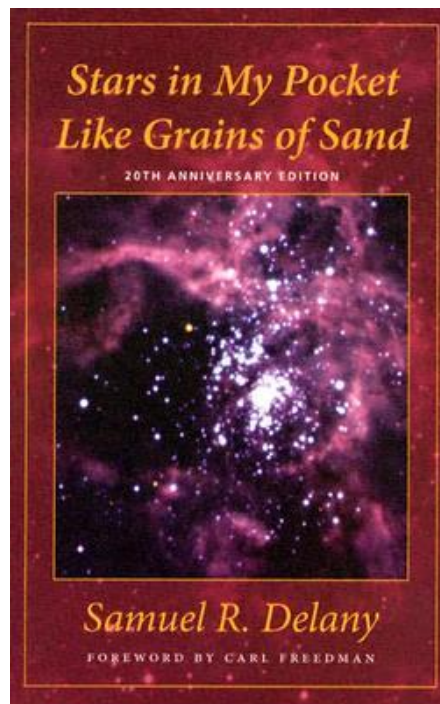




Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand

Samuel R. Delany , Carl Freedman (Foreword)

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Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand is a science fiction masterpiece, an essay on the inexplicability of sexual attractiveness, and an examination of interstellar politics among far-flung worlds. First published in 1984, the novel's central issues--technology, globalization, gender, sexuality, and multiculturalism--have only become more pressing with the passage of time.

The novel's topic is information itself: What are the repercussions, once it has been made public, that two individuals have been found to be each other's perfect erotic object out to "point nine-nine-nine and several nines percent more"? What will it do to the individuals involved, to the city they inhabit, to their geosector, to their entire world society, especially when one is an illiterate worker, the sole survivor of a world destroyed by "cultural fugue," and the other is--you!

Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand Details

Date : Published December 15th 2004 by Wesleyan (first published 1984)

ISBN : 9780819567147

Author : Samuel R. Delany , Carl Freedman (Foreword)

Format : Paperback 356 pages

Genre : Science Fiction, Fiction, Glbt, Queer, Science Fiction Fantasy

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From Reader Review Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand for online ebook

John says

WTH?! I spent two months of lunchtimes on this?!

I have not slogged through a more difficult read since Gene Wolfe's *lictor/new sun saga*, and I didn't get the payoff from this that I did from them.

If this is the "masterpiece" that the cover blurb claims, I'm afraid it is one that passed right over the top of my li'l pumpkin head. As a character novel, it failed me: I never connected with narrator Marq Dyeth and was never supposed to grasp he cipher Rat Korga. As a plot novel, it failed me: it took so many large leaps so often that it left me behind. As a language/conceptual novel, it failed me: the use of gender-term inversion for indeterminate and group personages forced me to stumble every page. (The deliberate language inversion stuff works for short works, but at novel length is felt pointlessly pedantic. I get it already, stop bludgeoning me with it!)

To me, this read like the execution of a challenge between writers (or from the author to himself). "Write something that illustrates the infinite possibilities of cultural diversity in a interstellar multi-species universe!" It felt like 60% of the words were spent with Industrial Diplomat Marg explaining to us that such-and-such had X meaning in Y cultural group but could be otherwise. That got tedious.

Garren says

A highly unusual book. It's a far-future galaxy-scale science fiction novel, yet it's not centered on a conflict of any kind. This would make it the sort of contemporary realistic novel that I normally find boring, except that it's so removed from the setting typical of the kind of story it is. It was slow going because I wasn't in a rush to resolve suspense, but I didn't want to abandon it either because I was constantly mis-predicting how things would go and enjoying what I found instead.

I could talk about the worldbuilding, the races, the culture shocks, the gay romance, and the sheer wonder, but it's best to plunge in and experience this book mostly blind. It's rewarding if you stay open and enjoy what you're given, though it could be frustrating if you keep expecting typical narrative conflict and resolution to apply.

Megan Baxter says

This is not a great book. There were times when I wasn't even sure it was a good book. But it's trying so many interesting things, testing the boundaries of science fiction, and perhaps, the comfort of the reader, to get at some truly fascinating things. Some of these experiments may have failed, but I'd much rather read an interesting but failed experiment than an unambitious sufficiency.

Note: The rest of this review has been withdrawn due to the changes in Goodreads policy and enforcement. You can read why I came to this decision [here](#).

In the meantime, you can read the entire review at Smorgasbook

Meghan Fidler says

The downfall of most science fiction is the difficulty of chronicling new bodies, worlds, and cultures for the reader. Many works dissolve into long flailing descriptions of aliens and drawn-out dialogs on cultural meanings. Authors who can surpass this albatross of introducing an 'other,' like Ursula K. Le Guin (training in anthropology helps, apparently! ^.^) and Octavia E. Butler, achieve an undeniable commentary on contemporary social life.

Samuel R. Delany joins this list. The main protagonist, Marq Dyeth is an Industrial Diplomat, a position which requires him to engage new forms of life and culture across a large section of the Galaxy. He does so with the help of 'General Information,' or GI, an internal brain link to something very similar to today's web. The commentary Delany provides on machine mediated interaction (i.e. today's internet) deserves a review of its own, and is one of the most notable aspects of this particular narrative. So I'll simply note that it is brilliant and continue.

Despite Marq's continual encounters with "Others," Delany never breaks stride--he never spends pages on physical descriptions, and the only time the readers receive long expositions on cultural meanings is when Marq himself needs to perform them as part of a family informal dinner.

This approach naturalizes the bodies and lives of these characters, giving the reader no time to shrug and become lost in confused imaginings of form. Instead, we are as Marq is: aware of difference, but not aggressively confronted by it.

This approach is brilliant, and if you'd like to see how excellence in science fiction becomes an impeccable social commentary, I've provided two excerpts below. One is from the aforementioned family gathering, and the second is a description of technology spurred on by the of Rat's prosthetic eyes:

(at the end of these I describe some turn of events in the novel, so if you like to read without prior knowledge of the plot, please stop after the following two paragraphs)

‘All right,’ I said once more. ‘But there’re so many ways that a stream differs from a family. I don’t know where to start. The father-mother-son that makes up the basic family unit, as the Family has described it for centuries now, represents a power structure, a structure of strong powers, mediating powers, and subordinate powers, as well as paths for power developments and power restrictions. It’s also a conceptual structure as well, a model through which to see many different situations. The Family has always been quite loose in applying that system to any given group of humans or nonhumans, breeding or just living together, so that you can have lots of fathers, lots of mothers, lots of sons: and any woman of any age or any gender can always fill any of the roles; I’m sure the right Family analysis could reinterpret our nurture stream or your reproductive commune as a classical ‘family’ without an eye blink, just by assigning one or more parts to one or more women. But if we agreed to the model, no doubt we’d begin to stabilize the power structure it controls. But there’re other power structures that can apply to nurturing groups. For instance, in the Family structure, the parents are seen to contain and enclose the children, to protect them from society. In the stream structure, the children are the connection between the parents and the society. To become a parent is to immediately have your child change your relation to society. Suddenly you have to deal with nurseries, nutrition co-ops, study-groups—a whole raft of social institutions. Because most children don’t generate from within streams, the stream structure conceives of all children as gifts from society, as gifts to society.’

When culture first develops the technology to counterfeit a human function, the counterfeit is usually awkward and jarring. But when the culture reaches a technological stage beyond that, the prostheses are made to look as much like to original organ as possible. Now when a stage beyond that is reached, suddenly the prostheses are consciously constructed to call attention to themselves in aesthetically interesting ways.

If you're not already intrigued... I'm sorry, but you may be suffering from an acute lack of engagement with your own life. You might want to look into that.

I am officially a Delany Fan. My only hang up with the story comes from the description of Marq and Rat as 'perfect erotic objects' for one another 'out to about seven decimal places.' While I enjoy others erotically, I also find the difficulty Delany has in portraying 'love' interesting and a little disheartening. The main character, Marq, can't admit to loving Rat, rationalizing his later emotional discomfort away, avoiding the term and relying upon descriptions of a match between 'erotic objects.' Which leaves me hanging: is Delany providing a commentary on the impact of open sexuality on intimacy (personally, I don't think this is it), was Delany expressing his own relationships through Marq's difficulties, or did 'Stars in my Pocket' intentionally write love out of the Universe?

These questions, of course, could be nothing more than a reflection of my own inability to see such a strong intimate connection without seeing love... but I also trust myself, and as an Anthropologist the places that make me squirm are often the places where inquiry is needed.

Or at least acculturation.

Fantastic novel. Strongly recommended.

Geoffrey Fox says

I had long wanted to read this famous book — a space fantasy far from my usual choices of fiction reading; it's good to break routine once in a while, as industrial diplomat and star traveler Marq Hyeth (the narrator of most of this book) might say. And it was not at all what I expected. Which is good, I guess. I wanted surprises and got them.

As I did expect, it is fantastical and ironic. But it is not light comedy. It is a story contrived to reflect on complicated, unresolved philosophical questions, with dark hints about the answers: how the brain really works and how its processes can be disrupted; the construction of memories, creating myths; the varied ways of negotiating our sexual obsessions, and, finally (finally!) time, space and death.

The setting: Millennia from now, when humans and other intelligent beings from other planets (some of them with 6 legs, multiple tongues, wings and metallic claws) have achieved relative peace in their competition to colonize the 6,200 or more known worlds in the universe, a big (7'4") 19-year old social misfit, homosexual and long drug user in a world that discourages that sort of thing volunteers for Radical Anxiety Termination to turn him into a "rat", an anxiety-less and thus ambition- and curiosity-less human used as a slave by the more-or-less corrupt state industries. His partial recovery of his mental faculties and belated discovery of emotion, described mainly by the short, stocky interworld traveler and industrial diplomat (ID) Marq Hyeth, his perfect love object, is the central story around which we witness many other relationships, experiences and memories. And hovering over all of it are two massive, possibly related conflicts which may threaten them all: first, an internal rivalry among the federated worlds between a fundamentalist political-ideological movement called the Family (apparently the inventors of Radical Anxiety Termination) who want everyone and everything to be controlled and orderly and invent exquisite punishments for those who are not, and the more tolerant, laid-back, open-to-experimentation Sygn; and beyond them, outside any known federation, a mysterious and immensely powerful system of beings who offer no communication to the others, the Xlv, whose intentions are unknown but, if hostile, may be spell disaster.

The book is full of invention, with new worlds and new sorts of intelligent beings and new technologies with strange names appearing in every chapter, almost on every page. Which often makes it very difficult to

figure just who is having sex with whom, and how they're doing it, or what's really going on in the dinner parties. (There's a lot of explicit, sloppy sex, but unless you're attracted to six-legged evelmi with shiny scales, or have an opportunity to stroll or float through a love-park on one of the Sygn controlled worlds, it will be beyond reach for you.)

My favorite parts include the long first section, before Marq Hyeth even appears, where we witness the brain-zapping in the Radical Anxiety Termination Institute and its consequences — which include the inability to take in new information from the General Information (GI) network which other humans and evelmi (those six-legged, winged- beings with all the tongues) use to learn new languages or access whatever data they want. This is because, as the high-ranking interworld official Japril explains,

"It's precisely those 'anxiety' channels which Radical Anxiety Termination blocks that GI uses both to process into the brain the supportive contextual information in the preconscious that allows you to make a conscious call for anything more complex than names, dates, verbatim texts, and multiplication tables; and it also uses them to erase an information program in such a way that you can still remember the parts of it you actually used consciously." (Pp. 161-162 in my edition.)

Wow! So all that we would give up if we lost all anxiety. That is a heavy thought. If I were a rat, i.e. if I had been subjected to blockage of my "anxiety" channels, I might be able to repeat that paragraph but I would never fathom its meaning. The novel is full of rather surprising, often profound, usually wittily stated observations.

Another delight is the dragon-hunting chapter. I won't tell you more. You just have to experience what happens in Dyethshome when you go on a dragon hunt. The final chapter comes as somewhat of a relief from all the interminable invention and learning of new creatures, habits, worldscapes. For here Marq Dyeth recalls his earlier life, which helps bring some coherence to the jarring, seemingly chaotic space travels we have just gone through.

Alexander Popov says

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Jeffrey says

This was a ‘tasty’ piece of writing, post-modernist to the core, but like the universal flows of information that permeate its (and our) W(w)eb, it wasn’t always accessible. Reading about the shapes of bodies and the forms of cities that are so unfamiliar, yet so thoroughly connected to the signs and symbols that define our own bodies and our own cities reminded me of what it is like to try an exotic new delicacy and then eventually grow to enjoy it. Initial apprehension, even revulsion, slowly gives way to satisfaction, yet it’s all situated completely within the familiar processes of taste and digestion that we employ even with the most banal of comfort foods.

The book's protagonist, a human named Marq Dyeth, is a diplomat overseeing the import and export of knowledge from one planet to another. While the universe that ‘she’ inhabits is coated with information, knowledge is more tightly controlled. Dyeth’s privileged status—only 1 to 2 percent of the entire population travels among the worlds—leads to his being selected to host human Rat Korga, the lone ambassador from a planet that no longer exists. As it turns out, the two are perfect erotic companions.

Though Korga’s stay on Dyeth’s planet is short, it generates great interest among both of the world’s species (humans and evelmi). Dyeth’s diplomatic sensitivity to cultural norms makes ‘her’ an adept narrator of the fictional universe that Samuel Delany has created, from it’s sexual ‘runs’ to dragon hunting to socializing with an elite political family from a distant planet. And it’s this last tale that allows for the development of

what is probably the book's most interesting metaphorical subplot.

Two rival political factions compete for supremacy among the universe's six thousand or more inhabited planets: the Sygn and the Family. The former resembles a version of today's liberal cosmopolitanism, several magnitudes beyond the realm of the imaginable. Its adherents are imbued with a strong focus on urbanity as the locus of the social being, and promote non-biological units as the center of reproduction/socialization. In contrast, the Family capitalizes on political claims of eternal truth, a glorification of the nuclear family unit, and a reverence for community and tradition. The conceptual pleasantries of such a dichotomy are appealing in and of themselves, but it's the clear reference to the politics of today that is the most enjoyable to contemplate.

Thinking about this book from a bigger picture, I'm not sure I'd recommend it for someone venturing into science fiction for the first time, as I was. But if you want a book that will expand your political mind, and you're not averse to the interplay of utopian and dystopian fantasy, then you'll probably enjoy it. I'd also suggest, as a corollary, that you read Chapter 5 of Madhu Dubey's book *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism*.

(c) Jeffrey L. Otto August 8, 2009

Ezra says

if william gibson invented the term "cyberspace" (in "Neuromancer", 1984), then samuel delany (in "Stars In My Pocket...", same year!) is responsible for synthesizing the actual conceptual framework of the internet, and some of the consequences that might arise from an informationally-saturated society. gibson's book is like an impressionist painting, a piece of graphic design, an anime short; it's a style injection, with both ephemeral and lasting effects. "Stars In My Pocket..." is not like that at all - it is a "real" novel, with real analytical and poetic insights in practically every sentence. delany is concerned with the limits of difference and commonality in complex societies - in the educational, sexual, racial, and economic domains. this book is a really profound meditation on how drastically sophisticated information technology might impact those dynamics, casting bigger and stronger nets between those who share access to the same data, and driving deeper and darker fissures between the haves and the have-nots. it's a level of thought about our 2010 society (from 25 years ago) that i don't believe has been achieved since. of course it's about a lot of other things too - perception, freedom, and love. maybe my favorite piece of science fiction.

Christy says

This was a hard book to rate. It raises interesting ideas and plays with theoretical concepts that are intriguing and significant within the fields of gender studies, queer theory, postcolonial theory, sf/genre studies, postmodern literary theory, and theories of race and ethnicity. There is a lot to take in. For that, I like the book. However, there is so much going on in this book that it becomes difficult to follow and, worse, it becomes difficult to care about the characters and what happens to them. As an exploration of ideas in the form of fiction, it is a success; as a novel with a narrative and compelling characters, it is a failure.

There are two things Delany sets forth in this novel that I find particularly interesting. One, given my interest in feminist theory and gender studies, is his use of gendered pronouns. Instead of using gendered pronouns to acknowledge sex/physiology (where he = male and she = female), Delany presents a culture in which gendered pronouns reflect relationships of desire. In this culture, all beings (whether male or female, human or other) are referred to as women and called by the female pronoun. The exception to this is when one

person is attracted to another person. In that situation, the person who is desired becomes "he." You can chart the shifting desires between individuals by paying attention to the pronouns used to refer to others. This is fascinating. It is a model of gender and sexuality that is not at all about bodies as types for it does not distinguish between sexes in common general speech nor between species and therefore it is rather liberating for a queer movement. There is no concept as homosexuality on many worlds (though the practices associated with the category certainly exist). There is a great deal of freedom on Velm (the world about which the reader is given the most information) to have sex with anyone you like of any sex, any species, any age, any height. Other worlds, it becomes clear, have different customs and prejudices (one world is okay with homosexuality, for instance, but frowns upon sexual relationships between individuals of very different heights). This is also potentially liberating for a feminist movement. Women are not differentiated in the language, are not set apart as outside the linguistic norm (having been commonly accepted as male). There is, in fact, a near reversal of this in the common assumption that all beings are women, daughters, sisters, mothers, regardless of their sex. There are potential problems with this, in that it does resemble a reversal of the current situation even as it reconfigures the system, but in practice, on Velm anyway, this functions less as a reversal of power relations and an empowering of women at the expense of men and functions more as an undoing of the concept of gender. It is not that women gain power, but that all people are the same, only distinguished by the workings of desire, whatever paths that desire may follow.

The second element of this novel that is particularly interesting is in Delany's concern with cultural transmission. The book is just filled to the brim with details (some relevant, some irrelevant, and some whose relevance is impossible to judge) about the cultures that Marq Dyeth, an interplanetary ambassador, comes into contact with. Because he travels to different worlds so often and must know so much about their different cultures and the ways in which they communicate with each other, this information is constantly intruding into his narrative. A character nods and we find ourselves inundated with information about what this means here, there, and everywhere. This makes the book difficult to read; it also illustrates the difficulties and dangers inherent in communication, especially when dealing with different cultures and different species. This is significant within the text of course because cultural/species differences sometimes inhibit and sometimes prevent communication (for instance, Delany shows how differences in bodily perception will affect communication [some creatures taste as a primary sense, some hear instead of see] and how their physical environment will affect understanding and metaphor [what does morning mean, for instance, in a culture that has no sunrise/sunset?]), but it is also significant outside of the text. In the modern world, misunderstandings of other cultures and between cultures abound. One way of reading *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* is to see in it a warning about the necessity of greater sensitivity to cultural differences. As a part of the African American literary tradition, one could also read this element of *Stars* as a warning about the cultural differences between white Americans and black Americans, between black Americans and black Africans. This book's publication, following as it does, the black power movement and the flowering of interest in Africa among African Americans, serves as an oblique commentary on African Americans' attempts to fit into these various groups (whether white American or African). The cross-cultural connections within *Stars* serve as a hopeful vision of intercultural closeness (Marq's family, or stream, is composed of both humans and evelms) and as a warning of how easily those intercultural connections can be wounded.

Having said all that, I want to point out once again that, as a traditional sort of novel, this book is not the work of genius I was led to expect. But perhaps it is not fair to expect it to be a great traditional novel. Delany's focus here is experimental, after all, and the overwhelming and somewhat diffuse nature of the narrative reflects the broader issues he addresses. I cannot tell what the central narrative arc of the novel is, nor can I tell what details I should note as important or relevant as the story unfolds; but, upon reflection, that seems to be the point. Delany unsettles the reader by refusing to provide the expected focus and drive and in this unsettling provides a narrative that more truly reflects the diversity and randomness of reality, both in the novel's world and in ours.

Because this is a science fiction novel rather than a realist novel, there is even more room for these sorts of complications. Delany writes about the protocols of reading science fiction, in which the reader, rather than

relying on a given world and its usual expectations, must create a new world in the process of reading. All science fiction requires this. It requires world-building in the reading process. Delany takes this concept further than most science fiction writers do, however, in his insistence on creating "the same order of richness and complexity" he sees about him in the real world by not just creating one world for the reader to marvel at but by placing that world in a larger context. His scope is not individual but cultural, and the overwhelming amount of detail in this book makes this cultural rather than individual approach unavoidable for the reader. The reader cannot simply care about Marq Dyeth's relationship with Rat Korga; the reader must also care about the human/evilm political relationship, the dangers of cultural fugue, the question of who and what the Xlv are, and the many, many small ways that all of these groups (and more) interact with each other. Delany writes, in the afterword to *Stars*, "I think that any time when there was such a notion of a centered subject, especially when related to the white, western, patriarchal nuclear family, not only was it an ideological mirage, it was a mirage that necessarily grew up to mask the psychological, economic, and material oppression of an 'other'...." (384). He goes on to state that he sees a special connection between this position and the genre of science fiction. While I do not believe that science fiction has any sort of monopoly on this attitude among literary genres/types/styles, Delany's *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* certainly goes a long way toward creating a science fiction that is most definitely science fiction (it includes many traditional tropes of sf) and also stylistically and ideologically experimental as well as politically progressive.

Bill says

I am a fairly experienced reader, but I had difficulty reading this book. I found the use of names confusing. If ever I have truly needed a name glossary, it is with this book. I kept getting confused about whether a name referred to a person, a place, a planet or a star. I was uncertain about who was human, who not and the continual shift of pronouns made this even more difficult. In a sense this relates to cultural confusion in our 'real' world. In another sense this book needs to be read when one is able to concentrate and focus. I was not.

Much has been written here about this novel on this page, much that perhaps I will comment on after future readings. The book is about many things, but a couple have invaded my quasi-consciousness.

The simplest of these concerns Delany's concept of the Web which was brilliantly prophetic at the time this was written relative to today's WWW.

Though we still are tethered to external devices, we can quickly find information we desire, still have to digest it ourselves, but find the information is controlled by another web of anonymous personages, powers and machines while maintaining the appearance of being free and open. And, all our activities on the Web are archived forever for those same entities to monitor. Delany's Web spans 6000 worlds and tens of thousands light years, but his ideas have much relevance to our current, if provincial Earthside WWW.

The other is more difficult to put into words, but I think it has to do with the nature of reality, communication and our own essential aloneness. How can you know me? How can I know you? All we know about each other is illusory and incomplete as is information and the science of information or the information of science, as is how we understand our culture and alien cultures. It is likely as difficult to understand each other as it would be meeting an alien being from another star system who has entirely different ways of sensing the external world. As it stands we can never grok another being.

But Delany provides a clue how we might do: (view spoiler)

Ben Babcock says

So ... I don't think I'd go as far as *The New York Times Book Review* does in praising this book. According to the blurb on the back of my edition, "it invites the reader to collaborate in the process of creation, in a way that few novels do". Umm ... yeah. Sure. Someone has been critiquing literature a little too long. But the blurb is right about one thing: *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* is both extraordinary and transcendent.

Samuel R. Delany is an interesting author for someone like me to try reading. So much of his writing is grounded in the cultural revolutions of the twentieth century, from the civil liberties movement to the sexual revolution to demarchist and anarchist alternatives to the democratic/communist stalemate of the Cold War. *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* is only thirty years old, but in some ways it feels like it's from an era much further away in time. My experience is so different from Delany's, as a result of where and when I grew up (not to mention the colour of my skin). Sometimes it's not a matter of books not aging well so much as the semiotics of a book changing as the context in which it's read changes. (I wonder if this is an aspect of reader-response theory?)

But oh, look at *me* getting all literary critic now.

Basically, if you have read Delany before, you will recognize him here: very little exposition, and what exposition there is exists entirely within the context of the story. That is to say, the narrator—Marq Dyeth—talks to you as if you are a fellow traveller in this universe and not a human from Old Old Old Earth (or whatever) cast adrift in this strange far future. As with *Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia* (in the review of which I see I also mention reader-response theory, so hey, at least I'm consistent), Delany creates a society so different from our own that it's nearly unrecognizable. Simple nouns like "hunting", "dinner", "room", and "family" seem to mean the same thing but don't. Marq inhabits a universe where it is necessary to acknowledge that one cannot possibly know all there is to know about one's own world, let alone the entire span of human civilizations across the galaxy. It is a staggering, humbling concept.

The way in which Delany uses language to establish difference and a sense of the Other is, as always, paramount. Ann Leckie's *Ancillary Justice* rightly raked in the praise and recognition last year. One attribute consistently remarked upon is the way in which Leckie chooses to use feminine pronouns, she and her, to refer to all people regardless of their actual sex/gender. While I'm not trying to belittle Leckie's approach to presenting gender, it's important to note that Delany did it thirty years before her. Perhaps the most significant language difference in this book is that all humans (and other sentients, like evelm) are *women*, even if they are male (or neuter). Masculine pronouns only exist either as archaic references or to be used when referring to an object of sexual desire. Is there a serious point here? Sure. Is Delany doing this to fuck with our heads? Yes, definitely. Every time you read the word "her" you automatically conceptualize the person as being female, except that a few sentences later, Delany might toss in a bit of physical description indicating the person is actually male. Oops. The shift in pronouns is an important part of the larger change Delany demonstrates, a society in which gender still exists but is largely insignificant. People exhibit whatever sexuality makes them comfortable; people reproduce through a variety of ways—"old-fashioned", cloning, whatever works. Marq spends entire chapters walking around and doing stuff completely nude. There's a lot of *difference* here, and the more closely you pay attention and read how Delany actually describes things (like the use of a subscript 1 and 2 to denote different connotations for words like *job* and *work*) the more difference you will perceive.

Delany exemplifies science fiction's powers of *possibility*. A great deal of science fiction imagines a world much like ours with just a small difference. And that's fine for the stories that those authors want to tell. But science fiction can be such a powerful tool in the hands of a grandmaster like Delany. Who cares how we could get from our current society to the one he depicts here? That's not his problem to solve. What he's

concerned with is exploring how that society would function and how it affects Marq Dyeth and Rat Korga. He dares to dream different, and the result is a story that takes place on a vast interstellar canvas.

Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand is primarily a story about attraction and desire. Marq and Korga are supposed to be each other's "perfect erotic objects". Delany is careful to differentiate between sexual desire and love here. So most of the story is about establishing how Marq and Korga come from such different places, which then gives us a context for understanding their strange meeting on Marq's homeworld. This takes up relatively little of the novel compared to what came before, but it's all about Delany preparing us for the meeting. It has been a while since I've read a novel so relentlessly character-driven ... *Daniel Deronda* comes close, but even that, I think, was more linked to a plot than this one.

Still, there is an ongoing story arc that affects the wider universe. The mysterious Xlv appear to be responsible for destroying Korga's home planet. The Web knows more than it's saying. And why have the Thants really changed allegiance from the Sygn to the Family? I guess I'll have to read the sequel to find out.

Julia says

It is a tragedy trees have been cut down for the sake of this absurdly overrated, plotless, pretentious garbage.

Fey says

The prologue of this book is a third person telling of Rat Korga's life. Beginning at age 19 when he arrives as an illiterate delinquent for "Radical Anxiety Treatment", basically a sort of lobotomy that turns him into a docile zombie, with full mental capacity, but only able to do exactly as he's told. Perfect for slave labour. Korga has a temporary escape from servitude when a woman buys him as a sex slave, but gives him technology enabling him to read books. He returns to slavery however and not long after that, his planet (Rhyonon) is destroyed.

The rest of the novel is 1st person narrative from Marq Dyeth, who comes from an entirely different planet (Velm) and culture. Marq is an international diplomat, and lives a fairly privileged life of space travel to exotic cultures. And comes from a very liberal background, every generation of his family practice adoption rather than procreation, as such he has many sisters and many parents, of both human and evelmi (evelmi being a sentient, 6 limbed, multi-tongued, lizard-like race). The notable thing about Marq's world, (and apparently everyone else's world EXCEPT Korga's), is that although they make distinction between male and female (and neuter as well for evelmi), everyone is termed 'woman' and referred to as 'she' regardless of sex. The exception being that the pronoun 'he' is used when the speaker has a sexual attraction to the referred person.

There is a tenuous connection to be seen between Marq and Korga, in the fact that many of the books Korga read were by, or relating to Marq's 7 times great grandmother Gylda Dyeth, or the Dictator she worked for - Vondramach Okk. But the greater connection between them isn't announced until at least a third of the way through the book, when one of Marq's acquaintance's happens to be working on the rescue mission for Rhyonon, contacts him to say that Korga has been calculated to be Marq's perfect erotic companion and that they are sending him to Velm.

I found the novel especially hard to get into. I began to be interested in the prologue after a while, Rat Korga's story was beginning to be very interesting, although I thought it was a little rushed. I suppose I would have preferred a novel that was entirely about him, the premise of rediscovering everything through technology, despite his altering brain surgery, was really fascinating. Would have certainly made a great story on it's own. But it was rushed through, and then the rest of the novel, I could never really enjoy.

I understand that the 'twist' of referring to all people as 'woman' and 'she' was probably supposed to be quite innovative and eye-opening, but really it just didn't have any impact on me. They clearly did still make distinctions between sexes, as people were termed male and female and neuter, and Marq has a clear expressed preference for males, so it wasn't about a real blurring of gender lines or anything like that. And it just made the language clumsy and awkward. So the society was also completely unbothered by peoples sexual tastes for males/females/aliens etc, but I found this not at all innovative either, it sounds like any other book I might usually read.. But it's more than likely that I simply came to this novel about 3 decades too late.

The only impact that the culture had on me, was probably in regards to their diet. And this isn't just because I'm vegetarian, because in Marq's culture they actually ate cloned human meat, which I found completely hideously wrong and repulsive, but I guess that was the intent? But what is the use of putting that into a novel, without injecting any commentary on it? And that's what the book really lacks, it lacks discussion, and feeling and depth. These strange things just happen, but Marq never really pays much attention to them, it's just things that happen in his every day life. It would have been much better to have Rat Korga's view on everything aswell, but we never do, because he's now in the third person, and doesn't have anything to say for himself.

One of the main difficulties in reading this book was that it dumped you right in the middle of a foreign technologically advanced culture, and didn't bother to explain terms and concepts until much later. And it's very hard to keep reading when you don't know yet, what you're reading about. Very difficult, very awkward.

There was one grand speech from Marq at the end of the book about the mysteries of sexual attraction, about the unlikelyhood of meeting your perfect mate, and about how the concept of your world is not about the place that you live, but about the way you view things. I think this was the highlight of the entire novel. And yet it didn't have the impact it could have.. because I was never connected to the character.

On the whole, I found the novel mostly disappointing. I waited such a long time for this novel to go somewhere, and by the time I got to the end, I finally figured out this train was never leaving the station. Even if you'd never read a novel about these themes before, I wouldn't even recommend it, because there are better things out there now.

John says

2 stars is a VERY generous rating for this book. No point, no focus, and a world that we're expected to already understand even though it's only ever "explained" through the characters' interactions with it. It's great that Delany "predicted the internet" in this book, but to try to parse that out of the obtuse writing was a chore, and certainly not a pleasure that I expect to get out of reading.

1.5 stars at best.

Anna says

I definitely wasn't in the right frame of mind for this book, as the whole time I was terribly worried about my Nana being ill in hospital. When preoccupied by worry, I either need fast-paced plot-driven fiction or dense non-fiction to act as a distraction. 'Stars in My Pocket' is a meandering sci-fi novel of ideas, with a great deal more world-building than plot. It has aged pretty well and remains interesting and original, with many striking details. I liked the drama of the dinner party scene; the details of alien cultures were a real strength. The concept of 'Cultural Fugue' was highly intriguing. I was less invested in the two main characters, who are apparently each other's perfect erotic object. I imagine this says something about my priorities, but: so what? The pursuit of Rat Korga by curious crowds was much more interesting. The trouble was, the narrative read like a series of carefully imagined set pieces, all vivid and strange yet not sewn together securely enough. This wouldn't necessarily bother me normally, however I'm not at my best right now. The experience of reading a book can of course be heavily dependent on how you feel at the time.

Mike Puma says

Once upon a time (around 1986 or 1987?), I had an opportunity to meet Samuel R. Delany at an ALA or ABA [now BookExpo]. Taking advantage of my position as a buyer for a large book distributor, I monopolized some of his time in the Bantam booth while he waited to do a signing—something that is surely tedious for many authors, some of whom will seek diversion with anyone willing to talk with him or her. In our brief discussion, I remember him most for being surprised at his students' reluctance to spend \$80.00 for a two-volume edition of some work by Lacan. Not wanting to appear unknowledgeable (who the hell was this Lacan fellow?), I merely shook my head to acknowledge his frustration at the short-sightedness of some students who didn't recognize the value of such a purchase (how quickly we forget the outrageous prices of some collegiate texts). Why does that matter? It doesn't. What does matter, at least to me, is that Lacan has come to be one of the many languages I don't speak but will occasionally recognize when I hear it. Delany speaks Lacan. Not just Lacan, he also is fluent in Marx, and Freud, and Jameson, and all the other languages that make his texts so dense, and wondrous, and intimidating. He's also fluent in pornography, which admittedly, had something to do with my initial interest.

By the time I'd read SiMPLGoS (1985), Dhalgren was already atop my Favorite List; other Delanys had been dutifully accomplished or would be—the Neveryón series, The Tides of Lust, Hogg: A Novel and The Mad Man, et al. And so after my Delany period, I reapproached him with reluctance—my taste in reading has changed, and I wondered if his initial appeal would endure (I've restarted *Dhalgren* numerous times only to decide: Not yet).

When one of my groups decided to read this one, I thought I was ready. It begins with the story of Rat (the narrator's big-O other or little-o other; I'm not fluent in Lacan, but dammit, it's one of them) before moving on to the narrator's seemingly endless account of his world, other worlds, terrains, suns and moons, planets and space travel. To be honest, I thought the middle section would go on forever—it was slow, I was slow, and then...finally, the narrator encounters Rat (now Rat Korga). The pace quickens towards an inevitable end. Inevitable but necessary. Necessary and sad. Themes of loss, memory, desire (that damn Lacan!), overwhelm the Real. The *sublime* yields to *desire*. Desire falls victim to Authority to loss and memory.

Someone once pointed out to me that there are two kinds of memory (I don't mean short- and long-term, either): recognition memory and reconstruction memory. The second is what artists train and most of us live off the first—though even if we're not artists we have enough of the second to get us through the normal run of imaginings. Well, your perfect erotic object

remains only in recognition memory, and his absolute absence from reconstructive memory becomes the yearning that is, finally, desire.

I'm glad I reread this one, although I retain the five-star rating primarily because of the way the novel impressed me the first time I read it. Something that does strike me about it—especially when compared to other Delanys—there's actually very little sex in this one, precious little should that be what you're looking for.

Wrey Fuentes says

Delany's prose takes some getting used to and I have even read reviews of his work that sang to the tune of, "Does he have to be so high and mighty in his verbiage?"

The answer is, yes! He does. *Someone* has to.

Get off your lackadaisical bum, you shoddy reader you, and expect something more from yourself and the writer. Stop kowtowing to the school of thought that indicates, "a simple word instead of an esoteric one." What the hell are all the rest of the words in the dictionary for? Why have complex syntaxes and tenses and grammatical moods if we restrain ourselves to pedestrian fair?

Looking for an easy Sunday afternoon read? Look elsewhere.

Looking to make some new neuron connections in your brain? The destination is before you.

Greg says

Two Stars? Are you kidding me? This is a book that has been re-issued by a University Press, that deals with complex issues like language, gender, sexuality....

I know, I know. But this book didn't do anything for me, if anything it just made me angry.

Well maybe that is because you are a white heterosexual male and you deserve to be made uncomfortable about the part you have played in the oppression of women and colonial peoples.

Yeah, I guess so. I guess I just don't see what the point of writing a book and using the term woman to cover everyone male or female. I know that it's 'enlightened' and takes into account the thoughtless way language is used in our day to day lives, but really? Doesn't using the term woman instead of man just reach the hegemonic end? Doesn't it just replace one misuse of language for another, and in the end take away the richness and precision of a word to make it a meaningless signifier? Why not just use the term person?

Because that is still sexist, the word son is in it.

Well the word man is in woman, this whole argument is interesting only in that people should be more aware of what they are saying.

You will admit that the Queer Theory just makes you uncomfortable right?

Yeah, I guess. Apparently in the future society will be set up in such a way that there will be designated places to go have anonymous sex while you are on your way to do something else. And apparently this is something more mature and good than say having self-control over ones appetites. The whimsical, lets have lots and lots of anonymous sex mixed with the 'post-modern' treatment being given to topics in this book sort of disgusts me, and this probably isn't Delany's fault. It's just too reminiscent of Foucault, and around the time Delany would have been writing about this 'liberated' society the little bald French fucker would be traveling the world knowing full-well that he had AIDS, how it was transmitted and having unprotected sex with as many people as he could in places where people went for anonymous fucking. One really doesn't have anything to do with the other, but both immature stances towards sex are both coming from the same basic post-structuralist / deconstruction of dominant paradigms and the writings / action are subversions of this dominant paradigm.

No one would find a grown adult who could not stop him or herself from consuming massive amounts of candy just because they couldn't control the appetite of their desires as being anything other than immature in the same way one would see Tom Hanks' character in *Big* as immature.

You are an idiot. What about the story though?

What story?

Did you even read this book?

Yes, I just didn't find much of interest in it. The sixty page prologue was kind of interesting. The remaining 310 pages was a lot of not much going on but lots of made up words and new cultures / customs being thrown around. I'm not that fascinated by world-building I guess, and weird words with too many constants that I can't even figure out how to pronounce in my head make me go all glassy eyed, and look sort of like the video artist that Michelle just posted a picture of on my profile. Actually this book was kind of like watching most video art, kind of painful, kind of boring, and kind of embarrassing at the half-baked intellectual pretensions of it all.

Daniel says

Hailed as a "masterpiece," I dove in not knowing what to expect. What I found was a book with enough inventiveness for dozens of novels and lacking sufficient plot for even one. I don't require the proverbial "page turner," but if whole sections could be removed without making a difference then this isn't a work of fiction, it's a literary exercise. It is highly regarded by many, but it was a long hard slog for me, and I won't be returning to his work any time soon, if ever.

Richard Derus says

This was a favorite read of mine back in my twenties. I used it as proof that SF wasn't a literary wasteland, that innovative stuff was being done in the field and there were voices that the most exacting style-snob couldn't scruple to include in hifalutin' conversations.

Boy, was I wrong.

It's turgid, it's obfuscatory, and it's mutton dressed up as lamb. "Cut through the galaxy's glitter; slice away

all night. What thoughts did I dole out to that world (out of the six thousand, which, according to a rumor that had crept worlds and worlds away, corroborated only by a certain certified psychotic, may have been) destroyed by the XIV?

Certainly I thought about it.

Yet after a week, after a handful of weeks, now at home, now away, somehow the rational part of my mind had accorded it much the weight one gives to the most insubstantial notion."

What the...? Six thousand worlds, or one, destroyed and the thought is insubstantial. I am reminded of the moment I stopped reading Susan Cheever's work, when she described a moment in a character's life as "soft as loss." Loss, soft? Funny, that isn't how I've experienced it. And this farrago, what is the insubstantial notion that the author gives to the possible destruction of a large number of planets? Too big to understand, too hard to grasp entirely, what? But insubstantial?

That's the beginning of chapter four. It's one example of a repeating problem that I see at fifty that I didn't at twenty-five: write lots of words, no one will notice that you're not saying much.

I haven't re-read Dhalgren, Delany's claim-to-fame book, and now I don't think I will. This re-read wasn't a success at all. It's a book I think is second rate, about ideas I think are unoriginal and pretty uninteresting. And that makes me sad.
