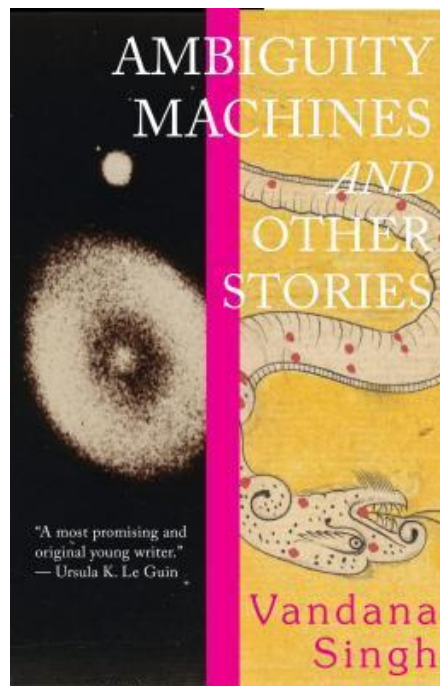




# Ambiguity Machines and Other Stories

*Vandana Singh*

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## Ambiguity Machines and Other Stories Vandana Singh

We think we're all moving together through space and time at the same speed and in the same direction, yet the universe is far stranger than that. The stories in this collection explore and celebrate this world and others and characters who are trying to make sense of the people they meet, what they see, and the challenges they face.

## Ambiguity Machines and Other Stories Details

Date : Published February 13th 2018 by Small Beer Press

ISBN :

Author : Vandana Singh

Format : Kindle Edition 288 pages

Genre : Short Stories, Science Fiction, Fiction, Fantasy, Anthologies, Collections

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## From Reader Review Ambiguity Machines and Other Stories for online ebook

### Peter Lehu says

This is an exceptional collection of beautifully written and mind-expanding speculative stories. Each story reveals new aspects of what it is to be alive by placing human experience into new, strange realities--in both speculative futures and pasts.

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### Tzu-Mainn Chen says

The author biography at the back of "Ambiguity Machines and Other Stories" explains that Vandals Singh is a physicist, and her stories reflect a fascination with the possibilities of science. Shifting realities, alternate forms of matter, evolving ecological systems - Singh touches on all these topics, situsting them within stories that are admirably grounded with humanity. In other words, her stories are not sterile and cold; rather they are full of emotion and wonder.

Singh's stories are missing one thing, though. They rarely feel like complete stories, instead ending with a moment of catharsis or understanding that isn't reflected through action or a change in situation. This may be fine for some, maybe many readers; however, I suppose I prefer more traditional story structures. In the end, "Ambiguity Machines" wasn't for me, but I think it is an excellent collection for those who enjoy more modern and non-traditional stories.

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### Terence says

Yet another in an ever-growing list of fortuitous discoveries at the library, *Ambiguity Machines* is a collection of short stories written by Singh over the last decade or so. I'm not sure why I picked it up since I already had an armful of books but it was blurbed by Yoon Ha Lee (another recent find) and it was "just" short stories. If I found her work unpalatable, I could abandon it without too much investment.

The first couple of stories were good, "With Fate Conspire" and "A Handful of Rice." But Singh captured my heart (so to speak) with "Peripeteia," the third story, and her protagonist's Alien Manipulation Hypothesis: "The universe is a massive quantum-mechanical relativistic Rube Goldberg machine in continual need of adjustment by a bunch of super-intelligent aliens" (p. 58).

(view spoiler)

(hide spoiler)]

There are no clunkers in the collection, though I enjoyed some more than others:

"Lifepod" - Reminded me a bit of Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis*, which is not a spoiler since the story itself doesn't (if that makes any sense).

"Sailing the Antarsa" - This story is representative of a theme that runs through much of Singh's work here: How limited human perceptions of the universe are.

"Wake-Rider" - A story about fighting back against the monopolization of thought and culture. And it's representative of another aspect I found common in this collection: The stories rarely end conclusively. (view spoiler)

"Requiem" - A story about the other species of the planet fighting back against our depredations. Not in a "guns and bombs," Rebels vs. Empire way or in a hopeless-gesture, William Kotzwinkle way but in a way that only a few humans begin to understand.

Highly recommended, a very strong 3.5+ stars. I've already bookmarked Singh's website/blog and I look forward to reading more of her work.

PS - There's also a strong UKL vibe in Singh's stories. Not surprising since she does credit Le Guin as a mentor in one of the blogs I've been reading. It's made me determined to definitely reread the *Earthsea* books, a project I was contemplating anyway.

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### **Rod Van Meter says**

A U.S. based Indian physicist woman writing SF, when I picked this up I was hoping for a different sensibility than much of what I read, and I wasn't disappointed. A beautiful first collection of stories, with very different settings and characters but all around the themes of time and reality, with one or two exceptions. Some are cyberpunk, some space opera, but all carry a certain sensibility. One or two hammer home political points rather overtly, and at the same time don't fit as well with the theme, so I think the collection would be stronger without them, overall, I definitely recommend this, and will look for other works by Singh!

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### **Peter Tillman says**

Always a pleasure to see a new (to me) writer at work. As in all collections, some stories work for me; others, not so much.

TOC: <http://www.isfdb.org/cgi-bin/pl.cgi?6...>

\*With Fate Conspire • (2013) • novelette by Vandana Singh. An illiterate woman in a future Kolkata is the only one who can see through a time-viewer to 1856. Bounced, not for me?

\*A Handful of Rice • (2012) • short fiction. Singh imagines the great Mughal emperor Akbar as a deathless shaman. Sadly, I bounced off this one.

\*Peripateia • (2013) • short fiction. A young woman physicist, whose girlfriend has left her, may be able to see her lifeline. Surrealistic and effective, 3.5 stars.

\*Life-Pod • (2007) • short story. The author writes that her story "features a woman who finds herself on a living space-ship and must figure out, based on her fragmented memories and the "thought-clouds" of others in stasis, who she is and where she is going." Which is more than I figured out. 2.2 stars.

\*Oblivion: A Journey • (2008) • short story.

\*Somadeva: A Sky River Sutra • (2010) • short story. Online at <http://strangehorizons.com/fiction/so...>

\*Are You Sannata3159? • (2010) • short fiction . The author calls it "probably the grimmest tale I've ever written." I'll leave it for last (if then).

\*Indra's Web • (2011) • short story. A former slum outside Delhi has been rebuilt into a solar-powered village. Now, one of the solar towers has quit working, for a surprising reason. 3 stars.

\*Ruminations in an Alien Tongue • (2012) • short story. Online at <http://www.lightspeedmagazine.com/fic...>

\*Sailing the Antarsa • (2013) • novelette.

\*Cry of the Kharchal • (2013) • novelette. Online at <http://clarkesworldmagazine.com/singh...>

\*Wake-Rider • (2014) • short story. Online at <http://www.lightspeedmagazine.com/fic...> Now, this is more like it! An action-packed mini space-opera, and a cautionary tale. 3.8 stars.

\*Ambiguity Machines: An Examination • (2015) • novelette. Online at <https://www.tor.com/2015/04/29/ambigu...> A young Mongolian engineer, held captive by an extremist group, is ordered to produce a superweapon. He builds a teleportation device instead, and escapes to his beloved wife. So opens this extraordinary story, a major work that you should not miss reading. 4.5 stars.

\*Requiem • novella. First publication 2018. A software engineer from Boston visits a future Utqiagvik (Barrow), Alaska, where her favorite aunt was lost in a winter storm. The story has a nice, lived-in feel, but gets a little woo-woo for my taste as it progresses. 3.3 stars for me, but the WSJ's reviewer called it a "small masterpiece."

The book came due before I'd finished it, so my 3-star rating is based on what I read. A solid collection, worth checking out.

The author comments on her stories, and links some others, at <http://vandana-writes.com/short-stories/>

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## Violet says

The book is similar to Ken Liu's story collections in the way that the author uses a specific cultural lens to create sci fi that explores humanity and their role in the greater universe. With Vandana Singh's writing, its Indian culture and beliefs, featuring nonwhite protagonists and commenting a lot on the interconnectedness of all things.

Never have I seen a more appropriate name for a collection of short stories, though. Everywhere I saw open endings, vague motivations, unclear causes. Don't get me wrong. This is never a problem. Everything is done with taste and grace and in a nice variety of forms. Some stories are straight forward adventures and some are more nebulous think pieces, but all deal with their own ambiguities. For example:

"Lifepod" where our view of the world is as vague and confused as the narrator. Trapped in an alien life support system cut off and drifting in space, we are unsure as the narrator where or what we are, and moment we get even the slightest idea, we're stopped short before we ever learn more.

"Are you Sannata3159?" cries a boy as he is being dragged off to be slaughtered by his own society, a future India that physically divides higher and lower class. Do we ever find out who Sannata3159 is? Sorry for the spoiler, but no. We are as lost and clueless as the poor boy.

"Ambiguity Machines: An Examination," as the title would suggest, it's the most nebulous story, made up of brief accounts of people's interactions with a strange and undefined machine. Beautiful and moving, part of the story's poignancy comes from its unclear nature.

In fact, that could be said about many if not all the stories within this collection. Most of the ambiguities contribute to the impact, because unknowns are always the most engaging.

However, it can be taken too far. It's a fine balance and sometimes too little can be said. My biggest complaint is the length of many of the stories. Don't get me wrong. The endings never seem forced, the plotlines generally had a nice conclusion, but they always seem to stop right as I'm really getting into them, right as I really start to feel for the characters and understand their world.

"Indra's Web" about a town's attempt to create a sustainable and interconnected living community was, at 10 pages, only a brief peak into an intriguing concept, a flash outside the window of a speeding train.

You see, a lot of these tales are too complex for their own good and there's often so much more to explore than what is given in those brief few dozen pages. Many of the stories could've been whole books in their own right. While that's part of the general ambiguity of the collection, it still doesn't make it any less frustrating. I get such a little taste of what could be that, for me, some of the stories border on the forgettable despite their overall quality.

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## Emrys says

Loved the melding of physics and science fiction in these stories, particularly as regards the currents of space and the journeys characters make through it.

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## Jeremy says

Singh is like a literary miracle of an Indian poet and physicist phased into one being. Her short stories instantly recall the more worldly and literary sci-fi stories of Ted Chiang and Ken Liu (both 5 star-ers). It's an impressive mixture of new scientific concepts with evocations of world literature, like A Thousand and One Nights, the Ramayana, or even Borges. "Lifepod" is an awesome confluence of poetry and alien symbiotics. Cyberpunk gets a dreadful shot in the eye with "Are you Sannata3159?". Dreams, story-telling, and other poetics infiltrate these advanced worlds while reaching to our universal past.

"And if you, the listener from another time and space, upon whose cheek this story falls like spray thrown up by the ocean--you, the eavesdropper, hearing a conversation borne by the wind, if you would walk into this story, take it away with you into your world, with its sorrows and small revelations, what would become of you?" (from "Somadeva: A Sky River Sutra")

## Rachel (Kalanadi) says

So, so close to a 5-star collection. Every story was well told. There were a few that just weren't to my personal taste in some way, so my final rating is probably 4.5 stars for content and quality.

"With Fate Conspire" - 4.5\*  
"A Handful of Rice" - 4\*  
"Peripeteia" - 4\*  
"Lifepod" - 3.5\*  
"Oblivion" - 3\*  
"Somadeva: A Sky River Sutra" - 3.5\*  
"Are you Sannata3159?" - 3\*  
"Indra's Web" - 3.5\*  
"Ruminations in an Alien Tongue" - 4\*  
"Sailing the Antarsa" - 4.5\*  
"Cry of the Kharchal" - 3\*  
"Wake-Rider" - 4\*  
"Ambiguity Machines: An Examination" - 4\*  
"Requiem" - 4.5\*

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## David says

This is one of the more aptly-titled books I've read in a while. Singh's prose is lovely, and her stories are, as billed, laced with ambiguous motivations and structure. I think some work better than others, but that is to be expected in any collection.

The other-worldly sense I got from reading these reminded me a bit of Cordwainer Smith - not due to any structural similarities, but due to the shared unfamiliarity with the perspectives their protagonists bring. That's the good part.

The part I didn't like as much is that the stories are heavier on reflecting on perspectives than they are on acting, which is not to my stylistic taste. Additionally, she seems to be taking an extremely pessimistic view of humanity's impact on the world, and that becomes a bit heavy handed at times.

All told, I'd recommend this if you're into atmospheric stories.

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## Sarah (CoolCurryBooks) says

Since I loved Vandana Singh's short story collection *The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet and Other Stories*, I made the decision to read *Ambiguity Machines and Other Stories*. And what a wonderful decision it was!

*Ambiguity Machines and Other Stories* contains fourteen stories and novelettes. These stories are futuristic and yet rooted in history. They're also all about connections — the connections between people, connections between cultures, connections between people and nature, and connections between time. It's a topic broad enough to allow for a diverse array of stories, but the thematic linking makes every story speak to each other in powerful ways.

“Somadeva: A Sky River Sutra” was perhaps my favorite story of the connection. It juxtaposes the past with the future as an ancient poet is reborn as an AI aboard a spaceship. I love innovative science fiction that plays with genre constraints, and this story delivers. In concept, it is somewhat similar to another story in the collection, “With Fate Conspire,” a novelette about an illiterate woman in a flood drowned future who has the ability to peer back into the past through a strange machine. She’s supposed to be observing a famous male poet, but she instead becomes fascinated with the life of an ordinary woman. She begins to create her own poetry, convincing the oblivious scientists that these are fragments of the famous poet’s lost arts.

“A Handful of Rice” has some of the trappings of steampunk (it originates from a steampunk themed collection) but it is less obsessed with the aesthetic than other steampunk works. The protagonist decides to assassinate an immortal Mughal emperor. Then he realizes that the emperor is a man he once knew, a close friend from boyhood. I think the two were supposed to have a brotherly relationship, but honestly it felt so homoerotic. Was this intentional? Who can tell!

“Cry of the Karchal” is a novelette and possibly my least favorite entry in the collection. It just feels too long and is full of people I don’t care about! It takes place in an old Indian hotel, built on the ruins of an ancient fortress said to be haunted by a sorcerous queen. The ghost of the queen is putting a plan into place, one that involves four individuals and magic in the shape of a sand storm. It’s the only story in the collection that’s more fantasy than science fiction.

The titular “Ambiguity Machines: An Examination” is a novelette that originally appeared on Tor.com. The story’s a collection of three accounts of impossible machines that warp the rules of reality, blurring boundaries and forming connections between people, places, and times. It’s the story where the thematic material is most relevant, and it’s both gorgeous and enthralling.

In “Ruminations in an Alien Tongue”, an old woman waits for the return of an old friend... only, while she’s met him many times, this will be his first time meeting her. He’s caught in a time loop, and as decades go by he reappears on her doorstep without aging a day or remembering who she is.

“Wake-Rider” and “Are You Sannata3159?” are probably some of the most standard science fiction stories in the collection. They are well crafted and engaging but tread more familiar ground than some of the others. That’s not necessarily a bad thing! I enjoyed both stories. In “Wake-Rider,” the protagonist is a young woman who’s part of the rebellion against a corporation that gains dominance through a nano-plague that infects people, turning them into drones that do little other than work and consume at the company’s behest. She finds an old wreck that might change everything... if she can get the information out. In “Are You Sannata3159?”, a boy lives in the darkness of a grand metropolis’s undercity. His mother and sister both get jobs at the slaughter house that’s suddenly providing residents with meat of a suspicious origin. It’s fairly easy to see the direction the story takes, but it still managed to creep me out.

“Oblivion: A Journey” is another story that uses a familiar set up: a revenge tale. In a far future, the narrator’s home is destroyed and they vow vengeance on the perpetrator. The pursuit of vengeance will provide meaning to their life, but how fulfilling is it? Like some of the other stories in the collection, “Oblivion: A Journey” also contains queer themes, with the protagonist switching genders and various points in their life.

“Peripeteia” is one of the stranger stories of the collection. The narrator is convinced that the universe is a grand conspiracy created by aliens. She’s long jokingly believed it, but her longtime partner leaving her is causing a crisis: she can’t understand any reason for this to happen other than alien invasion. Is the narrator insane or saner than everyone else? Like with many of her other works, Singh eschews clear cut answers.

“Life-pod” is another puzzling story. The protagonist is a woman who was human... but is she still? She’s awake on an alien ship filled with captive humans. She thinks an alien might be lurking too, but she can’t be

sure. The story's dreamlike tone is subtly entrancing.

In "Sailing the Antarsa," space is like an ocean, with all that entails. A woman volunteers to go off on a mission, riding solar currents, to see if the settlers of a nearby planet have survived. Over the course of her journey, she encounters strange creatures in a manner that hearkens back to the golden ages of science fiction.

"Indra's Web" is one of the more forgettable stories in the bunch. In fact, I had to look it up to be able to recall what it was about when I started writing this review. It's a solarpunk story where an Indian slum has been transformed into a vision for a sustainable future.

Finally, "Requiem" is the only story original to this collection. The protagonist is a grad student who finds out her aunt, a scientist working in Alaska, has died. She goes to Alaska to collect her aunt's belongings and finds some truths about the world and herself. I liked it fine enough but didn't think it was the strongest in the collection. That said, I enjoyed the interaction between Inuit and Indian culture.

Vandana Singh is a sadly underrated author. Maybe people just don't know authors unless they write novels? Anyway, I highly recommend reading some of her work.

Review from The Illustrated Page.

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## **Kat Mayerovitch says**

There's such a lyrical, Scheherazade-like quality to these stories. People tangled up in time like unruly balls of yarn, cause and effect gazing at each other like twins who can't even tell themselves apart, past and future leading up to one another like an unending Escher staircase.

This is science fiction that doesn't explain itself, that lets the reality of technology or topography or physics just \*exist\* as a background to a larger story. If you need detailed diagrams of the ductwork before you can bring yourself to believe in a spaceship, these stories will drive you mad. But if you are the kind of reader who loves to let yourself fall into a dreamlike state of "what if?" then I can't recommend this collection more highly.

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## **Mark says**

I was attracted to this collection of short stories by the author's background in physics and her cultural perspective as an Indian author (now living in the States). I found many of these stories intriguing and evocative. The language is textured enough to read as "literary sci-fi/fantasy" but there is enough of a kernel of hard science there to give Singh's work a sense of being well within that tradition. I was reminded of some of the thoughtful work of Le Guin and even Octavia Butler, as well as, in some stories such as the title story and "Cry of the Karchal," the more mystical, even conceptual fantasy of writers such as Borges or Eco. Some stories read as diaries from the lives of people in extraordinary circumstances yet facing familiar, resonant human dilemmas in those situations—hence the literary quality.

Here are a couple of quotations (not plot spoilers) I found deeply insightful about the current state of technology, society, and the planet:

(from “Requiem” p. 304) “I realized when I was quite young that there were two classes of problems, broadly speaking, simple ones and complex ones. Machines are good at solving simple problems. But throw in enough complexity and all bets are off. I went into biomimicry-based engineering because I wanted to challenge this realization. It’s only when I got to the Arctic that I realized my first instinct had been right. You can’t solve complex problems with machines, without breeding more problems of increasing intractability. Complexity is the spanner in the works of Newton’s Engine. But it goes beyond that. You might think a sufficiently advanced AI would think its way through some of the failures (I happen to know they are not just rumors) that are plaguing GaiaCorp’s Project Terra. GaiaCrop has invested so much in its intelligent geoengineering systems, but I think it is inconceivable for autocrats to realize that their slaves might not march to their orders. AIs are a fundamentally different kind of intelligence than humans. We have more in common with the whales than with our household robots.

I think our main problem may be that we think of the Earth itself like a Newton’s Engine, something we can tinker with and fix. Jimmy says that even biologists fall into this trap—of putting living creatures into rigid categories of structure and behavior, motivated by simplistic evolutionary imperatives.”

And later, pg. 313:

“It is hard to be in the world—if you live in fully, it is easy to sink into despair. What, after all, can one or two people do, when the world is dying? Why not submit to the alluring logic of GaiaCorp’s promise to save the Earth, to their megamachines seeding the oceans, their satellites seeding the skies, their winged shades reflecting the sun’s light away from whichever politically expedient, remote, hard-scrabble country is out of favor? Why not bide the time as gently as possible by surrendering our full, human, curious, questing selves, lulling ourselves into dreams? The deal is that to be fully alive you have to be willing to bear pain. That is what I swore to, when I was in my twenties—that I would be fully alive. But nobody can do it alone.”

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## **Radiantflux says**

21st book for 2018.

An interesting collection of scifi/fantasy stories.

While few of the stories really stood out to me as being exceptional, I enjoyed reading stories strongly imbued both with a non-Western (Indian) perspective and a strong environmental ethos. Her story "Sailing the Antarsa", which describes a colony world, in which all life is held as sacred, was particularly good in this regard; I would love to see this particular story expanded into a book.

Looking forward to reading Singh's first novel.

3-stars.

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## **Lanie Tankard says**

Here's my review:

<http://wtpcentral.thewoventalepress.n...>

