimately, Bowl of Heaven was a tragic waste of a good idea. I understand there is a second book (or there will be soon). My only thought in regards to this is, "why?"

Tamahome says

pg 111/412: Very traditional, Ringworld or Rendezvous with Rama-like sf novel. Should take me only 10 hours to read. Has got plenty of science, space, and aliens, but it's not bogged down in it. None of that singularity stuff.

pg 215/412: Hey, I'm halfway though. I just might finish this thing. Although it's more of a jungle story now that they're on the inner bowl surface. But there's still some interesting science that comes into play. A cool thing about this environment is different areas have different levels of gravity. There's also an interesting alien point of view in some chapters.

All done. Err, there's no ending. Don't you love all the series in publishing these days? So I mostly liked the beginning part where they discover the Big Dumb Object in space. I'm not a big fan of jungle stories, like in the middle. There was a little more tech towards the end, but then it's to be continued in the next in the series. At least it's relatively short for a novel these days. At least I finished it, which is rare for me.

Pretty good video of the authors at Google with a slideshow: <http://www.sfsignal.com/archives/2012...>

At least they promise it's only a 2 book series.

Denise Eggleston says

I just finished reading "Bowl of Heaven" by Gregory Benford and Larry Niven. It should be noted that I won an advanced reading copy on Goodreads.com First Reads program. I recommend this book, but with certain reservations. I'll get to those in just a few paragraphs.

The "Bowl of Heaven" opens with a party on Earth. The crew and builders of a star ship are celebrating the incipient launch of the ship. In it, the crew, except for a rotating cadre of watchkeepers, will sleep for hundreds of years while they fly to an Earth-like planet called Glory. The main character, a biologist named Cliff, is rudely awoken from his long chemically-induced slumber. Captain Redwing and a few others are also awoken.

Their ship has approached an anomaly, a bowl-shaped object with a captive red-dwarf sun. The bowl is immense; the size of a solar system and inside the bowl is an unimaginably-sized territory. They find a land of lush forests, deserts, rivers, and seas. They decide to explore the bowl they nickname Cupworld.

The explorers end up divided on this new world. One group is captured and studied by immense bird-like creatures. The other group escapes into Cupworld and is chased by its inhabitants. The rest of this volume is about the experiences of each group with a bit about Captain Redwing hanging about the sky.

That's basically the story and I hope I've avoided spoilers. Now for the reservations. The book is very close to Larry Niven's "Ringworld" concept. Cupworld and Ringworld are two immense constructions surrounding captive suns. Each world is based on the fictional concept of a Dyson Sphere built around a sun (the actual concept is the more practical satellite rings around a sun and not a construction the size of solar systems).

Each book has its protagonists dealing with the natives of the constructions. Each construction is almost inconceivably old.

The books are not identical though and "Bowl of Heaven" is enjoyable on its own terms. In some ways, "Bowl of Heaven" is more philosophical (and I mean that in a good way) than "Ringworld." But, if you've read any of the "Ringworld" books, you will not be able to get the echo out of your head.

One other reservation; the book ends with a note that a second volume will soon be released. Arrgh. I want to know what happens to Cliff, Captain Redwing, and all the others. I have to wait. Sigh.

David says

I had MUCH higher hopes for this book. It is, after all, co-written by two excellent novelists. Unfortunately, this does NOT show through. I found the writing actually bad at times, and confusing at others. Perhaps Mr. Benford and Mr. Niven did not talk to each other much while working on their sections to get their story straight. Way too many "wait.. what?" moments.

Will Maddox says

Well, the first portion of the book got my attention and reeled me in. That was pretty much it. The rest of the novel truly sucked. I mean, truly, truly sucked. The main characters discover this spaceship that's using a star to power it, which means the space ship is truly massive, like the size of a solar system. Ok, this could be interesting. So they land at the front door and these giant chicken type aliens come out acting all friendly, then suddenly attack and start taking people prisoner. One group escapes, and spends the rest of the novel running across the "Bowl" as it's known... I just found the whole thing absurd. Massive chicken/bird aliens can build a spaceship out of a star, but they can't chase down 5/6 humans running around their ship? What's the plot supposed to actually be? Yes, the writer's hinted at some deeper plotting elements. But that's it, they hinted. You DO NOT WRITE HUNDREDS OF PAGES WITHOUT A PLAUSIBLE STORY. You just don't! I was especially disgusted when the male character who the writers established early on was on the spaceship with the love of his life, soul mate, one true love, etc. etc. (because they really laid it on thick) just decides to randomly start banging some chick that happens to be on the run with his little group. Why? Cause he could. REALLY? Your soulmate has been captured by the Colonel's worst nightmare and maybe right now is being tortured or killed and you grab the first piece of ass you can? Sorry, Gregory Benford, If I could figure out how to give your book a negative star rating, I would. It was that bad. I had to put it down part way through and read two GOOD books (review them shortly) just to finish this garbage. Please, if you're on a reading budget, skip this. If you like intelligent writing. Skip this. Save your brain cells.

Lyssa says

This book is horridly boring. There is not one moment of interest at any point in the story. Please don't read unless you want to fall asleep.

Rusty says

What happens when two masters of Science Fiction collaborate on an entirely new novel of mankind's future among the stars?

You get something so bad that it's worth sitting up and paying attention.

Honestly, this book is definitively, and I'm being serious here, the most poorly crafted professionally produced novel I've ever seen.

I dare you to find its equal.

But let me back up a bit. See, I've spent the past month or more riding high on a flurry of Science Fiction novels, television, and movies. I thought the joyride of greatness was never going to end. I picked up this nugget of SF from the used bookstore for a few dollars and thought it was just another sign from the SF gods that my destiny was to never have to experience the real world, ever again. I could just keep losing myself in tale after tale of space travel and aliens.

But with this work, all that came to a screeching halt. Too bad, there was something interesting happening in those pages. But whatever it was got buried by a ton of shit.

Larry Niven will always be a hero of mine for his Ringworld books, and Benford for his Ocean of Night novels. In this collaboration we've got the classic BDO (one of my favorite subjects in SF – the Big Dumb Object), a solar system sized artifact shaped like a bowl that is tethered to star that has been traveling through the interstellar medium since long before humans existed in anything like their modern form.

Our intrepid heroes from earth get trapped on this giant bowl and have to uncover its many mysteries... before they starve, or are hunted by the things living there.

Again, lots to love from that premise, at least from my perspective. So why do I feel so much hate for it?

Well, one has to be my expectations. I assumed this was going to be very good. Instead, I got something like a pilot for television show, we're only getting the premise. No resolution on any single plot point raised. Period. It's just like they were busily typing away and decided it was long enough and so they stopped. Book over.

Second, guys, seriously, I love Tor books, and I've already mentioned my love for the authors. But this thing is clearly a working draft that accidentally got sent to the printers. How bad was it? Well, so bad that after 50 pages or so I got out a piece of paper and stuffed it inside the book, whenever I would come across something inexplicable, I'd write a quick note. There is no way I could remember all that stuff that started going goofy.

Seriously, this stuff is beyond unforgivable. When Cliff comes out of his hyper sleep he quickly realizes they've been asleep for about 80 years (pg 26)... during that time they've traveled 40 light years (pg 28). Now, I'll start off right there mentioning that ramscoop drives in SF have been around for a while, and the physics of how they'd work are pretty well understood (even if the engineering isn't). They won't go half the speed of light, that's off by a couple of orders of magnitude. But whatever, this is supposed to be a hard-science fiction novel, so that sort of stuff is annoying, but I can live with it. But then it gets mentioned that they've been traveling .0081 the speed of light (pg 36). Oh, well, that fixes one problem and creates another. They would have traveled a bit over 3 light years since they've been away from earth, not 40.

Again, who really cares, right? Except, it's just that stuff like that bugs me. How about the fact that it's mentioned casually that they lost contact with earth over a century ago (pg263)? Wait... what? They've only been traveling for 80 years, remember? No, they've been traveling for 'centuries' (pg 348).

But wait! Turns out, they've been getting regular updates from earth the whole time (pg 409). So nevermind that last thing. At least they're safe there in orbit of that Orange dwarf star where the bowl is ((almost the size of the sun) pg 39), except that it becomes a red dwarf for the rest of the book (for those not into astronomical trivia, a red dwarf is just a tad larger than Jupiter, and the bowl would have to be considerably smaller to be in the temperate zone around the star. None of the numbers they would have given would make any sense then).

Okay, so I'm sure that if sounds like I'm being an ass, I mean, so these guys writing a 'hard' science fiction novel suck at math (well, arithmetic)... and pull numbers out their asses and don't bother to keep them consistent. A story isn't about math, it's about, characters, prose, plot... not numbers.

Fine, does it bug you that Howard gets injured, patched up, then re-patched up a few paragraphs later? And I don't mean they checked back with him, I mean they pulled the same bit of debris from his arm more than once... they bandaged the same wound (after removing said debris) twice (pg 106).

Or, Cliff, our story's protagonist, inexplicably is called Carl (pg 327) before going back to being Cliff again.

Or, Abye states, dramatically, that they're being hunted by aliens (pg 378), then, on the VERY NEXT PAGE (pg 379) when a traveling companion says they're being hunted by aliens Abye reacts by saying 'they're after us?' His eyes 'go wide' and everything. I mean, the dialog makes zero sense.

Speaking of actual words... at one point a group finds a tool left behind by some alien and the narrator asks, rhetorically, 'Dared they try it.'

What the f**k does that mean? Later, after witnessing the slaughter of a group of aliens by a third alien group, a character states, rather poignantly, 'They lost a lot of dead.'

Um, seriously, what the hell is that supposed to even mean? And I've not even got into problems I had with Cliff, our sociopathic lead character who, minutes after his life's true love gets kidnapped by an alien, decides to start screwing the only girl he can find. He never even hints at feeling shitty about it. Just idly thinks that things could get complicated later.

And of course the plot itself seems to revolve around getting the characters onto the bowl. Once there, they all sort of wondered around, no plan of action, just kind of vaguely trying to not get caught by the aliens... and sampling every damned piece of matter they come across to see if they can eat it. – Hey, it's bird, think we can eat it? Look, a tree, think we can eat it? Whoa, dirt, think we can eat it? Dude, it's alien shit, think we can eat it?

At some point, if I'm being honest with you, I started enjoying this. The same way I enjoy watching MST3K.

It's such an epic disaster than I started to revel in it. I realized I'm reading something that was pounded out over a weekend, probably while the authors were drinking. They clearly think I'm a moron, that I'm stupid, that readers in general are, and decided to vomit out some words and call it finished.

Screw us. We just need to shut up and hand over money I guess. I'm giving this two stars instead of one because of the balls it took them to write such shit and still have the nerve to put this out for public consumption.

Also, I did like the cover, and the interior had a few illustrations. So, yay for that.
