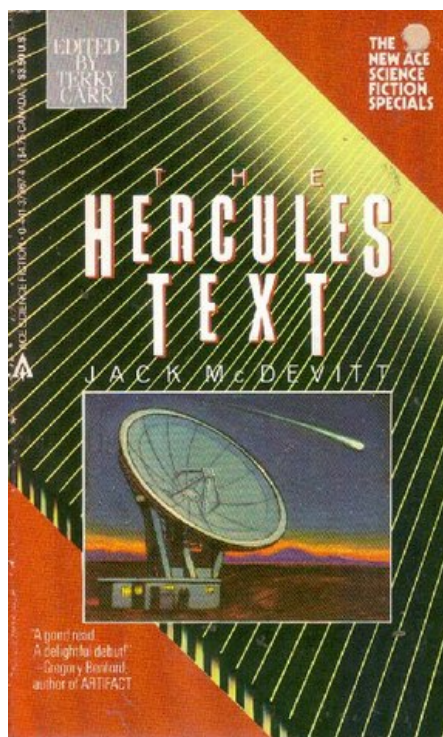




The Hercules Text

Jack McDevitt

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The classic first-contact science fiction novel that launched the career of Jack McDevitt, the national bestselling author of *Coming Home*.

From a remote corner of the galaxy a message is being sent. The continuous beats of a pulsar have become odd, irregular...artificial. It can only be a code.

Frantically, a research team struggles to decipher the alien communication. And what the scientists discover is destined to shake the foundations of empires around this world—from Wall Street to the Vatican

The Hercules Text Details

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From Reader Review The Hercules Text for online ebook

Kathi says

Jack McDevitt's first book, written back in the 80s, is a very engaging story of apparent first contact. The cast of characters offers an interesting mix of scientists, bureaucrats, and politicians, with a few military and security folks thrown in. They are so human, with personality quirks and attributes both likable and not. While some of the plot twists and turns are predictable, many are surprising. And the science is accessible to the average reader.

Bob says

I love reading McDevitt's work. Always like grabbing some fast food. Outside of his two know series, his standalone books are hit and miss. Kinda like trying new fast food places too, I guess.

This, his first novel, isn't bad, but has too many navel-gazing discussions concerning Christian beliefs and extraterrestrial life. Great setup of First Contact and 'what to do with all this info'. The characters and plot move right along, but there's ponderously heavy 'whoa, dude' vibes that serve as road-kill speed bumps in a tale that should be a rip-roaring yarn.

David Cavaco says

I really wanted to like this book given the premise that our world makes first contact with an alien world. Problem is that the story line has too many bland characters that the reader loses track of them or cares about them. Was expecting a bigger finale at the end but was disappointed. I recommend reading 'Contact' by Carl Sagan, the movie was great as well.

Alexandru P?noiu says

Good but strangely unfinished

One million years ago somebody build themselves a pulsar and used to broadcast an encyclopedia to the universe. As it happens, the transmission reached Earth just as the United States had built a massive astronomic observatory on the Moon; while all the other nations had demolished all radiotelescopes and shot their astronomers, the United States had wisely kept one or two alive. (The author does not explain how this troubling state of affairs came to pass, nor does he even mention it; yet we infer it because it is essential to the plot.) As a consequence, the broadcast is received only by carefully vetted team working for the NASA. (view spoiler)

The writing is good. Some characters are not unbelievable, and some tension does build up waiting to see whether a straying wife will be reconciled with her bureaucratically heroic husband or not. But, but, but what's with the abrupt ending? I understand the drive to begin a novel *in medias res*, in the middle of the action, but to end it just when a climax was coming into sight? Naughty.

Yes, we have algorithms doing what no algorithm can ever do, yes, we have the unexplained total lack of astronomers in Russia, China and elsewhere, and yes, we have ample psychological silliness; yet everything is forgiven because of one resplendent idea: the main character is a bumbling bureaucrat, who is well aware of his limitations and struggles to keep the scientific team working as efficiently as possible. For this one idea *The Hercules Text* will never be forgotten.

(Scale: * - unreadable, couldn't finish; ** - bad or very bad, but readable; *** - good work, well worth its price; **** - very good in its genre; ***** - timeless masterpiece.)

Kevin Schillo says

Interesting that this came out around the same time as *Contact*. While they share a similar premise (first contact via radio transmission), there is significant difference between the plots and the world's reaction for this to be written off as a copy of Sagan's novel.

P says

[about transparency of information in government . (hide spoiler)]

Dennis says

That's by far the most realistic fictional book I have read so far, despite it dealing with extraterrestrials contacting our world. What makes this so realistic is the fleshed-out characters, each with an own mindset and his or her own convictions, and detailing of the impact such a signal would have on our society. Despite this book not being a thrilling roller coaster ride I sympathised greatly with the characters and wanted to see where the story takes them. The only point of critique really would be the ending which feels kinda forced and sudden. Other than that, if you want to know what happens if we discover we're not alone in the universe this is the book for you.

Neil Hepworth says

What a magnificent book, and a debut (twenty years ago!), to boot. **The vast majority of today's science fiction debut novels can't hold a candle to this one.**

The Hercules Text is a first-contact story, wherein humanity finally receives signals from another life form, but more importantly, the story is about all the scientific, social, political and religious implications that follow. The alien contact is realistic, however, so there is no two-way communication because the message itself took a million years to reach Earth - it's all just a bunch of sit-and-get for the humans sitting on our end of the telescope (and other fancy equipments). The plot does follow a few mysteries through the course of the book, but mostly **the story is not about the alien contact, but the reaction to the contact.**

In lesser hands, such a story would be boring, and I can understand how some of today's readers would be put off by the pace of this novel, but if you understand that McDevitt is taking a **realistic, mature, and well-**

thought-out approach to how the characters react, then you start to find depth in the ideas, and sincere moments of self-reflection about how *your* notions of the world and of humanity's place in the universe might change.

The reason I knew that this was a five-star novel was because ***The Hercules Text* made me feel the way a good science fiction novel should make the reader feel: small against the vastness of the universe, and hopeful that humanity will capably find its way into the future.**

On a side note: I get the impression that *The Hercules Text* is not the type of story that has become McDevitt's bread and butter, but rather that he has spent most of his time writing military space operas. Is this an accurate assessment? While I'd love to read more McDevitt, but the military space opera niche is one that I have found to be less than awesome more times than not. How does the quality and thoughtfulness of his other writings compare to *The Hercules Text*? What of McDevitt's should I read next?

vonblubba says

I was in the mood for a first contact novel, but I already read most of the classics on the topic (Childhood's end, Rendezvous with Rama, etc). So I decided to look for something less known. Normally when I do this, it ends bad. Well, not this time.

"The Hercules text" takes place in a very very near future, where a SETI-like project finally hits jackpot, receiving a non-natural signal that comes from another galaxy.

We are not alone: the novel focuses on the consequences that this newfound knowledge has on our society, from multiple point of views. Politics, religion, psychology, the personal belief of every individual, nothing is left out. And that happens even before a SECOND message is received, a very complex one, containing who knows what kind of knowledge. And who knows how that knowledge will change us...

This is speculative fiction at its best (emphasis on "speculative"). What would happen if. The kind of SF i prefer, because that's what SF purpose should be: question the path we, as a species, are walking, trying to guess where it will take us.

The Hercules text does this very well, stating in more than one occasion than the contents of the second message, whatever scientific treasure it may contain, is not as important as the first one. Because the knowledge that we may not be alone has the potential to disrupt our way to see the world and ourselves in a much deeper way.

If I really have to split hair, there's something I really didn't like in this novel. That's the way they translate the second message. I believe should something like that really happen, it would take decades (to say the least) to make any meaning of the signal. Here they do it in a matter of weeks. And the first breakthrough is achieved in a very very silly and unrealistic way. Put everything in a computer, press a button and we're done. And I say this as an IT guy. But hey, I understand the necessities to conclude the story with the same set of characters, so that's ok.

So, read this. Without hesitation.

David says

This one started a little slower than McDevitt's books usually do, but with a great payoff once it got moving. It deals with the implications of receiving an alien communication with tremendous new technologies: anti-gravity, free energy, the ability to live forever. Sounds great, right? But can humanity handle such an upheaval without tearing itself apart? Will we actually be better off? McDevitt does a great job of handling these questions and getting the reader thinking about what might actually happen if such a message were to be made public.

One note: This is an updated version of McDevitt's first published novel. Unfortunately, although the political references have been updated, the computer technology has not, so it creates a bizarre juxtaposition of 21st century society and late 20th century computing. This wasn't a big obstacle to enjoying the story, but it makes me think I might just have soon have read the original.

Tom Britz says

The Hercules Text is Jack McDevitt's first novel, yet it reads like a mature novelist at the height of his career. This novel of man's first message from the stars, proving finally that man is not alone and its terrible consequences, had me at times angry, because it read so true to form. For an author to make you, the reader, get angry at the turn that the characters take (when it is true to form, not because the author lost control of his characters) says a lot about the quality of the writing. I heartedly recommend this book to anyone interested in science and especially man's place in the cosmos.

Anurag Sahay says

This was one of the first few times that I read a first contact story (as opposed to watched) since Clarke - and honestly, it wasn't as good as I was expecting. The characters were nice, but the setting seemed very quaint for a near future setting - I suppose that's because of the anachronisms introduced by the fact that this was a War on Terror update of a Cold War setting book.

The bulk of the novel is interesting enough that I sped-read it (on weekdays), which I haven't done in ages, but the end really throws attempts at scientific accuracy out of the window, and is quite a mess.

Overall, I wouldn't recommend it unless you're specifically a fan of this genre.

Seth Kennedy says

Not a fast-paced novel by any means, McDevitt still drew me in with a thoughtful, philosophical approach to answering the question "How would we deal with it if there was life out there?" Through administrator Harry Carmichael's eyes, we see the impact on his colleagues, friends and the world as a team of scientists unravels a transmission from an ancient civilization and decode the message. McDevitt also shows a deft hand in making this a human story, interweaving the characters' more mundane concerns into the plot. Good stuff. In some way it reminds me of Ed Lerner's first stories in InterStellarNet, and you can also make parallels with Sagan's Contact or any other story of discovering evidence of alien life.

Roddy Williams says

“From a remote corner of the galaxy a message is being sent. The continuous beats of a pulsar have become odd, irregular... artificial. It can only be a code.

Frantically, a research team struggles to decipher the alien communication. And what the scientists discover is destined to shake the foundations of empires around the world – from Wall Street to the Vatican.”

Blurb from the 1986 Ace Science Fiction Special paperback edition.

McDevitt’s Debut novel is almost a text-book examination of the effects of a superior culture on a more primitive one. In this case, Humanity is the primitive culture, in receipt of a radio message, sent one and a half million years ago from a binary star system outside the galaxy; so far in fact that our scientists can only conclude that the G2 sun and its pulsar companion were artificially created.

Harry Carmichael is a senior administrator at an American Space Centre where the message was discovered and is being decoded.

Rimford, America’s answer to Professor Stephen Hawking, along with a number of other experts, is asked to join the project. Also involved are a priest and working scientist (the Rev. Steele) an attractive linguistic psychologist (Leslie Davis) and an extraterrestrial-obsessive astronomer (Ed Gambini)

The alien transmission turns out to contain a vast amount of information which the team slowly decipher. Despite the fact that McDevitt unravels the effects of the alien transmission in a sequence of events which seem portentous and inevitable, there are some aspects of the narrative which are weak due to their unlikelihood.

I think most people – having thought it through – would not think it a good idea to announce to the world that we can now tap the energy of the Earth’s magnetic field, rendering fossil fuel and other energy sources redundant. For the President of the US to do it is quite unbelievable, but this is what he does. As one might expect this triggers a stock market crash and economic chaos.

The consequences then extend to the USSR who threaten to initiate nuclear war unless the data is shared, and into religion, where various fundamentalist sects lay siege to the Space Centre, some claiming that the aliens are the creatures of Satan while others claim them to be God’s Children.

Slowly, most of those involved come to the conclusion that we are not ready for the knowledge of the aliens and the scientists destroy the data.

The focus of the novel is on the effect on US society which detracts somewhat from its power since the only other interested party appears to be the Soviet Union.

The narrative is interspersed with American headlines cleverly showing the ripple effect of the initial discovery of the broadcast and the later alien revelations.

As in the movie ‘Species’ and the story ‘A for Andromeda’ comparisons have to be made symbolically with the original story of Pandora who was sent in the form of a gift from Zeus (from the sky) only to become a curse to mankind.

Ironically, the female characters are few. There are no female scientists, apart from Leslie Davis, the linguistic psychologist who helps to translate the alien text and give insight into the psyche of the aliens themselves. She is under-used and employed mainly as a human interest element in the life of Harry Carmichael who is himself in the throes of a divorce and concerned for the future of his diabetic son for whom the data of the aliens could provide a cure.

It is a competent first novel and heartening to see that McDevitt in later novels puts female characters to the fore, even if his Americocentricity continues unabated.

The Professor says

“Slow down, Pete. What’s a lightbender?” Utter bobbins. Jack McDevitt’s first novel but still exactly the sort of cloth-eared writing that gives science fiction a bad name among the general public. A slog to read, no humour and pre-school level characterisation. If this novel had been beamed from the Altheans humanity would have given it one star and gone about its day. Yet it’s routinely called a classic and gets five star reviews. Colour me bemused.

For the purposes of reminding myself what this tract of text was about in years to come “The Hercules Text” had the misfortune to be published a year after Carl Sagan’s 1985 “Contact” which is a bit like a church deacon delivering a sermon just after Moses has declaimed from Mount Sinai. SETI (or, hello Mr Cameron, “Skynet” here) pick up a “hello” signal from the stars, point everything they’ve got at it and win the lottery, receiving an alien version of Wikipedia which, humans being humans, causes no end of squabbling. The whys and wherefores of this are not really worth discussing – in this novel the signal crosses intergalactic space without attrition and is picked up only by a narrow caucus of poorly managed scientists rather than, say, an entire hemisphere of listeners and the withholding of its details pisses a lot of people off – and the novel wants to depict the religious and political impact of such a Book of Revelations. It’s a rather nice idea, it’s just that McDevitt is clearly still learning how to bang a nail in prose-wise and depicting the sociological impact of imminent post-humanism would cause many an old hand to think twice. You want someone like Kim Stanley Robinson on something like this, not a genial hack.

Oddities abound. Harry Carmichael is a honkingly obvious enabler of info-dumps rather than a character. “Star Trek” plays a part in the plot. One boffin takes a transcription of the alien text home with him, idly starts building a machine from blueprints contained therein and unsurprisingly ends up blowing himself and half the surrounding countryside up. Loose talk of new energy sources immediately causes the stock market to crash and banks to fold...events that are never referred to again. The Hercules text contains details on how to cure blindness, create death rays and manipulate black holes which quickly gets silly, like Klaatu or the aliens of “V” offering to solve all of humanities ills at one stroke. There’s also no explanation why so much of the Hercules text is anthropomorphically-specific, right down to curing shortsightedness and little Tommy’s diabetes. As for the prose, sorry Jack but it’s sludge and we’re in Repetition City. Here’s what happens when I put the word “steak” into the search function of my ePub reader:

Page 44: a steak for Gambini, roast beef for Harry

Page 70: They ordered drinks and steaks

Page 145: While they grilled steaks and baked potatoes

Page 195: The steak was delicious

Page 236: ...indulged in steaks

...and I list just the one steak reference for each juicy steak-related scene. I won’t start listing all the dead sentences or we’ll be here when the Altheans arrive.

So yeah, thumbs up for the idea, thumbs down for everything else really, I have no idea what book Stephen King read, probably just giving a tyro writer a helping hand. One last point: the version of “The Hercules Text” I read was the 2015 edition in which McDevitt had found necessary to defrost any Cold War references and otherwise bring up to date, which appears to have amounted to solitary mentions of 9/11, Obama’s second term, the internet and email. In the foreword he justifies these changes with “It seemed prudent to go back and reframe The Hercules Text in the light of these happier times.” What happier times Jack is referring to escapes me but I’m sure in light of his career as a best-selling author they involve steaks. Lots of steaks.

Keith says

A mighty fine First Contact novel. Jack Mcdevitt completely rewrote the text from an earlier version published in 1987. I haven't read the original and probably never will but this version is brilliantly conceived. There's no meeting the alien scenario but a complex and lengthy message from deep space. The effect of this message, and its contents, reverberates through numerous human communities. The science is well presented and the investigatory team has great characterization. A very nice read.

Rafael Ontivero says

Empecé escuchándolo como audiolibro, pero al final acabé leyéndolo como libro normal.

No está mal para ser una novela de mediados de los ochenta, todavía bastante actual ya que el tema técnico solo está perfilado.

La única parte que ha envejecido un poco mal es todo el tema sobre las dudas religiosas y la necesidad de tener que enfocarlo casi todo en ese mismo aspecto. Por otro lado McDevitt hace pasar a los políticos por bastante duros de mollera y capaces de iniciar la tercera guerra mundial por el contenido del propio texto.

También le veo alguna flojedad en el argumento, como que sería tan fácil que los rusos tuvieran acceso al texto con simplemente enfocar un radiotelescopio al origen de la señal... En fin, es lo que hay con las novelas un poco antiguas.

Michael says

This book was an early work by Jack McDevitt and is credited with much of his success as a new author. I had never read the original version which was released in 1986 and this one was re-released in 2015 and updated to reflect modern technology and the political climate of the 21st century. This is a cautionary tale of first contact with an advanced alien species through a radio signal from many thousands of light years away. They send us advanced technology and the U.S. unwisely doesn't share it with the rest of the world, at least at first. After sharing some of the information they then decide to destroy the information rather than share the rest and this story tells the tale of the conflict of the scientists who are interpreting the signals about whether to go along with the government or to release to information to the public and the world as a whole. It is a thought provoking tale and one can see why Jack McDevitt became a successful author with such a great beginning.

Benjamin Hare says

Hard science fiction with some very well developed characters working at the Goddard Space Institute when a message from another world is received. National politics plays a big role in the tale as the scientists begin to translate bits and pieces of the message. How much should we release to the public? What should we keep out, and is it ethical to do so? These questions constitute the bulk of the plot.

Each of the scientists involved is developed to some degree, and each one feels entirely believable. Theology, philosophy, and psychology are explicitly dealt with as more of the “Hercules Text” is decoded. Lots of dialog over meals and drinks at the bar down the street as they volley ideas back and forth. McDevitt’s prose style reminds me very much of James P. Hogan (“Inherit the Stars”.) Our protagonist, Harry Carmichael, is a blue-collar HR director trying to make sure the scientists at Goddard have all the resources they need for this monumental task. At home his marriage is falling apart, and herein lies the concrete abstractions for all of the ethical concepts being discussed by the scientific team.

The only other book I’ve read by McDevitt is “Moonfall” (1998). “The Hercules Text” is similar in that both deal with a very large threat posing a danger to all of mankind. With “Moonfall” it was a literal danger—a meteor—where the threat here is more in the implications of what deleterious effects such a vast amount of alien knowledge will do to the human race. McDevitt’s genius is to bring the details of physics and astronomy into the lives of everyday men by focusing on the dramatic elements through such believable characters. “The Hercules Text” was, for a me, a riveting read.

Matt Lanka says

First contact stories exist on a scale that runs between apocalyptic action (Footfall, Independence Day, etc) and incredibly detailed philosophical texts that consider the actual mechanisms by which we might communicate with intelligent alien life and the far-reaching implications for humans as a species (anything by Stanislaw Lem.) "The Hercules Text" tends toward the action end of the spectrum but rather than have aliens invade Earth and attempt to destroy humanity, McDevitt's aliens provide humans with technology they are not prepared to deal with without destroying themselves. The story also has sections that ponder the religious implications for the discovery of alien life, but I felt these could have been more lengthy and more deeply considered. I like the idea of this book and McDevitt is one of my favorite sci-fi writers, but I think "The Hercules Text" could have been much longer and more intellectually rigorous.
