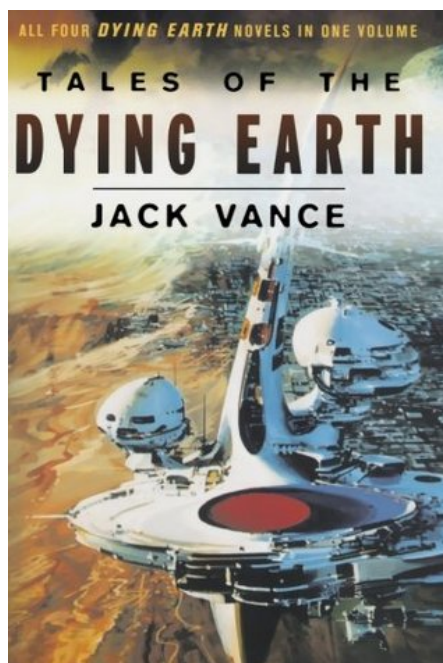




Tales of the Dying Earth

Jack Vance

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Tales of the Dying Earth

Jack Vance

Tales of the Dying Earth Jack Vance

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Tales of the Dying Earth Details

Date : Published November 2000 by Orb Tor Tom Doherty (first published December 1998)

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From Reader Review Tales of the Dying Earth for online ebook

Szplug says

This collection delivered one of the more pleasant surprises I have ever had borrowing a book: I took this on the advice of a friend, expecting a decent series of *old style* science-fiction with that corny *Xanxxar from Planet Zorkon* feel; what was delivered instead was an entertaining, hilarious and wildly creative series of tales set in the *far* future, when the long-suffering sun is in her final days, feebly emitting barely enough red light to keep things on Earth functioning. The first of the four books that make up this omnibus is a handful of short stories (one with *Chun the Unavoidable* being a favorite) that set the stage, so to speak; the fourth details the misadventures through space and time of the Magnificent wizard Rhialto. In between are the middle pair, both of which star a rogue named Cugel, selfishness incarnate, the most endearingly misanthropic anti-hero I've ever encountered in a fantasy/science-fiction tale.

Vance is a very good writer, with that Stendhalian or Vidalian ability to impart a sense of effortless suppleness to his prose, like the words reliably *flow* off of his pen and onto the page - capable of wringing the ridiculous out of his futuristic Earth without being heavy-handed or cartoonish. He has loads of playful fun with the oftentimes overly serious fantasy genre, while respecting it at the same time; and he shows a delightful creativity and satiric touch throughout. I never tired of watching Cugel scheme and smugly expect his inflated cunning to let him master every situation, only to find - almost without exception - that said craftiness has actually been stupidity, followed by the horrified realization that he has, again, made his situation *far* worse.

Readers can find evidence of Vance's influence and inspiration in several authors who followed after him - most notably Gene Wolfe, who borrowed the idea of an aged sun for his tetralogy *The Book of the New Sun*. The latter is a true masterpiece, but *Tales of the Dying Sun* is also vastly entertaining and inventive from the first page to the last, and highly recommended - particularly for those suffering from the temporal meltdown blues.

Bokeshi says

What can one possibly say about a book that almost singlehandedly defined an entire sub-genre of SF and fantasy? Jack Vance is a legendary author who needs no introduction, and this is his most quintessential work. Even though I prefer some of his other books more (e.g., *Lyonesse* or *Planet of Adventure*), the *Dying Earth* quartet is doubtless a masterpiece. It's whimsical, opulent and darkly magical, much like the world at the end of time in which these stories take place. People who don't have an appreciation of irony and baroque language may want to skip this one; the rest of you, rejoice--you've just discovered a treasure.

* * *

Džek Vens, legendarno ime u krugovima poznavalaca zlatnog doba nau?ne fantastike, dobitnik je svih najve?ih žanrovskih nagrada i priznanja za svoje književno stvaralaštvo, uklju?uju?i i prestižnu Grand Master Award za životno delo (titula koju deli samo 30-ak najzna?ajnijih autora spekulativne fikcije). Me?utim, iz nekih nepojmljivih razloga njegov rad nikad nije prevo?en na srpski jezik.

Vens kroz svoju raskošnu prozu koristi ?itavo bogatstvo engleske leksike i stoga definitivno nije lak autor za prevo?enje; ?itati njega na srpskom bilo bi jednako ?itanju Šekspira na srpskom (i ne, pore?enje nije sasvim arbitrarno -- Vens je po mnogo ?emu Šekspirov žanrovski pandan). Možda je to jedan od razloga njegove

zanemarenosti na ovim prostorima, i možda je, na kraju krajeva, tako i bolje. ?itaoci koji se odvažaju na lutanja van granica doma?ih publikacija sigurno ?e, pre ili kasnije, u moru zanemarenih i previ?enih pisaca (posebno ?anrovskih pisaca), otkriti i Džeka Vensa, koji je u toku svoje 60-godišnje spisateljske karijere bio zaslu?an za neka od najve?ih dostignu?a na polju SF i Fantasy ?anra.

Istina, Vens je izbacio i nekoliko osrednjih dela, kao i par promašaja, ali to je zbilja minorna packa u karijeri pisca aktivnog više od pola veka, pisca koji iza sebe ima preko 70 naslova, od kojih je ve?ina konzistentno natprose?nog (a nekoliko njih ?ak vrhunskog) kvaliteta. Svejedno, mora se priznati ?injenica da Vens poseduje vrlo karakteristi?an stil koji se ne?e dopasti svakome -- njegov fokus na ekscentri?ne kulture i bizarna društvena ure?enja na užtrb karakterizacije i zapleta možda ?e zbuniti neke ?itaoce, dok ?e njegova sklonost ka formalnim, arhai?nim i ironi?nim dijalozima možda odbiti druge -- ali oni koji vole divlje uzlete mašte, cini?an smisao za humor i jedinstvenu eleganciju jezi?kog izraza, sigurno ne?e biti razo?arani.

Ipak, nemojte mi verovati na re?; bolje potražite neku knjigu Džeka Vensa i sami proverite šta zna?i biti neprikosnoveni majstor ?anra. Majstor na ?ijem su se oltaru klanjali Martin, Gejmen, Pra?et, Simons, Vulf, Legvinova, Zelazni, Herbert itd. Samo zapamtite da se Vens ne ?ita zbog slojevitih likova i komplikovanih zapleta; on se ?ita zbog verbalnih dosko?ica, melodi?nog stila, nepresušne imaginacije; zbog ?udesnih svetova neprevazi?ene lepote, neobi?nih obi?aja koji u njima vladaju, i još neobi?nijih individua koje ih nastanjuju; zbog pikaresknih pustolovina koje pod svetlucavom površinom ?esto kriju mra?ne i oštre društvene satire. I budite spremni na to da ?e vam mnogi od gore navedenih pisaca, nakon ?itanja Vensa, delovati kao bledunjavi amateri.

Premda je Džek Vens danas najpoznatiji po crnohumornoj i labavo povezanoj Dying Earth tetralogiji (?ija dva središnja romana govore o Kugelu Promu?urnom, verovatno najnespretnijem zlikovcu ?anrovske knji?evnosti), po meni su njegova dva ubedljivo najve?a ostvarenja spektakularna Lyonesse trilogija (savršena antiteza Tolkinovom Gospodaru prestenova) i veli?anstveni ?etvorodelni roman Planet of Adventure (briljantan oma? Berouzovom Barsum serijalu). Sva ova dela postoje u omnibus izdanjima koja se mogu relativno lako na?i, a moja najtoplija preporuka se podrazumeva.

Radujte se, budu?i ?itaoci! Pred vama je kov?eg s blagom koji samo ?eka da ga otvorite.

(Deo neobjavljenog eseja o stvaralaštvu Džeka Vensa pisanog lani.)

Nancy Oakes says

Tales of the Dying Earth is fantastic. It is divided into four parts: The Dying Earth, The Eyes of the Overworld, Cugel's Saga and Rhialto The Marvellous.

All of the tales take place in a far-off future Earth in which the sun is dying, and in which the earth's population has dwindled. Magic is the rule of the day.

The Dying Earth is a series of tales which are interconnected, following the exploits of a few people (and some very odd creatures & even a demon or two).

My favorite section of the book follows the story of Cugel, in The Eyes of the Overworld, in which Cugel the Clever has the great misfortune of trying to rob a powerful magician and gets caught in the act. This story follows Cugel's journey to get home to plot revenge on the magician, who has transported him to the far North. It is often very funny, and really so well written that I could actually visualize the action.

Cugel the Clever reappears in the next section, Cugel's Saga, and although not as humorous as Eyes of the Overworld, still a fun read.

Rhialto The Marvellous is the final story in this collection. Rhialto is a magician, and is part of a group of other magicians. Here, Rhialto is framed for misdeeds of which he is innocent; later, Rhialto and his fellow magicians find themselves on a quest to rescue someone stranded on the edge of the universe.

The book's length may detract some readers, but don't judge it simply on number of pages: I was entranced from day one and took every opportunity I could to get back to reading it after having to put it down. The stories are incredibly well written so that the reader cannot possibly get bored. Some of Cugel's exploits, for example, had me laughing out loud.

I would recommend this to anyone who likes fantasy that involves magic, or fantasy in general. Do not miss this one!!

Adam Calhoun says

I got this book a year ago, partly because I kept hearing how this 'Vance' character was a master fantasy writer that I had somehow missed, and partly because it followed one of my rules for purchasing books (if it has a wizard or a spaceship on the cover, buy it!). The moment I started reading the first novel in this book, I knew Jack Vance was something special. It took me a year to read it because the writing was so good, I wanted to stretch out how long I could read it for the first time. Of course, as soon as I started reading each novel in the book, I couldn't stop; I would be done with a day or two.

Vance has got to be one of the greatest writers I have ever read, and quite probably the greatest stylist. The writing is unreal and pleasantly full of words that I don't know or that make me think. Vance does *not* talk down to his readers. His books are full of humor, but so dry as to make sure these are not "humorous" books...if that makes sense. Still, each book is populated with understated declarations by characters attempting to make themselves look superior or to save face. There are short sentences that speak volumes. It makes me swoon!

The novels follow similar patterns, either being collection of short stories or being stories made up of shorter stories. The theme is consistent: the world amoral, and everyone's path follows a random walk up and down, but over time averaging out so that they end up where they began. Until they die. It is bleak, but appealing. I don't know how much more I can say about this book. Read it! Or you've missed a great piece of literature.

Dan Schwent says

Earth is on its last leg. The sun is a red giant, the moon has vanished, and magic has returned.

This omnibus includes the following four books:

The Dying Earth: The Dying Earth is a collection of linked short stories. And here they are:

Turjan of Miir: Turjan, a wizard, seeks the help of Pandelume, another wizard, in creating artificial life.

Turjan is a good intro to the Dying Earth. The basics of the setting are covered and it sets the tone for the rest of the short stories. The story itself is pretty simple. Turjan has to do a favor for Pandelume in exchange for his secrets.

Mazirian the Magician: Mazirian covets Turjan's secret of artificial life, and also T'sain, the woman Turjan has created. MtM was like an extended chase scene showcasing some of the weirder denizens of the Dying Earth. I liked it but so far all the wizard characters have been nearly interchangeable.

T'sais: T'sais, the woman created by Pendelume, comes to earth to find beauty. What she finds is trouble, as well as a disfigured man named Etarr and the sorceress that cursed him. More of the Dying Earth is revealed and the ending is definitely worth the read.

Liane the Wayfarer: In order to win the hand of a witch named Lith, Liane seeks to recover half of a stolen tapestry. But is he a match for Chun the Unavoidable? Liane is almost like a prototype for Cugel, the protagonist of later Dying Earth stories, amoral and greedy. Chun's robe of eyeballs is a chilling image.

Ulan Dhor: Ulan Dhor, nephew of Prince Kandive, goes to the ancient city of Ampridatvir to retrieve the magic of Rogol Domendonfors in the form of two tablets. Instead, he finds a bizarre city where everyone wears green or grey and can't see people wearing the opposing color. Can Ulan find the two tablets and take them back to Kandive? This story was easily my favorite so far. Even though it was only twenty pages, a lot of ideas were crammed into it. It's becoming easier to see how Vance influenced so many that came after him.

Guyal of Sfere: Guyal's father gets tired of his inquisitive nature and sends him looking for the Museum of Man, where the Curator can answer all of his questions. Only Guyall finds trouble along the way... Guyal's tale takes him into the odd culture of the Saponids and against ghosts and demons. The message of this tale seemed to be "Don't forget the past but don't worship it either."

Eyes of the Overworld: Caught in the act of robbing the wizard Iucounu, Cugel the Clever is flung to the other side of the world, tasked with retrieving the missing Eye of the Overworld. Can he retrieve the Eye and get revenge on Iucounu?

Here's where the Dying Earth kicks it up a notch. Cugel is a scoundrel and a liar; a classic anti-hero. He lies and bluffs his way from situation to situation. He brings to mind Roger Zelazny's Jack of Shadows, as well as Hugh Cook's Drake Douay.

There is a lot of dry humor in this story as Cugel gets flung across the world, imprisoned, sent back in time, and imprisoned again, never forgetting about getting revenge on the one who "wronged" him. Vance's P. G. Wodehouse influence is visible in the dialogue and in the situations.

Cugel's Saga: Cugel's woes continued as he is flung across the world a second time by Iucounu. This time, Cugel gets himself indentured as a worker retrieving scales in a pit of muck and, later, as a worminger aboard a ship. Will he ever get back home and finally give Iucounu a taste of what's coming to him?

Cugel's Saga was even better than the Eyes of the Overworld. Once again, Cugel lied and cheated his way back to Almerly to get his revenge on Iucounu. Vance's Wodehouse influence was even more visible in this tale. Cugel is a like a sociopathic version of Uncle Galahad or Uncle Fred.

Rhialto the Marvellous: Rhialto the Marvellous is a collection of three novellas starring Rhialto the Marvellous.

The Murthe: The Murthe, a witch-goddess from the distant past, arrives in the present to take over the world and turn the men into women. A creature from the past has persued her and must rally the wizards against her.

Even for a fantasy story, this one is pretty sexist. Still, it's hilarious, especially when the wizards fall victim

to the squalm.

Fader's Waft: Another wizard launches a smear campaign against Rhialto and he has to traverse time and space to redeem himself.

Hilarious. I have to think Terry Pratchett's wizards are influence by Rhialto and company.

Morreion: Rhialto and company attempt to solve the mystery of Morreion, a wizard who disappeared aeons ago, along with the origin of the IOUN stones.

As in the previous story, the bickering and pettiness among the wizards is hilarious, much in the vein of P. G. Wodehouse. The ending was poignant and was a perfect example of Vance's penchant for anti-heroes.

Closing Thoughts: What a difference 15 years makes! I was 18 the first time I visited the Dying Earth and didn't care for it all that much. With age comes wisdom and I loved the Dying Earth on my second visit. While it's influential to fantasy and Dungeons and Dragons in particular, it isn't the breezy read a lot of people expect. It reads like a mix of Fritz Leiber and P.G. Wodehouse. Vance's anti-heroes are the inspiration for countless that came later. Cugel the Clever has risen to become one of my favorite fantasy characters. I came for the SF but stayed for the subtle humor and uniqueness. If you've lost your taste for heroes and crave fantasy, a visit to The Dying Earth will do you no ill!

Boone says

Absolutely amazing! I've never read anything quite like Vance's Dying Earth stories, and that's a good thing. I'm not a huge fantasy fan, but this is generically classified as fantasy.

Jack Vance has a knack for language. He uses words that aren't well known but add a different type of depth to the story. The dialogue is unique. It's very formal yet at the same time very witty and full of sarcasm. Other reviews condemn the stories for the florid and formal dialogue, mostly because it's not conventional. Just because it doesn't fit your particular style doesn't mean it lacks merit.

Also, some reviews give these stories a poor rating because of the lack of character development. I wish more modern authors followed Vance's style rather than the 800 page soap opera of characters full of development while lacking on real plot, substance, and setting. With Vance you get to know enough about the characters, but the focus is more on story. I'm in the minority, I know that, because it seems most novels these days get rave reviews based on how many characters there are and how much detail you learn about their motivations. For me, that's not so interesting.

Even if you're not a fantasy fan you should read these stories. The Eyes of the Overworld and Cugel's Saga are wonderful if you don't mind following a main character who is truly a scoundrel. Both stories are picaresque so keep that in mind before you read about the exploits of Cugel the Clever. You've been warned, some readers sensibilities are challenged by the Cugel stories which also result in some of the poor reviews you may have seen. However, if you like reading unpredictable, unique stories full of unusual characters and settings then Vance may become your new favorite author.

aPriL does feral sometimes says

Beautiful poetic writing: check.

Wondrous fantasy and magical creatures and magicians: check.

Too clever for their own good, but yet fun anti-heroes: check.

Five stars, right?

Except: in every story every women character is either too ugly to enslave or rape, or she is beautiful and is kidnapped, enslaved and raped - after which our various heroes being sated with the sexual abuse of their beautiful female captive, they then rob and cheat her of all of her jewelry and money before either killing her or using her as a decoy for some murderous evil monster who kills her.

Why are the rapes in these four novels worse than what is in other novels I have read? Because every male protagonist in every single short story in all of the four books never assumes the women are of value to know as a person or to love or as worthy of anything except for a night's rape to satisfy lust or for revenge on another man, after which they either forget they had her and move on to the next adventure. Neither the author or his male adventurers feel the women characters are worthy of anything more than a tight hole to f*ck for a sentence or two before killing her. Despite that the writing obviously was gorgeously imitative of fairy tales language, I could not get past the complete dehumanizing of every woman character as being only a human useful for having breasts and a vagina, which after one night were easily discarded like garbage.

Burn this f*cking book. Imagine your baby daughters reading it, fellows.

Stuart says

Tales of The Dying Earth: A perfect introduction to Jack Vance's work

Originally posted at Fantasy Literature

There aren't any other books is SF/Fantasy quite like Jack Vance's Tales of The Dying Earth. They have had an enormous influence on writers ranging from Gene Wolfe and George R.R. Martin to Gary Gygax, the creator of Dungeons & Dragons. These stories highlight Jack Vance's amazing imagination, precise yet baroque writing style, and somewhat archaic dialogue that disguises an incredibly dry wit and skeptical view of humanity. I've read SF and fantasy all my life, and I can say with confidence that his voice and imagery are unique. If you've encountered anything like it, it's most likely that those writers took their cue from Vance.

The Dying Earth

This book, first published in 1950 by Hillman Publications, is very short (around 175 pages), and is actually a collection of six slightly overlapping but self-contained stories set in an incredibly distant future earth where the sun has cooled to a red color, the moon is gone, and humanity has declined to a pale shadow of former greatness, and struggles to survive amongst the ruins of the past. The world is filled with various magicians, sorcerers, demons, ghouls, brigands, thieves, adventurers, etc. The events are episodic but are compulsively readable, and really beautifully written. The sense of melancholy and decline are ever-present, yet the characters themselves are not cowed by this situation, and strive to achieve their own goals even as the world moves toward a time when the sun will eventually snuff out like a candle. Despite this, many of the situations they find themselves in are quite funny, in a dark and ironic sort of way. For my money, this book is by far the best of the four and worthy of its classic reputation.

The Eyes of the Overworld

16 years after *The Dying Earth*, *The Eyes of the Overworld* (1966) details the misadventures of the self-interested, not-so-clever scoundrel Cugel the Clever after he crosses Iucounu the Laughing Magician. It contains all the same sly, tongue-in-cheek humor, the strong imagery of a decaying and run-down world, and the wonderfully-stilted high language used by all the humans and other creatures of this autumnal far-future world. Basically, Cugel is not a charming scoundrel with panache like James Bond or Arsene Lupin III. Instead, he basically is just morally bankrupt and self-serving with a thin veneer of suave talk. He doesn't hesitate to betray companions at the first opportunity, and has loyalty to no one. I think Jack Vance's take on the anti-hero is quite fresh, but I find it hard to be sympathetic to Cugel. Still, on further reflection I think that it is his inept selfishness and repeated failures to achieve his goals that has endeared him to a lot of readers, an unwitting Inspector Clouseau in an epic fantasy setting. Cugel's adventures are still miles above your average sword-and-sorcery tale, but fail to reach the sublime heights of *The Dying Earth*.

Cugel's Saga

Cugel's Saga (1983) is the third book in the *Dying Earth* series, coming 17 years after *The Eyes of the Overworld* (1966) and 33 years after *The Dying Earth* (1950). It's also the second book to feature that thieving scoundrel Cugel the Clever, who often finds he is not quite as clever as he thinks, as his schemes generally end in failure at the end of each chapter, leaving him penniless and fleeing his enemies until he encounters the next adventure. This book is a similarly picaresque episodic adventure in the slowly crumbling world of the *Dying Earth*, as creatures, magicians and humans pass their waning days before the fading red sun goes dark.

Rhialto the Marvellous

Rhialto the Marvellous (1984) is the final book and consists of three stories, "The Murthe", "Fader's Waft", and "Morreion". Overall, I'd rate this as the weakest of the four parts of *Tales of the Dying Earth*, but still worth reading if you enjoy the wild imagination, high language, and deadpan humor of Jack Vance's baroque tales set in the far-future dying earth.

"Morreion", the last story, is by far the best. It chronicles the journey of Rhialto and his fellow magicians to the edge of the universe to find a missing colleague who sought the source of the much-coveted IOUN stones (which are used in D&D, apparently).

"The Murthe" is a very short and humorous story of the havoc that is wreaked by a powerful magic-user from the past, who starts to convert the magicians in Rhialto's conclave into women without them realizing it through a process of "ensqualmation". Their antics as they become more feminine are quite amusing, and her power is not easily vanquished.

"Fader's Waft" is the longest story, and unfortunately the weakest in my opinion. In this story Rhialto is the center of various schemes by his fellow wizards to defame his character and seize his magical possessions. Although some of the situations are fun to read about, overall it gets fairly tedious at times and doesn't measure up to Cugel's stories.

Eric says

"I wish you pleasant travels and success in all future endeavors."

"The sentiment is naturally valued," said Cugel with some bitterness. "You might however have rendered a more meaningful service by extending a share of your noon meal."

Pharesm's placid benevolence was as before. "This would have been an act of mistaken altruism. Too fulsome a generosity corrupts the recipient and stultifies his resource."

Cugel gave a bitter laugh. "I am a man of iron principle, and I will not complain, even though, lacking any better fare, I was forced to devour a great transparent insect which I found at the heart of your rock-carving."

Pharesm swung about with a suddenly intent expression. "A great transparent insect, you say?"

"Insect, epiphyte, mollusc-who knows? It resembled no creature I have yet seen, and its flavor even after carefully grilling at the brazier, was not distinctive."

Pharesm floated seven feet into the air, to turn the full power of his gaze down at Cugel. He spoke in a low harsh voice: "Describe this creature in detail!"

Wondering at Pharesm's severity, Cugel obeyed. "It was thus and thus as to dimension." He indicated with his hands. "In color it was a gelatinous transparency shot with numberless golden specks. These flickered and pulsed when the creature was disturbed. The tentacles seemed to grow flimsy and disappear rather than terminate. The creature evinced a certain sullen determination, and ingestion proved difficult."

Pharesm clutched at his head, hooking his fingers into the yellow down of his hair. He rolled his eyes upward and uttered a tragic cry. "Ah! Five hundred years I have toiled to entice this creature, despairing, doubting, brooding by night, yet never abandoning hope that my calculations were accurate and my great talisman cogent. Then, when finally it appears, you fall upon it for no other reason than to sate your repulsive gluttony!"

Cugel, somewhat daunted by Pharesm's wrath, asserted his absence of malicious intent. Pharesm would not be mollified. He pointed out that Cugel had committed trespass and hence had forfeited the option of pleading innocence. "Your very existence is a mischief, compounded by bringing the unpleasant fact to my notice. Benevolence prompted me to forbearance, which now I perceive for a grave mistake."

"In this case," stated Cugel with dignity, "I will depart your presence at once. I wish you good fortune for the balance of the day, and now, farewell."

"Not so fast," said Pharesm in the coldest of voices. "Exactitude has been disturbed; the wrong which has been committed demands a counter-act to validate the Law of Equipose. I can define the gravity of your act in this manner: should I explode you on this instant into the most minute of your parts the atonement would measure one ten-millionth of your offense. A more stringent retribution becomes necessary."

Cugel spoke in great distress. "I understand that an act of consequence was performed, but remember! My participation was basically casual. I categorically declare first my absolute innocence, second my lack of criminal intent, and third my effusive apologies. And now, since I have many leagues to travel, I will-"

Pharesm made a peremptory gesture. Cugel fell silent. Pharesm drew a deep breath. "You fail to understand the calamity you have visited upon me. I will explain, so that you may not be astounded by the rigors which await you. As I have adumbrated, the arrival of the creature was the culmination of my great effort. I determined its nature through a perusal of forty-two thousand librams, all written in cryptic language: a task requiring a hundred years. During a second hundred years I evolved a pattern to draw it in upon itself and prepared exact specification. Next I assembled stone-cutters, and across a period of three hundred years gave solid form to my pattern. Since like subsumes like, the variates and the intercongeles create a suprapullulation of all areas, qualities and intervals into crystorrhoid, whorl, eventually exciting the ponentiation of a pro-ubietal chute. Today occurred the concatenation; the 'creature,' as you call it, pervolved upon itself; in your idiotic malice you devoured it."

Cugel, with a trace of haughtiness, pointed out that the "idiotic malice" to which the distraught sorcerer referred was in actuality simple hunger. "In any event, what is so extraordinary about the 'creature?' Others equally ugly may be found in the net of any fisherman."

Pharesm drew himself to his full height, glared down at Cugel. "The 'creature,' " he said in a grating voice, "is TOTALITY. The central globe is all of space, viewed from the inverse. The tubes are vortices into various eras, and what terrible acts you have accomplished with your prodding and poking, your boiling and chewing, are impossible to imagine!"

"What of the effects of digestion?" inquired Cugel delicately. "Will the various components of space, time, and existence retain their identity after passing the length of my inner tract?"

The Dying Earth: **4 stars**

The Eyes of the Overworld: **4 1/4 stars**

Cugel's Saga: **3 1/2 stars**

Rhialto the Marvellous: **4 stars**

4 1/4 stars

Olivier Delaye says

QUESTION: what is a writer to do when he can write neither characters nor plot?

ANSWER: he writes a plotless/misogynistic/paper-thin-character-driven (driven, AH! Dragged, is more like it!) "succession of boring sentences" (sorry, guys, can't bring myself to write "stories" here) weighed down by stilted dialogue and never-ending description of mountains, rivers, rocks, trees, grass, people, etc., all this using as many pompous and pretentious words as possible so that us, innocent readers that we are, can drool over how smart he is. Sorry, Mr. Vance, but Umberto Eco you most definitely were not.

IN SHORT: a total waste of my precious reading time. And I'm being nice here.

Stephen says

6.0 STARS. See my reviews of each individual book for my thoughts on that book. As a series, all I can say is that this is one of the best series EVER WRITTEN and the world created by Jack Vance is as good as anything I have ever read. I plan on reading Songs of the Dying Earth Stories in Honor of Jack Vance in the near future and can't wait to see what some of the genre's best writers do with this setting. HIGHEST POSSIBLE RECOMMENDATION!!!

Scott A. Nicholson says

Recommended and lent to me by a friend under the false pretense of science-fiction, Dying Earth summed up everything that I dislike about sword and sorcery fantasy. Admittedly, I only read the first three of this four novel collection and cannot bring myself to read the first.

The first novel is a number of short stories centered around the premise of an Earth so far into the future that the world seems to have completely abandoned modern civilization and now relies on a sort of medieval fuedal system in which 90% of the population either knows powerful magic (of the recited scroll variety) or possesses a number of powerful magical items. Allow me to say that this is not generally my cup of tea for setting, but I did see some potential in the stories contained within. The characters were difficult to like, but in such brief passings, it didn't matter; the stories at least held some manner of intrigue. One of the stories even had genuine sci-fi elements.

The second novel follows the journey of a very-unlikeable rogue named Cugel as he tries to work his way back home from a far away land. Along the way, he meets a variety of characters who are either helping or hindering him, but his reaction is always the same: take advantage of them to the extent of robbery, murder, or, in one case, trading the person into sexual slavery (I feel that it should be noted that this was the only female character that had personality beyond being being a vessel for sex). Needless to say, a fellowship is never formed and we're forced to put up with more of the same machiavelian bumbblings that more often than not leave him worse off than before. Eventually Cugel reaches his goal and the reader enjoys (or not) the final confrontation between evil and... a different shade of evil?

Finally, we come to the third novel and the last in the two part Cugel saga, where the author provides us a fresh dose of the same story through the clever use of a different path. I'm not exaggerating. Same beginning location, same exact goal, same asshole protagonist. My only regret is that I kept reading.

Jean-marcel says

Sometime in my teen years I all but stopped reading fantasy, and this was because I was only familiar with the dozens of modern purveyors, all of whom I felt were just trying to ape Tolkien in the most awkward and pandering way. I hadn't yet realised that Tolkien had many contemporaries who had their own voices, styles and abilities, who could have taken the genre in wholly different directions had they been as well known. One day, I happened upon the first volume of the Dying Earth tales, and, vaguely remembering having read something about him being a science fiction writer in the past, decided to give it a try. Within a few pages, I was completely drawn in, and there was simply no escape for me. What accomplished this, without doubt,

was Vance's unparalleled wit and the effortless beauty of his grandiloquent prose. I believe at the time I was already familiar with the decadent fantasies of Clark Ashton Smith, and with Vance's Dying Earth I was much reminded of the stories of lonely Zothique, the last continent on an Earth at the end of its natural life. Vance occasionally allows himself to become incredibly unrestrained, such as in the early battle of two wizards, and it was this sense of wildness and dreamy delirium that utterly won me over with the early Dying Earth tales. They read like the myths of some far-flung, decadent and ancient culture, where magic and science are the same thing and both spoken of with equal wonder. There's a mad logic underpinning everything and the setting is as alive and potent as in something like peake's *Gormenghast*. Reading this, my sense of the otherworldly and alien was kindled to such an extent that there was simply no way I wasn't going to track down everything else by the man, and he became a favourite author, even if most of his other work doesn't have quite this feeling of the fantastic and strange about it.

This omnibus volume is the perfect way to experience everything about the Dying Earth. In the first set of published stories, one becomes familiar with the setting, and, if you like, the "mythology" and its function. Here the characters are not so important, but I appreciate the way Vance uses brief mentions of characters or situations from one story to lead into the next, where that character or situation will tend to be the element of focus. I think this is particularly well handled with liane the Wayfarer, who proves himself to be an utter bastard in his brief and accessory role in one story only to appear to escape scott-free, and then in the next tale our attention centres wholly on him and we learn of his eventual fate.

The second and third books deal with the exploits of "Cugel the Clever", so named by the man himself, which is a neat trick because he's really not so clever at all. It's here that Vance's love of the absurd and picaresque really comes out, and we're given rapier-sharp humour and dry wit that's sometimes extraordinarily clever and sometimes just a bit ribald and often elicited laughs from me. Some of the jokes might even go over your head if you don't have a dictionary handy, and some of them only make sense after they're repeated a few times (I particularly like the bit about the Blue Concentrate!). Cugel's misadventures are classic stuff, and these two books make up the "novel" part of the series and form a full, coherent narrative. I groaned and laughed with delight when at the end of *Eyes of the Overworld* it transpires that Cugel basically has to cross the world all over again because of a stupid mistake, and so he does this, but travelling in the opposite direction in the next book. A cool thing if you ask me is that these stories are basically just a conceit for Vance to take us all over his Dying Earth, so we can meet an unbelievable host of bizarre characters, visit dozens of strange places with even wilder customs, and learn how it is that Vance manages to create interesting quirky societies all as though it were nothing at all to him. There were times when I just stopped reading for a bit and shouted aloud, "just how does he dream up all this stuff?" They're basically travel books in a fictional universe told more-or-less from the perspective of a total scoundrel who tries to get the upper hand in every dealing but usually ends up with the short end, even if he never entirely realises it. I was sometimes reminded of *Gulliver's Travels*, or *Candide*, which is high praise indeed.

Finally, the last book in the series, Rhialto the marvelous, is all about the arch magicians of the Dying Earth: their rivalries, foibles, travails, and the various tools at their disposal. I enjoyed reading about their antics, and Vance takes great care in explaining here how magic really works in this universe, without making it at all boring and tedious, which is quite a feat. However, I feel like he must have been having some bad times while writing this one, because the sense of justice throughout is, to put it mildly, pretty skewed, and the ending kind of left a bad taste in my mouth. I'm sure this was deliberate, and maybe Vance was getting more cynical in his older years, but the tone doesn't quite seem to connect with the rest of the series, and the last story in particular is a bit of a downer...strange, me saying this, as I tend to be attracted to "dark and doomful", but this was just kind of bloodyminded. Still, Rhialto is a joy to read and contains some of Vance's most flamboyant prose.

Jason says

I feel like I just read the beating heart, the source, of a strain of speculative fiction I have known since I was a kid. This is it, I realized as I read, this is the original. Where has Jack Vance been all my life? Why did no one tell me about him? The feeling is uncanny. I just read these books for the first time, and I feel like I have returned to a place I have always known.

The first book, *The Dying Earth*, is surreal and melancholy. It follows several characters, mostly wizards and the creations of wizards, as they trek across this moribund wasteland, red sun sputtering in the lower sky, trying, obsessively, to find some kind of meaning before everything ends. It is beautiful and sad and strange as all hell.

Then come the two Cugel books, which are something else entirely. They are extremely clever and comical adventures that will have you literally laughing out loud (and how often does a book make you LITERALLY laugh out loud? These two will). Despite their comic surface, though (and, again, there are parts that are EXTREMELY funny), there is a melancholy undercurrent to all this, and the narrative never lets us forget that these actions are all taking place at the end of the world, ancient sun burning out, old fortresses and palaces crumbling, few remaining humans scrambling about their meaningless, rural lives, just waiting for the darkness to come. It is this sustained and compelling contrast between the hilariously rational misadventures of Cugel on the one hand and the quiet, simmering undercurrent of melancholy on the other that catapults these books into the realm of the magnificent and unforgettable. These books are a unique sort of funny and a unique sort of sad at the exact same time, and together, the paradoxical effect of all this strangeness is one of recognition - yes, you nod as you read, yes, yes, this is familiar. Vance's control over tone is awe-inspiring. To those who may complain of "wordiness" or "purple prose," you are misreading the book - the prose is intensely ironic, and the majority of the time the characters use arch, pedantic rhetoric to disguise their base and embarrassing motives. Also, all the talk of the "plotlessness" of the Cugel books is nonsense - they are only plotless in the way that Homer's *The Odyssey* is plotless, which is to say they aren't. The plot encompasses the character and his world and his various attempts and strategies to live in it, at least until it dies. This has as much a plot as life has a plot.

The final book, which is also the shortest, is the weakest. It is a fix-up of three stories, the first two of which are a clear step down from everything that came before. The second in particular is disappointingly tedious, and gets trapped in the kind of shallow slapstick the earlier novels skillfully avoided.

The final story in the fix-up, though, "Morreion," is amazing, containing the most moving passages in the book. It tells of a bizarre trip across the universe to rescue a lost wizard. And it tells of endings, of things lost and forgotten, of ancient enemies long extinct. It is the most fitting denouement to this series I could have imagined, broadening the perspective from a single dying Earth to an entire dying universe, to the death of truth, of loyalty, of life, of everything. Retroactively, it helps to frame all that came before. The scenes when the wizards meet the lost wizard Morreion feel like something out of myth. That is precisely, in fact, the feeling evoked by much of this series - a sense of mythic origin, like we are reading stories of long ago that underpin our current reality. These places feel REAL in a way that we rarely find in fantasy fiction. Like Oedipus or Odysseus, we somehow feel that Cugel and Rhialto will always be there, struggling against the dark.

In short, this is one of the best fantasy series I have ever read. If you are open to non-traditional modes of storytelling, and if you are willing to go where the stories want to take you, I cannot recommend it to you highly enough.

Miloš Petrik says

Having only read fragments of the work previously, I have to say the entire corpus of the Dying Earth series is a tragic and melancholy epic. Set in a world close to its end, Vance's heroes embark on weird adventures featuring lost magics, ancient technology, and remarkably verbose characters.

A distinct reticence to take human life, especially in the later sections of this collection is evident, and oddly in sync with the decadent world basking in the last of sunlight. Vance's adventurers more often than not contrive convoluted schemes to arrive at their ends. If this had been written as a nihilistic, testosterone-ridden swashbuckling-and-sorcery romp through a fantastical setting, it would have been all but generic. Instead, this oft-overlooked gem of weird fiction serves as a much-needed counterpoint to the main corpus of fantasy fiction, serving to demonstrate that fantasy can be more than gore, sex, and banter, though the Dying Earth is lacking in neither of these.

Mohammed says

The finest fantasy collection i have read along with Lord Dunsany's early fantasy collections.

Dying Earth stories and Cugel are a master-work of the field.

Made me a huge Jack Vance fan and it has a place in my affections like no other literature I have read.

sologdin says

Nutshell: assorted losers use the always already imminent destruction of the Earth as an excuse for grave breaches of sense & decency; sadly, the destruction of this Earth is not presented herein.

Though the volume designates a metonym by which the setting stands for a particular subgenre, the setting here is incidental rather than intrinsic to the narratives; the setting predominates conceptually for readers, but is really mere window-dressing for the actual stories. By contrast, the dying of the sun in Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun et seq.* is central to the narrative (though the opening batteries may initially appear to be upjumped vancianisms). By further contrast, the brief hints of a dead far future in Wells' *The Time Machine* contain more setting-substantial narrative content, and more menace, than what we have here. I'd expect, when the sun starts to burn out, to see radiological problems, agricultural disruptions, and so on. The economics of a dying earth should be stark and alien.

Rather than arising out of the setting, the stories presented are variations of cynical wayfarers seeking to obtain their maintenance or increase their advantages.

Some have described sections of the book as picaresque, especially the Cugel sections. My *Harmon & Holman* tells me that the picaresque novel has seven elements: chronicle of a rogue's life; rogue is "low," "loose," and "menial"; chronicle is episodic; no character development; realistic mode of narration; interaction with all social classes; and rogue lacks actual criminality.

Cursory reflection will demonstrate that, whereas parts of the writings here evidence several of these items, at no point do all cohere. Cugel is certainly a low, loose, & menial rogue, engaged in *Eyes of the Overworld*

in loosely connected episodes (the second Cugel volume is less loose, though still somewhat episodic). He is however a horrible criminal: many frauds & impersonations, burglary, theft, armed robbery, human trafficking, battery, murder, coerced sex, kidnapping, piracy, antiquities trafficking, dereliction of duty leading to the destruction of an entire town, *maiestas*, dishonest trade practices, pandering, and so on.

The narration is not realistic, of course. And there is what might be considered character development for Cugel, such as when he uncharacteristically gives in to "quixotic folly" in order to aid a companion (260). It's not obvious if there is interaction with all social classes, though it is a varied cast. (Part of the problem with this collection is that setting really is not developed, so it's hard to tell if the land is owned by feudal lords, or sorcerers, or communists, or whatever.)

It is accordingly safe to conclude that Cugel, at least, is no picaroon. The titular characters in the first part are also wanderers generally--but they don't meet the definition either. Neither does Rhialto, the protagonist, of sorts, of the fourth component.

What these more resemble is the representation of knight errantry in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* or even Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. We have a random assortment of wanderers seeking out their maintenance in an ill-defined fairy landscape. Were the setting more developed, into a true Tolkienian secondary creation, it may not seem this way; but the piling up of proper nouns and unexplained references to persons and places far away or long ago, never to appear again, contributes more to a static fey otherland than a rigorous and dynamic secondary world. That's all great--but it therefore resembles the setting of *Arthur* more than anything else. Yeah, we have no actual knights here; it's a mix of high tech and seeming sorcery; oddities, creatures, monsters; space travel, time travel, interdimensional travel; nerdlily losers seizing women; sinister women seizing nerdlily losers in return; anthropophagic rat-things; giant worm livestock; eye-stealing thugs; &c. Encounters are basically random: I expected Sir Breunis Sans Pite to charge from underbrush, smite upon the left hand and on the right, until blood brast from his ears and from his eyes, until he retreated into a malodorous fen.

Last volume should likely be read first, as it has an introductory essay that describes the setting a bit. (It also appears to be first by setting chronology.) The first couple stories in volume I involve the attempts of second-rate sorcerers to "create humanity in my vats" (7), which should be read *in pari materia* with Mary Shelley. Of course, that our magician first "formed a girl of exotic design" (13) should not come as a surprise. A rival magician tries to take the product many times (17). The rival can make "a perfect body," but is unable to make "the brain ordered and pliant" (19). It's the ultimate dream of antisocial nerds: perfectly-bodied women with perfectly pliant minds.

Narrative presents a number of missed chances. For instance, Cugel acquires a solitary "eye of the overworld," which allows him to see "a wonder of exaltation," though "concurrently his left eye showed the reality" of the shithole in which the chapter was located (149). Dude removes the differential eye and the narrative proceeds--but it could've been a kickass sustained commentary, reality v. the view of reality from the overworld.

Ugly default in the fourth volume, wherein the protagonist and allies unite to prevent "the final triumph of the female race" (595), though it seems the political system, "a hitherto unclassified dream," features "all possessions are in common, and greed is unknown," "toil is kept at a minimum and shared equally among all" (593). Obviously something that needs stomped out, this gynocommunism.

Despite all of the nastiness, there are lots of nifty details, cool turns of phrase, and clever dialogue--all very strong. Characteristic is the catalogue of teratoids (248) and the curator's Index Major (128). Hard to overemphasize these strengths--when it's good, it's very good. Probably should therefore be considered an important contribution to speculative fiction, despite its weaknesses.

Recommended for those who are polyandrous by habit, persons who stimulate the vitality of the sun, and readers who traverse the refuse heap of the universe.

Dayna says

The first and fourth books in this collection are ok. However, the second and third were terrible. I hated the main character and really just wanted him to fail and die. The only reason I continued reading was because I have this crazy idea that I can't put a book down without finishing it. Who knows, it might get better, right? This one did not. If you pick up this book, don't bother reading the 2nd and 3rd books. They are crap.

Enric says

This is possibly one of the best fantasy series ever written.

It is a genre-trespassing epic from the hand of the very master world builder: Mr John Holbrook Vance himself.

In this series he creates a gloomy decaying world in the extremely distant future including traits from science fiction (some technically advanced cities appear in some chapters), high fantasy but also from classical fantasy, so that it is indeed somewhat difficult to place into a specific sub genre.

The stories were originally published in several Sci-Fi magazines during the 1950s and 1960s. The Cugel Saga was later joined into two separate volumes so that the final "Tales" is comprised of four parts that are actually three:

- * The Dying Earth is a series of short stories with a melancholic and dramatic tone. Th
- * The two parts of the Cugel Saga (see later)
- * And the final part, Rhialto the Marvellous. Being the latter a good read by itself but, from my point of view, lacking the genius of the two previous parts.

While in "The Dying Earth" the atmosphere of the narration is filled with drama and darkness, the Cugel Saga constitutes an extraordinary example of picaresque literature very much in the style of the anonymous "Lazarillo de Tormes". With Cugel, the protagonist, being drawn from one hilarious misfortune into the other and not without deserving it (!).

Well, I will not spoil the story, but recommend it as one of the best and most entertaining and enjoyable readings you may find... despite its rather huge size even in the paperback edition ;)

Matt says

Awesome. Especially the volumes that tell of Cugel and his exploits. Compare him to Tom Jones or Barry Lyndon, but in a surreal fantasy setting on our own world, surrounded by crumbled civilizations and

overlooked by a sun that could blink out any any moment.
