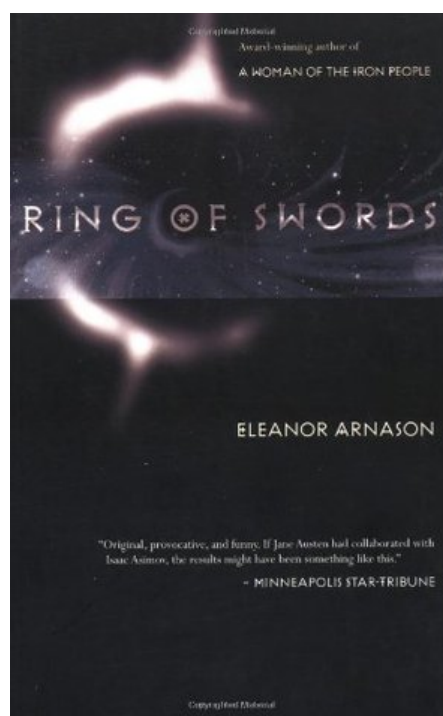




Ring of Swords

Eleanor Arnason

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For half a century, Earth has been on the brink of total war with an implacable alien race. Biologist Anna Perez is the first to discover the truth-the hwarhath have segregated their society strictly along gender lines, to prevent the warlike males from harming women and children. In their eyes, humans are a dishonorable and barbaric race who may require extermination...

Ring of Swords Details

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From Reader Review Ring of Swords for online ebook

Carmelo Medina says

Me gustó, la verdad, es uno de esos libros de la serie Nova que podrías considerar "menores" y que no te daría por leer y que esconde una novela muy interesante. Me ha hecho reflexionar y me ha descubierto ideas nuevas. Seguramente lo volveré a leer. Es de 4,5

Olethros says

-Curiosidad interesante.-

Género. Ciencia-Ficción.

Lo que nos cuenta. En el planeta que orbita la estrella G2 hay una pequeña colonia de biólogos investigadores, entre los que se encuentra Anna, que estudia las especies nativas del planeta. Pero además es el lugar elegido para el encuentro de diplomáticos y militares con una delegación hwarhath, la única especie inteligente que los humanos han encontrado y que también viaja por el espacio pero de la que no se sabe demasiado. La primera sorpresa durante el encuentro es que un humano acompaña a los hwarhath en labores de traductor y consejero, pero habrá más según se vayan conociendo nuevas costumbres de los alienígenas, entre las que llama la atención que su cultura es homosexual y que posiblemente el humano que les acompaña, Nicholas, podría mantener una relación con un miembro de esa especie.

¿Quiere saber más de este libro, sin spoilers? Visite:

<http://librosdeolethros.blogspot.com/...>

Sarah (CoolCurryBooks) says

Ring of Swords is a classic feminist science fiction novel from 1994. In terms of gender and sexuality, it shows its ages in ways you would expect, but it still holds up as an intriguing first contact novel.

Humanity has made contact with only one other sentient people, the Hwarhath, but they have been locked into war for fifty years. Now, the humans and Hwarhath are finally sitting down to negotiate a peace, but they know so little about each other.

Anna Perez is a biologist studying the native sea creatures of the planet where the humans and Hwarhath have decided to have their talks. She's more interested in her work than the talks — she thinks that one of the species may be sentient, although none of her colleagues believe her. However, she is drawn into the process when she befriends a human who's working for the Hwarhath. Nicholas Sanders was an intelligence operative captured by the Hwarhath during the war, and he has chosen to ally himself with them, largely because of his romantic relationship with a Hwarhath general. The human military regards him as a traitor to his species, and they want to use Anna to spy on him.

Before I delve into the plotting and characterization, I want to go ahead and talk about the way Ring of Swords deals with gender and sexuality. Part of the difficulty the humans and Hwarhath have understanding

each other is that the Hwarhath have very rigid gender roles. It's a matriarchal society where the women run the home, and the men are sent outside of it to become soldiers. Since the species unified under a single government, they as a society didn't know what to do with their men when there wasn't a war to fight. Thus, when humans were discovered, they were rejoiced as an enemy for the Hwarhath men to combat.

In Hwarhath society, men and women largely live separately and sexual acts or attraction between men and women is deeply taboo. Instead, same-sex relations are the norm. The find human society's focus on heterosexuality deeply disturbing and many of the humans are likewise disturbed by the aliens' homosexuality. This is one of the ways in which Ring of Swords shows its age. The attitudes around same-sex attraction have changed a lot since Arnason wrote the novel, and thus the attitudes presented by these futuristic humans seem outdated. I'm not saying that homophobia doesn't exist anymore! But things have changed so much, so it doesn't make sense that the human diplomatic core would act like homosexuality was that taboo.

Another issue with the treatment of gender and sexuality in Ring of Swords is that it's incredibly binary. Everyone is either cis men or cis women, and there's no recognition of non-binary or trans people. This is something I've encountered with a lot of older feminist sci-fi, so it wasn't exactly surprising. The novel also deals with sexuality as almost a purely homo/hetero binary and contains no reference to the possibility of multiple gender attraction. There is one reference to Hwarhath who prefer not to have sex with either men or women, which could be taken to mean that asexuality is recognized among them (I took it to mean such, although I don't know what Arnason's intentions were exactly). It's mentioned that this isn't seen as an issue, although I still think it would suck to be an ace Hwarhath.

As I mentioned before, a lot of this is what I expect from 90's feminism (although the potential inclusion of ace people was a surprise). I don't expect a book written in the 90's to have 2018 feminism, and I'm sure it was more revolutionary when it was published. Heck, it probably helped pave the way for the more inclusive feminist sci-fi we have now.

The only other cultural criticism I have of Ring of Swords is that it was very Western-centric in how it presented human norms. What it presented as normal for humans was actually normal for the West. I feel like it flattened a lot of the diversity present in family structure and gender roles throughout humanity. For instance, a noted difference between the Hwarhath and humans was that Hwarhath lived in large communities of extended families and that humans lived in nuclear families. And, uh, that's presenting a brief slice of a small segment of the population as something universal? I'm a lot less willing to excuse this sort of Western-centric bias than I am the portrayal of gender and sexuality... although bisexual and trans people did have some recognition in the 90's, so "a product of its time" doesn't fully work in that regard either.

Although these elements don't really hold up to a modern-day feminist scrutiny, I still enjoyed analyzing them. Also, I generally like books about aliens! Aliens are fun. And I do like first contact stories where two groups of people struggle to understand and communicate with each other, so in that way, Ring of Swords was right up my alley.

Ring of Swords is a slower paced story and not super actiony. It's more thoughtful and character focused. Third person sections focusing on Anna make up the majority, although it also includes some first-person diary entries from Nicolas. I enjoyed Anna as a protagonist. Other reviewers have called her cold, and maybe she is on the surface. But underneath she's full of a burning curiosity to understand the world around her and to reach out and make connections across species.

If you're in want of an anthropological science fiction novel, you should give Ring of Swords a go.

Review from The Illustrated Page.

Bryan Hall says

I picked this book up from the free-to-a-good-home pile in my lobby because the blurb on the cover says, "If Jane Austen had collaborated with Isaac Asimov, the results might have been something like this." I've read my share of Jane Austen, but no Asimov, so if that quote is to be trusted...then Asimov must be kind of terrible.

I suppose there are some gender politics at work here, and it's sci-fi, so that's where they're coming from. But it took me months to read this, because it is just slow and boring. We're in the future, with faster-than-light travel, and we've discovered an alien race (they're described as being a bit shorter than humans, and furry, but I never pictured them as being cute like Ewoks or even Wookiees; also, I'm pretty sure they wear shorts most of the time?). This race, the "Hwarhath", have a female-governed society but the men are in charge of wars, and also homosexuality is the norm except for icky hetero procreation (or maybe they use test tubes for that) -- although I don't think any female-female relationships were ever even alluded to, so there goes your equality. The central conflict is over whether the Humans and the Hwarhath should be peaceful (at the risk of one side changing their minds and wiping out the other) or have a nice, civilized, all-out war. There's a little more to it than that, particularly in the first section of the book, but aren't you already kind of bored just reading that premise?

If not, go ahead and read this book. But I warn you, not very much happens. I *suppose* all the talkiness might be interesting to some people, but...nah, I kind of doubt it. There's some exploration of how intelligent species would view one another, and what makes a species "intelligent", and why humans do things certain ways (back to gender politics, etc.), and those things are worth thinking about, but it all just drags. And aside from one sequence, fairly early on, nothing ever really *happens*. Just a lot of talking, and negotiating, and talking about negotiating, and zzzzzz...

Snail in Danger (Sid) Nicolaides says

"Humans had build a world inside the world, which reflected it in pretty much the same way as a drop of water reflected the landscape. And yet ... and yet ...

"Inside this little world they had taken pains to put all the things you might think they would want to escape from — hatred, fear, tyranny, and so forth. Death was intrigued. They thought they wanted to be taken out of themselves, and every art humans dreamt up took them further *in*. He was fascinated."

—Terry Pratchett, *Wyrd Sisters*

"Have you read *MacBeth*?" she asked.

"Yes. In the original and in Nicky's translation. I thought I could do something with it. The heterosexuality is irrelevant. The woman—that wonderful and horrible woman!—can be turned into a mother or sister. Then the story is about ambition and violence, which are decent topics that will not disturb anyone in the audience."

The second quote is from page 157 of the edition I was reading. (It has a different cover. Very left over from the 80s type art.)

Anyway, Arnason has structured her aliens' society to make some gender-related points I think, and also some ones about human culture, but honestly, the thing makes my head hurt. I kept thinking of the David Weber Axiom as formulated by Lavie Tidhar here, though in my head I compress it to "The only possible outcome between two groups with sufficiently incongruous interests is large-scale armed conflict." (This is probably not fair to Weber, Tidhar, or Arnason.)

I'm not sure which is more painful to me — fiction that glorifies war or fiction that acknowledges that war is bad but kind of accepts that it's going to happen as a matter of course. Or to be fair, you might say "characters" or "cultures" rather than "fiction."

Kiv says

This book is at once a hilarious look at the perils of diplomatic negotiations, and also a serious and unflinching anthropological piece exploring ideas of morality, sexuality, and gender politics. It asks questions of what allows a person to be given the status of personhood, and assumes nothing as a given truth during its exploration of the questions presented. Arnason's aliens are incredibly real and easily relatable, while still remaining completely foreign. They are richly drawn, and clearly there is a wealth of knowledge to be had about them outside the information presented to us here. I could easily see myself forgetting that the hwarhath do not actually exist in our universe (to my knowledge). I could not put this book down, even through the small set of appendixes at the end (which happened to hold some of the most scathing and unflinching commentary of human society).

This is a book that I can see myself re-reading again and again. It strikes me as an incredibly relevant work that will reward re-reading in different ways as time goes on. It's both thought provoking and a genuinely fun read, and something I would honestly recommend to anyone

Salvador Echavarria says

Interesante ver el choque cultural de las dos especies, donde los roles de lo masculino y lo femenino toman gran importancia. Una civilización regida por valores y eticas distintas que a los humanos, pero quiza no por ello mejores, o quiza si. Sin duda leer sobre una especie practicante de la homosexualidad y que aborrece la heterosexualidad humana resultara interesante. Mi unica pega es que me resulto un poco lento el comienzo, pero de ahí en fuera todo muy bien.

Stig Edvartsen says

Surprised this book is not more well known.

It's a smart and thoughtful book about morals, ethics, rules of engagement in war, sexuality and how we as a society deal with violence. Rounded characters, good dialogue and an unpredictable story makes this a page-turner. It is hampered somewhat by a surprisingly passive protagonist, but that could possibly have been done on purpose to illustrate thought vs action.

Jesse Lehrer says

Total surprise here - loved this book! Stumbled across it on some good scifi recs and was really pleasantly surprised. Culture, politics, language, sexuality, gender all come into play in this book - the writing was great and flowed so well I rarely put it down and read it over the course of a few days. Her characters were very interesting, and the cultural differences between the hwarhath and the humans were very thought provoking for sure. Definite recommend if you're into cultural commentary in scifi. The plot is somehow dry (in a good way) and fast paced and intriguing all at once.

Jennifer says

Well written and the concept works because we are talking about an alien species. I love the explicit diversity in the book even among the aliens they are not all the same color.

Matthew Hall says

This was a difficult book to 'enjoy' but part of that is the pleasure of what Arnason builds-- humanity meets an alien culture which is both rigidly religious and orthodox homosexual-- heterosexual sex is considered repulsive and procreation is tightly monitored. Add to this the fact that they are unsure humanity 'counts' as an evolved species creates a story that's pretty challenging to consider.

The addended anthropological explanation for the culture Arnason created help to deepen the story is also worthwhile, you can see how she links the ideas of how humanity has (tried, often tragically) to control women's bodies and lives, and how she created a society that avoided that, but still produced its own problems.

Lisa Feld says

So, all I knew about this going in was a comment by the author in a roundtable interview of women SF writers: "It's a story that is set up to have a war, and the major characters decide that, instead, they're going to have a Shakespeare festival." Which was intriguing enough for me to chase down a copy. It also helps that I'm a sucker for first contact stories with lone humans surrounded by aliens and making horrible mistakes with the best of intentions because they don't understand what they're seeing.

I had very mixed feelings about this story, in the end. It grabbed me intellectually but not emotionally--I thought the ideas were nifty and well executed, but the characters rarely pulled me in the way I wanted them to. One of the joys and frustrations about an experimental story like this is that it doesn't go where you expect it to go. And more frustrating, as in a Jane Austen novel, the major crises tend to happen off-stage. Unlike Jane Austen, the ending also just fizzled out. Unsatisfying for me. I wanted more resolution for the various characters' subplots.

That being said, the language is graceful, I kept getting sucked back into this world, and it made me question

a lot of my assumptions in the way good SF should. Definitely keeping this one for a second read.

Galia says

Circulo de espadas esta muy bien escrito, es entretenido, nos enseña muchas, muchas cosas sobre nuestra propia cultura. Tiene sus ligeros toques de humor, romance y acción.

Es una lectura altamente recomendada.

¡LO AME!

Just_ann_now says

I've been doing a thing with books lately; when I find an author that sounds interesting or I read short stories by, or however I hear about new authors (how do *you* hear about new authors?), I go to Goodreads and look up their most highly rated books. (And I should probably talk sometime about how really ambivalent I am about rating books, but I do it anyway). Then I order that book or put it on my wish list or request it from the library. I usually don't even read too much of the review, to find out what it's about – I don't mind spoilers for ~~Sherlock~~ TV shows, but I don't like them on books. (Who would have read the first *A Game of Thrones* book, if they had known what was going to happen?) And so that's what I did with *Ring of Swords*. And seriously, if I had just read the description: space ships, alien encounters, possible interplanetary war, I would have thought, this so not my thing.

Friends of the Internet, this book was not really about those things AT ALL.

Things this book was about: types of intelligences, matriarchal societies, the problem of male aggression, birth control in various cultures, alternate sexuality, asexuality, the significance of material culture, how on earth would a human even have sex with (no, sorry, that sounds more like a tumblr tag).

Books this book was sort of like: *The Sparrow* , by Mary Doria Russell; *The Gate to Women's Country* , by Sheri S. Tepper.

Books this book was really like: Not anything else I have ever read.

Who would enjoy this book: People who like thinky books, even if they are not good at articulating why they like them so much. That would be people like me. Also, people who *are* good at articulating stuff like that would like it too.

When Ann will learn to write a useful book review: Probably never.

Stéphanie says

An intelligent book with a strong message. I like the way the author dealt with the incomprehensions between the two races about each others living-styles. Definitely a must read.

Zab says

"Anything worth doing is likely to be slow, difficult, and boring. This is not an invariable rule, but it works in most situations."

Supreme pragmatism and candor are just two of the qualities that make Eleanor Arnason's prose anything but slow, difficult, or boring. This novel is about the messy interactions between humans and the Hwarhath, an incredibly well-realized alien species. Arnason's writing is good enough that the fact that the Hwarhath are all homosexual doesn't come off as remotely gimmicky, any more than sexuality is the main point of Ursula le Guin's *_Left Hand of Darkness_*.

Quirky yet serious, Arnason's prose is a bit less poetic than le Guin's, and a bit wryer. Politics, violence, romantic longing, and the threat of mass interstellar war have rarely come together in such an appealing package.

Mitticus says

El conocimiento es el único consuelo seguro. Creo que te lo dije una vez. Y sólo hay dos actividades que te hacen olvidar siempre el sufrimiento de la vida: practicar el sexo y jugar con las ideas

--RTC--

Rachel Brown says

A first-contact story involving a race of furry aliens, hwarhath, with a strictly gender-segregated society. The alien culture is wonderfully detailed, unusual but not gratuitously bizarre, and just captivated me. The plot is fairly standard, but the characterization and prose style is good, and oh, those aliens!

Lilia Ford says

Very well-written and smart. It's heavy on the speculative end of sci-fi, basically staging an extended debate about the conditions of personhood, the nature of intelligence and sentience, and the ethical dilemmas that arise when the usual assumptions of one's own people/species no longer apply. Despite the fact that most of the action is in the first half, there's plenty at stake, and the main characters, human and alien, are consistently sympathetic and involving.

The book is 20 years old now, and I couldn't help feeling that attitudes towards sexuality ended up changing much faster than people anticipated. It perhaps makes the book feel tamer and more intellectually cautious than is fair that most of the ordinary humans of Arnason's future take for granted that homosexuality is deviant and even more open-minded characters are surprised by it. In 1994, the conceit of a society where heterosexuality is considered deviant and homosexuality the norm would have felt more radical than it can

today, where I've read any number of stories based on that idea. Reading this book leaves you with the impression that even sci-fi writers had trouble imagining a future where different forms of sexuality would not only be legally "tolerated" but fully embraced--(let alone that all manner of sexual acts, including anal sex, rimming, fisting etc. might be described in detail in romance novels--and thank the gods for that!) Still, it does make me wonder how my favorite M/M sci-fi stories will be perceived in 2034.

Text Addict says

This is what I call a "thinky" book, where important concepts are front and center; it is sociological science fiction, where it's not the aliens' military technology that's important but their culture, and especially how they wind up interacting with humans.

It's also very well written, and completely unwilling to give either side all the moral high ground. The book, with the very intelligent and somewhat cold Anna Perez and the very worried Nicholas Sanders at its center, peels back multiple layers of assumptions about gender and power dynamics to expose some very interesting notions about human and alien societies. Not to mention about the myth of "it's always been this way."

I don't think there's really any way to describe it further without spoiling it and undermining it, too. Just keep going through the somewhat clunky "military intelligence isn't" setup to get to the main part of the story. I think it compares favorably to certain high concept SF by the likes of C. J. Cherryh and Ursula K. LeGuin.
