



# Proxima

*Stephen Baxter*

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## **Proxima** Stephen Baxter

The very far future: The Galaxy is a drifting wreck of black holes, neutron stars, chill white dwarfs. The age of star formation is long past. Yet there is life here, feeding off the energies of the stellar remnants, and there is mind, a tremendous Galaxy-spanning intelligence each of whose thoughts lasts a hundred thousand years. And this mind cradles memories of a long-gone age when a more compact universe was full of light...

The 27th century: Proxima Centauri, an undistinguished red dwarf star, is the nearest star to our sun - and (in this fiction), the nearest to host a world, Proxima IV, habitable by humans. But Proxima IV is unlike Earth in many ways. Huddling close to the warmth, orbiting in weeks, it keeps one face to its parent star at all times. The 'substellar point', with the star forever overhead, is a blasted desert, and the 'antistellar point' on the far side is under an ice cap in perpetual darkness. How would it be to live on such a world?

Needle ships fall from Proxima IV's sky. Yuri Jones, with 1000 others, is about to find out...

Proxima tells the amazing tale of how we colonise a harsh new eden, and the secret we find there that will change our role in the Universe for ever.

## **Proxima Details**

Date : Published September 19th 2013 by Gollancz

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Author : Stephen Baxter

Format : Kindle Edition 464 pages

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# From Reader Review Proxima for online ebook

## Will says

Genuinely dreadful. The first few chapters were reasonably engaging but then it degenerated into a mire of clumsy exposition and lengthy descriptions; ultimately even the premise was irritating.

It's a pity as 'Yuri' was a likeable and engaging character and the author certainly has a detailed imagination - he just needs to learn how to wield it more delicately than a sledge-hammer.

Unless you're terminally, terminally bored, don't read this turgid nonsense, it really would be put to better use as fuel or bedding for pet rodents.

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## Otherwyrld says

I wasn't quite sure how to rate this book for a while because, while there were parts of it I really enjoyed, other parts ...well, not so much.

### What I liked

The world-building that we see on the planet of Per Ardua is outstanding, it all feels very real and utterly alien particularly the alien life forms that we encounter here. The life cycles of the "Builders" and the other alien lifeforms are very well thought out. The planet itself is a pretty unique way of looking at a world which always keeps the same face to it's sun, and you really get to experience this world as our reluctant pioneers have to trudge through it. We also get to see some of the more "alien" worlds in our own solar system such as Mercury, the Moon and Ceres, which are all compelling.

The characterisations were also really good - Yuri Eden is a likeable pioneer even if he is a reluctant one, having been sent to this strange alien world as a convict. Stephanie is also a well-drawn character, as her secondary story about strange time-and-space twisting kernals and a mysterious hatch buried under the surface of Mercury intersects with Yuri's story.

### What I didn't like

The sheer stupidity of the politics here - I'm not a fan of near future political Science Fiction at the best of times, and the horrendous consequences of the developing war between the United Nations and China was hard to read at times. I just wanted to sit them all in a room and make them watch "Dr Strangelove" on autoloop until they learned how to behave like adults.

There is a sub-plot with a sentient A.I. that is sent to Proxima Centauri first before the colonists, but the story never really goes anywhere.

Who is Yuri Eden supposed to be, if that isn't his real name? He isn't Dexter Cole (the first pioneer), because we find his body later. Does this tie in to any of the author's other novels (which I haven't read). It's frustrating because I know I'm missing something, but I don't know what. Similarly, who are the mysterious aliens that create the hatches and that we only get a glimpse of at the end of the book? Are they from another story?

Speaking of the ending, why does Yuri and Steff go through another hatch and find themselves (view spoiler).Is this yet another reference to a different story?

So, 4 stars for the world-building, 3 stars for the characters, and 2 stars for the politics.

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## Robert French says

I have had the shelf in Goodreads named “abandoned” for some time, but never used it. Instead I simply deleted a book (or author) I did not particularly like. But Stephen Baxter’s novel *Proxima* has driven me to finally embrace this shelf so I can comment on books that irritate or simply annoy me. *Proxima* fits in that category with a vengeance. When I entered *Proxima* in Goodreads and checked the list of books by SB, I remembered before joining GR, I had read both *Flood* and *Ark*. I also remembered that I had been at times irritated by the plot and characters of those two novels.

I made it through the first 100 pages of *Proxima* before I abandoned the book. I consider what I have read of *Proxima* often ridiculous, quite illogical, violent, misogynistic and generally lacking in respect for people and humankind. Simply put it is illogical to settle a planet with antisocial, criminal misfits and oddballs selected through an unexplained sweep of the Earth and the Moon. A starship filled with violence perpetrated by so called Peacekeepers to keep the potential settlers in place until they are dumped on the new planet makes little sense. In addition, the acceptance of rape and abuse on the starship can only be considered deplorable. Unless you are completely brain dead it makes little sense for a group to riot and trash the starship just as they arrive at their destination. Finally Stephen Baxter portrays most settlers as ignorant, foolish, and with little interest in taking action to survive or to understand the planet on which they will live. There were two other side stories starting to progress as I read, but was so offended by the main story, that I finally gave up. I will likely never pick up another book by Stephen Baxter.

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## Nefeli says

When most sci-fi authors write about aliens they think how evolved their brains and how advanced their civilization might be and that they probably want to kill us and take over our planet. Stephen Baxter in his novel *Proxima* shows the most possible form that extraterrestrial life could take: not creatures that look like humans but with weird eyebrows and pointy ears using only their logic, but animals like those on earth, with strong instinct, adapted to their own ecosystem. This scientifically explained description of life on a hypothetical exoplanet is the most remarkable thing about *Proxima*. There is also the hint of the existence of creatures more intelligent than us who were here before us, but that idea is not fully developed, even though it gives more depth to the whole book.

The building of the strange yet fascinating alien ecology of *Per Ardua* is not only creative and imaginative, but also based on science sufficiently enough to make it feel like an ecosystem like that could actually evolve to exist on an exoplanet with these properties. See, as much as I enjoy the exciting but implausible ideas of *Star Wars*-like space opera, a scientifically realistic book like *Proxima* leaves me totally satisfied.

Other hard sci-fi elements in the story involved kernels, tiny black holes releasing energy, interstellar pathways in the form of hatches, alternate realities (Stef’s sister), colonization of the Moon, Mars and Ceres and intricate political events.

The plot was very interesting and I really liked how the narrative alternated from the past to the future to give a better understanding of the setting. The characters were likeable, smart and quite diverse and their

personal growth by the end of the book noticeable, while leaving enough room for further development in the sequel, Ultima.

Everything in the book was skillfully combined along with a really good writing style to make up a thought provoking and compelling read that is definitely worth a try by anyone who hasn't read it.

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### **Denis says**

"Proxima" is an epic story. Yet well paced, using simple language to explain complex science, much like an Arthur C. Clarke novel (who Mr. Baxter is often compared to, as he should be, considering he has collaborated with Sir Clarke on occasion), "Proxima" is a bit geeky and 'info-dumpy' at times, but personally, I like that sort of thing. There are great characters and situations in this novel, and I enjoyed it very much.

Looking forward to the sequel.

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### **Tudor Ciocarlie says**

I have big problems with all the major characters, but this novel deserves 5 stars because of the world-building, the science, the fascinating Solar System, the strangeness of a fully developed alien world, the question regarding our own evolution and the ever curious robot.

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### **Tamahome says**

It's ok. I'd probably like it better if it wasn't the start of a trilogy. I might read the second book, Ultima, whenever they bother publishing it in America. Parts of it I liked, and parts of it I was bored by. It's not exactly the wild sf I was expecting. There are hints of it. The end is definitely eventful. Maybe the wild stuff comes in the second book.

By the way, there is NO mention of this stuff in the first book:

"...there is mind, a tremendous Galaxy-spanning intelligence each of whose thoughts lasts a hundred thousand years..."

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### **Patrick says**

I'd first been introduced to Stephen Baxter via his aeon-spanning widescreen-IMAX Manifold trilogy, and Proxima is a sort of return to that kind of big-canvas science fiction. Spanning decades, rather than millennia, there is nonetheless time for characters introduced early on in the story as children to become major players in themselves, and for the movers and shakers of one generation to grow old and die, or else fade away into the background.

It tells three – or perhaps four – stories, in parallel. A conscious artificial intelligence which is sent off to explore our nearest celestial neighbour, Proxima Centauri; a manned mission made up of drafted ex-convicts which is subsequently set off to colonise an exo-planet discovered near that star which appears to be suitable for human habitation; and a physicist who discovers a portal on Mercury which enables people to travel at the speed of light between the two planets and, in so doing, also finds she has an identical twin sister of whom she has no memory (this is perhaps the point at which the book ceases to be 'hard' science fiction and nods in the direction of 'fantasy in space').

It's a bit messy, and it didn't have the mind-blowing 'space is big and time is long' impact that the first two Manifold trilogy books did on me (the less said of the third, the better) but there is some interesting stuff in here. Baxter has clearly put a lot of thought into how life on a planet which is orbiting a red dwarf star with no rotation – one side in permanent daylight and one always dark – might differ from life on earth. And his alien life forms seem genuinely, authentically alien. The weakness of the book is that, as with so many of Baxter's other stories, many of the characters feel like little more than ciphers to whom things happen. At best, you get a rough indication of someone's temperament – whether they are inclined to violence, if they are the sort of person to go against the grain, but there is rarely any more exploration of any of the main characters' motivations or back-stories. Even the central focus of the story, Yuri Eden (a pseudonym) seems curiously vacant. On the other hand, if you've only got 400 pages, and you want to explore interstellar travel, space warfare, esoteric physics, the brutal reality of setting up a tiny colony on an alien planet with press-ganged colonists and only the dimmest idea of what you will actually be facing, perhaps it's a little unfair to expect the author to really spend time fleshing out his characters too. And it would be a little churlish to complain about the AI-robot accompanying the colonists which acts throughout the book as a kind of 'exposition device' when there is simply so much exposition to do.

Frustratingly, it's the first of a series of books, and it doesn't really even attempt to wrap up the many plot threads it sets running (worse, I've read on here that the second book in the series is not nearly as good). But if you can live with that, there's an interesting exploration of the colonisation of alien worlds in here.

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## **Mårten Ericson says**

Where to begin? I started reading Baxter's works about two years ago, and have since come to terms with that he is somewhat uneven in his writing. Some stories are among the best sci fi I've read, some stories are significantly less sharp. Unfortunately the recently published *Proxima* will have to be filed among the latter.

It's a strange book in many ways. To me it apparently consists of several different storylines that - even if Baxter actually tie them together - don't really belong in the same book. It's an odd feeling being forced to jump between the main story about the colonization of a planet in the Proxima Centauri system and a totally different subplot taking place among the power politics of the solarsystem.

There is also a problem with how the story is built. Baxter can spend a couple of hundred pages on a settlements slow moving habits over a barren planet, while an expedition over the other frozen half, a discovery of a strange orbital object and the discovery of a new artifact can become squeezed together more or less within a couple of sentences. On the whole it feels like Baxter have got the balance of the story totally wrong.

There is also a problem with the characters. Even though most of them have their own colourful portraits, in the end all of them more or less boil down to the same characteristics. More specifically - everyone sneers at

everyone, all the time. Conversation throughout the whole of the book is characterized by bad manners. The only truly interesting mind in the book is the semi-intelligent robot vehicle that accompanies the colonists on Per Ardua (Proxima). Which brings me to the final questionmark in my review.

Reading about the colonists I get the feeling that they really must be genuine airheads. If this is intentional by Baxter or if he has not thought the thing through I can't say but - stranded at their new planet it takes the main characters 20 years or so to accomplish basic colonization stuff like building a hut, searching the nearby forest, make a nice lavatory - things that a normal intelligent human would get done in the first few hours or a in few days maximum. Searching for minerals or workable stone, making ropes, baking bricks, making concrete or pots even or finding something to write on - all such things seem totally alien to the ones landing on Per Ardua. Personally I don't think you have to have a major in *Robinson Crusoe* to have a small semifunctional society going after a year or so. On the whole the low interest shown by the colonists for their situation is just not plausible.

In the end - *Proxima* - is well written but not a thoroughly thought through story. I've read a lot of these lately, Brins *Existence* being one of them. I can only conclude ones more:

If you don't have a story - don't write it.

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## **Bradley says**

I kinda dropped off the Stephen Baxter map for a good decade while he was writing about things that were mostly on the earth or in the far past, but before then, I was a die hard fan. Sure, I was always mildly or slightly more annoyed with the characters sometimes for various reasons usually regarding subtlety, but when it came to any portion of the universe he was making, I was always enraptured like all the best captive audiences alive.

No, this isn't a galaxy-wide naked singularity allowing egress from our dying universe. This isn't a colony within an altered universe filled with so many bright stars it drowns out the darkness. We're not even living on the nano-scale on the surface of a neutron star. (Yeah, those are some of his actual novels.)

But we do have a truly Baxter novel of a far-future universal mind preserving \*us\* and some of our neighboring stars as their universe fades away.

Not that we know that within the text. Nope, we're actually explorers making it to a nearby dwarf star, Proxima, and settling upon a tidally-locked planet with very interesting alien life, and just below the surface, there's some rather interesting things going on. You know, like stargates and stuff. And let's not forget what we found on Mercury! Or the fact that our AIs are just a bit more effective and interesting than they really have a right to be. Or that whole timeline narratives sometimes get jolted in the proximity of those space-time useful bits we found on Mercury. No, no, let's forget about all that.

Because, after all, even if this is mostly a great exploration novel, it's also a huge chunk of an interplanetary politics novel right here at home that ramps up to have some rather fascinating and hard-hitting stupidity. Stupid on multiple levels. (Because all war is stupid. Especially when we're all just a part of some universal mind. :)

Seriously, I never should doubt this guy. I think this was pretty much a home run SF on the idea front.

The characters with a few caveats were all rather decent for Baxter, but I've never really expected all that much, so I am admitting that I am biased. :) I loved the exploration AI, though. No problems there. Intelligence is a function of curiosity, indeed. That core intelligence is practically dragging me to the next book in this SF all by itself.

Well, not really. I wanna soooo meet the far far future intelligence. :)

Like I said, home-run!

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## Effie says

Δεν το πιστεύω ?τι κατ'φερα επιτ?λους να το τελει?σω!!! ?χι, δεν ?ταν ?να κακ?, βαρετ? βιβλ?ο, το αντ'θετο.

Ο Stephen Baxter ?χει δημιουργ?σει ?να ολ?κληρο πλαν?τη, με δικ? του οικοσ?στημα βασισμ?νο στις, τ?τε πρ?σφατες ανακαλ?ψεις, και σε πολλ? θεωρητικ? ?ρθρα. Μας μεταφ?ρει στο αστρικ? σ?στημα Proxima, και συγκεκριμ?να στον πλαν?τη Prox c μ?σα απ? τα μ?τια του Yuri Eden, εν?ς γ?ινου ο οπο?ος βρ?σκεται ξαφνικ? σε ?να φαινομενικ? αφιλ?ξενο πλαν?τη, μαζ? με μια πολ? μικρ? ομ?δα ανθρ?πων που σκοπ? ?χουν να αποικ?σουν τον πλαν?τη.

Οι περιγραφ?ς του Baxter για τον πλαν?τη και ειδικ?τερα για το οικοσ?στημα του ε?ναι εξαιρετικ?ς και απ?στευτα αληθοφανε?ς. Το πρ?βλημα ε?ναι ?τι η εξερε?νηση του Prox c κρατ?ει για περ?που 200 σελ?δες, οπ?τε ?σο ενδιαφ?ρον κι αν ε?ναι κ?που κουρ?ζει και αρχ?ζει να σου λε?πει η δρ?ση. Η αγγλικ? ορολογ?α της βιολογ?ας ε?ναι κ?τι που με κο?ρασε ιδια?τερα μιας και δε μου ε?ναι γνωστ?. ?σως αν το δι?βαζα στα ελληνικ? να μου ?ταν λ?γο πιο ε?κολο. Επ?σης ?λες αυτ?ς οι περιγραφ?ς με ?καναν να μη δεθ? με τον Yuri και τους υπ?λοιπους χαρακτ?ρες.

Παρ' ?λα αυτ?, απ' τη μ?ση και μετ? τα πρ?γματα ?ρχισαν να ?χουν αρκετ? ενδιαφ?ρον υπ?ρχε ?ντονη δρ?ση, αποκαλ?ψεις, ανακαλ?ψεις και γενικ? το ευχαριστ?θηκα για περ?που 150 σελ?δες. Το τ?λος ?ταν και π?λι πιο ?πιο, τουλ?χιστον σε σχ?ση με αυτ? που περ?μενα μετ? απ? τ?ση δρ?ση.

Σ?γουρα θα διαβ?σω κ?ποια στιγμ? και τη συν?χεια. ?μως ?χι και πολ? σ?ντομα μ?λλον.

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## Liviu says

This novel has a lot going for itself and while it does not fully succeed in its ambitious goal of integrating three classic but usually disparate sfnal storylines, so being overall less the sum of its parts, the parts themselves attain true magnificence on occasion adn the book is worth reading for sure; not to speak of the sequel (Ultima) that the sort-of cliffhanger ending requires

As others noted the blurb is quite inaccurate (even the name of the main human character is wrong as he is known as Yuri Eden, while his real name is implied in the end pages), so as a quick summary, I would say that Proxima combines bare-bones (little tech, short, nasty, brutish lives) colonization of a strange planet - this part is the best but ultimately is a little irrelevant in the big picture - with humanity encountering mysterious and ultra-powerful artifacts that may give it the stars but at a cost and with grave danger - this



part will be most likely the most relevant in the next book - and finally power struggles, politics, conspiracies and standard near-future stuff - this part kind of resolves itself at the end

Overall, ambition and some awesome stuff in various parts of the novel overcome the major shortcoming of the whole being less than the sum of its parts and the feeling of forced stitching of sf tropes that do not really work together and as mentioned, that in a way solves itself logically by pushing one trope to front and leaving the rest as "done"

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## **Ric says**

Hard SF novel of first contact and intrasolar war. After a rather slow start, this book picks up about a third of the way in as the science fictional elements take over the narrative and the sense of wonder ramps up a couple orders. The setting is about a century in the future when man has established settlements in Mars, Mercury, the moon, asteroid belt, Jovian moons. Alien artifacts mined in Mercury power large hulk ships for transport across solar distances. A colony is established in Proxima Centauri four light-years from Sol (this takes up the rather slow first part of the book). But soon enough things pick up as the main characters discover that an alien power has left behind a pathway between the worlds.

It so happened that I watched the movie version of Carl Sagan's Contact during the course of reading this book. That movie bears striking resemblance to certain plot elements of Proxima. Sagan opted for a faster transport system and an alien in the form of a human, but the message is the same. The discovery of a benevolent galaxy of aliens saves man from his self-destructive nature.

Overall, a good read. I sleepwalked through the first third but this had my full attention the rest of the way. There is a sequel which I will try to get to soon. I may have read some of Baxter's work in the past but this is the first which has struck a chord and made me think about his other works. Recommended for fans of hard or classical SF.

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## **Nikola Tasev says**

This was supposed to be an epic book, spanning vast distances and about a century. This is spoiled by the author's inability to sustain more than a few characters with detail, so we follow those characters from very early age to being old and grey. They somehow never develop, change, retire, or become replaced by other people. The same guy calls the shots in the Solar System from the start of the book till the end.

Reading through the plot holes is painful. I really want to read a good colonization book, and this one gets some things right, but it gets so much wrong it is really frustrating.

Its first half is obviously inspired by the Second Fleet of convicts transported from Britain to Australia. A long journey while cramped and punished, leading to mutinies and huge death tolls. It made (some) sense in 1789, and NO sense in this book.

The colony starship has suspended animation and waking up facilities. They could train and lecture the colonists on Earth, where food, water, air, space and caretakers/guards are plentiful, and keep them asleep on the journey, waking them up in small groups for final briefings and planetfall. Instead the colonists were woken up at the start of the journey (on the ship no less!), fed, watched over and kept confined and demotivated for more than three years! This an insane waste of space, weight and labor on an expensive ship by very highly trained and presumably high payed people.

The excuse that everyone wants to be an explorer but no one wants to be a colonist is simply not true. At the very least fame and monetary compensation for the remaining family can motivate a ton of people to do incredible things, even without mentioning the exotic charm, nature and simple living which are popular even today (I'm not a fan, I know a lot of people who are).

It was a nice touch to mention people were carefully selected for genetic diversity. It was stupid to the extreme to not do any psychological profiling and compatibility research. It is stupid to the extreme to not select people with appropriate skills (or at least potential) and motivation. Genetic diversity can be guaranteed with a few kilograms of zygotes. Lack of skills, motivation, preparation and leaderships killed far more colonists during history than lack of genetic diversity. Some lectures were mentioned during the flight, but no effect from them - no enforced discipline, no motivation to do well in them. The colony ship feels like a prison.

The colonists themselves behave stupidly - I get it they feel like prisoners, but enough of them have been on ships or habitats before and should know that you don't just go breaking every machinery you can touch on the spaceship you depend to keep you alive, mutiny or not.

No team building is ever attempted. It is a nice idea to split the people in groups separated by great distance when colonizing, so a single natural disaster or demented individual cannot take them all. It is stupid not to merge groups when the numbers fall because of pre-settling casualties. Placing guards to restore some numbers is not a solution. The last several years were spent separating them, and now there is no trust between them.

From there on the story goes more or less predictably. Suspicion, demotivation and desperation doom the colonists to an at best an early bronze age existence.

The part of the book back at Earth is not more engaging, or plot-hole-free. The Anglo-Saxons rule the inner planets and find artifacts that let them have practically unlimited delta V ships (in space this is insanely powerful). The Chinese rule the outer planets and when they get a few of those magic ships they sacrifice all of them to hit the artifacts' source... even when one or two of them would suffice.

The book has some nice ideas, but they barely shine through. I'm not reading the next ones.

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## **Natasha Hurley-Walker says**

Baxter does what Baxter does best: phenomenal world-building using paper-thin characters and pacy interleaved stories, each ending with a cliffhanger so you CANNOT STOP READING. I just can't say enough about the world-building. What a fantastic, fleshed-out future, complete with history which *\*isn't\** the usual 20th-century references but instead a proper backstory of post-climate change collapse which informs every character's politics and prejudices throughout. The worlds, the tech, the "too-convenient" energy source, the multitude of space travel methods... ahh, just fantastic. Yuri, as an accidental relic of earlier times, makes a great protagonist because he knows almost nothing, so the reader gets to explore these extremely interesting times looking over his shoulder. I also like how many Australians there are in this novel. I think the only reason I can't give it five stars is because Baxter already wrote *Flood*, and that set such a high bar for me, it's pretty tricky to surpass it. This does come close, though. I went straight to Amazon and bought the sequel.

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## **Ben Babcock says**

I seem to remember reading some or all of Stephen Baxter's *Manifold* books when I was much younger. Those also involved a future sentience/intelligence at the end of the universe reaching back in the history of

the universe to alter events through weird, inexplicable phenomena. So I guess this is a thing for him. *Proxima* starts its life as a straightforward tale of enforced penal colonization of another planet before gradually sprawling into a parallel tale of solar system politics before eventually becoming something about exploring weird phenomena. Basically, it's typical Baxter. I would have loved this more when I was younger.

The story gets much better after all the potential settlers, save two, die at the settlement site of interest. The survivors are left with the knowledge that they are no longer trying to establish a self-sustaining colony but are basically just eking out an existence day to day for the rest of their lives. Baxter leaves us thinking that this is the most cockamamie planetary colonization scheme ever dreamed up, until the very end—although the UN is majorly saved by the discovery of The Hatch, because otherwise I still think their colonization plan was a terrible one.

Meanwhile, in the solar system, China has taken over Australia and Mars and the asteroids, but the UN-affiliated countries (read: America) have Mercury and its mysterious kernels that can power interplanetary/interstellar ships. Oh, and there are strong AIs hunkering in subterranean facilities, relics from the Heroic Generation when men were real men, women were real women, and strong AIs created from brain scans and deep learning networks were real strong AIs created from brain scans and deep learning networks. No one trusts these AIs, but hey, they make for great *deus ex machinae*, hmm?

Weird and wacky hijinks ensue, with babies and twins and sentient robots and exo-geological and exobiological observations. In one of the more blatant set ups I've seen in a while, nothing gets resolved before the end of the book—either this book was originally twice as long and had to get split in two, or else this is a cynical attempt to make people buy Book 2, because literally there is no ending. It's cliffhanger, epilogue, done. Who are those guys, the lost Ninth Legion? I don't know. Buy the next book to find out!

I know my sarcasm above makes it sound like I hated this book, and that's not the case at all. In fact, for the majority of *Proxima*, I was enamoured to the point of really wanting to keep reading. That's probably some of the highest praise a book can receive, right? It is a fun story. It's just that its substance is stretched so thinly across these 400-some pages.

By far the best thing about *Proxima* is the way Baxter describes life on Proxima c, or Per Ardua. This is a beautiful look at what it might be like to colonize an exoplanet—not just another planet in our solar system, like Mars, but a planet around an entirely different star, one with life like but unlike the life on Earth. Baxter covers the challenges—having to manufacture *soil* in which to grow crops, adjusting to the different day/year lengths and the increased radiation, the need to carefully select one's settler groups to avoid what happens here. In his slightly more fanciful but no less impressive depiction of alien, possibly sentient life in the builders, Baxter reminds us how difficult it would be to communicate with a species not of our planet. Basically, *Proxima* is a potent reminder of the practical challenges awaiting us if we ever attempt to colonize an exoplanet.

For all of the above, however, there were paragraphs of expository description and dialogue. There were extraneous characters and paper-thin politics. And all the characters, major or minor or extraneous, fit into a small number of moulds, from the cartoonishly macho and aggressive people like Gustave Klein to the suave but untrustworthy Michael Kings and Earthshines of the world. There is neither depth nor breadth to these people.

I can't help but keep comparing *Proxima* to *Red Mars*, the other colonization SF novel I recently read. They share many strengths and flaws. Both are very technical, almost pragmatic looks at the difficulties of settling

other worlds. Both have somewhat pessimistic ideas about how much humanity can cooperate in these endeavours (but Baxter's political scenes are a little harder to believe than Kim Stanley Robinson's). Is it weird that I found *Proxima* more engaging, but *Red Mars* overall the better book? Perhaps that's just my lingering, Singularity-related obsession with weird alien artifacts manipulating space and time.

I'm not going out of my way to recommend this book. If you like this sort of thing, you will probably like *Proxima*, and there are way worse books you could spend your time on. I can't even say it's more ho-hum, nothing-to-see-here, because it definitely has one of the best depictions of exoplanetary settlement we'll get for a while. Baxter loves to do the research and show off everything he has learned about exoplanets; I can't fault that love. I just wish it had led, overall, to a more involved story with more interesting people.

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## Megan Baxter says

Goddammit, Stephen Baxter, I'm trying! I've been trying to like you since I read an early book and thought the characters were so cardboard I couldn't get through it. (No idea what book that is now.) I enjoyed the first book you and Terry Pratchett wrote together. I mean, we share a last name. Arbitrarily, that feels like it should mean something.

Note: The rest of this review has been withheld 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](#)

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## Mark says

I'm a fan of Stephen's books, but if I'm honest, recently I've not kept up. Which is why I'm reading this one about a year after its first release (although the paperback is now imminent, due October 2014).

I'm pleased to see that we're back to big Epic themes here, although you may be surprised at the start. For *Proxima* is not your typical 'outwards to the stars' novel, in fact, often the opposite.

From the book: The 27th century: Proxima Centauri, an undistinguished red dwarf star, is the nearest star to our sun – and (in this fiction), the nearest to host a world, Proxima IV, habitable by humans. But Proxima IV is unlike Earth in many ways.

Huddling close to the warmth, orbiting in weeks, it keeps one face to its parent star at all times. The 'substellar point', with the star forever overhead, is a blasted desert, and the 'antistellar point' on the far side is under an ice cap in perpetual darkness.

How would it be to live on such a world?

Yuri Jones, with 1,000 others, is about to find out...

For a book which has basic SF tropes at its core, it is surprisingly contemporary in tone, taking old SF ideas (colonisation, space travel, strange alien species) and imbuing them with a modern twist. We begin with something tightly focused on one character, Yuri Eden, but then builds up a range of characters to the point where we have an ensemble that we know of and care about.

Whilst I understood the book was about space exploration, the first part of the book was not what I expected, to the point that I considered not going further. This is no confident step into the unknown. Yuri is a convict, shipped Botany Bay style to Proxima c (Proxima IV). Earth is a mess, through climate change, and instead of this being a glorious expansion of humans to the stars, there is no further planned funding for projects such as this, and the colonists are more something to be got rid of, as an inconvenience, rather than picked for any great skill. In fact the early days of exploration are generally looked down upon as 'the Age of Heroic Expansion'. In short, nobody wants to be there, nor be a settler, stranded without contact to other people. (Compare this with Heinlein's *Farmer in the Sky* to see how different Proxima is.)

Yuri's journey is one of being awakened and then survival, interspersed with repeated beatings, fights and conflict from other 'colonists' as well as the ironically named 'Peacekeepers'.

When the colonists get to Proxima c, an exoplanet, they are stranded with apparently no hope of return to Earth or any means of contacting the other small groups spread around the globe. Yuri and his group of a dozen or so spend much of their first few months ignoring each other, sleeping with each other or killing each other. Much of the first hundred pages or so show this unpleasant and harsh tale, with characters – misfits, rapists, murderers – who are also unlikable. It's grim, in space.

This is not the stuff of old SF. But bear with it. What Stephen has done in all of this bleakness is drop subtle little hints that 'other things' are happening. And it is at this point, about halfway through the novel, things turn all '2001' and we suddenly get an idea that, rather than being an unpleasant tale of human decline and squalor, on the cosmic scale Proxima is about things on a much longer timescale and a much bigger canvas.

Proxima c itself is an interesting enough idea, being just so big. (And it's not the only novel to cover such big ideas recently. I've also read Stephen Hunt's *In Dark Service*, which was a similar environment.) Much of the middle part of the book is spent examining the sheer alien-ness of this new planet. Different climatic zones are created on a world where one zone is bigger than most planets, and where seasons become quite different.

What we also get into here is an alien ecology, as the plants on Proxima are similar and yet different to those of Earth. There doesn't seem to be any animal life here, but instead Stephen spends quite a while explaining the rituals and existence of a bizarre alien ecology named stromatolites, based on a variation of cell-like tubes rather than plant cells and a range of species to rival Earth's rainforests. As is typical of our unusual colonists, most of the survivors are initially uninterested in these lifeforms or the scientific findings put forward by their group's ColU (named after the University which created it), an AI robot whose endearing qualities are a constant source of delight through the novel.

This does change in the later part of the novel when the situation alters, both on Proxima c and on Earth. A major discovery means that events do become much more interesting, balancing these strange ecologies with both life on Earth and the human expansion across Proxima. At this point the years jump forward quite quickly and it becomes apparent to the reader that we are in for a long haul here.

When we reach the final stages of the book and the consequences of human actions are revealed, the book became un-putdownable. It shouldn't be a surprise, after such a bleak beginning, that the story does not end

entirely well, though there are many themes that will no doubt be taken further in the next book, *Ultima*. In the end, part of the cosmic mystery is revealed, though there's enough left unexplained and a cliff-hanger that will leave you wanting to read the next book as soon as you can.

*Proxima* is a book of surprises. Whilst its beginning is rather shocking, and not always enjoyable, it builds to something in the end that shows a writer of skill, whose sense-of-wonder shines through. I'm pleased I finally picked this one up.

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## Carly says

You know, I just can't seem to find hard sci-fi that really speaks to me.

I had high hopes for *Proxima*: interesting premise and an ex-engineer author with a history of collaborating with Terry Pratchett? Count me in.

But the book just wasn't for me. I honestly didn't plan on reviewing it because I just don't feel strongly enough about it to want to write about it, and it was so incredibly memorable that a few weeks after I read it, I'm struggling to remember the plot. The book itself is long, and the plot is wide-reaching without ever feeling personal. The book can't seem to decide whether it wants to be a new-world pioneer survival story or a superpower political struggle, so it tries to do both. There's a lot of brain-dead politicking that made me want to smash the whole cast's heads together. Probably the greatest weakness was the characters. Absolutely none of them grabbed me, not the everyman (and blank-slate personality-less) protagonist who goes by the name of Yuri Eden (get it?), not the female scientist whose potentially interesting plotline gets derailed by pure and go-nowhere weirdness, and not the billionaire scientists or the random colonists or the AI whose potentially interesting storyline lies apparently forgotten for most of the book. My absolute favourite character was the pollyanna AI unit that the colonists used. I thought its perspective, particularly on its fellow robots, was perhaps the most interesting part of the book.

But while the colonization section provided plenty of fun moments with the Col-U, the whole subplot involved what I consider to be an unhealthy obsession with rape. Rape happens multiple times in the book, both on the ship and off of it. Pretty much all of the male colonists--except for our everyman protagonist--see the female colonists as their potential property, there to be used as breeding machines. They're not alone; that's what the expedition planned for them as well. Even our good guys are desperate for children. I don't really get the whole "biological imperative" that these sorts of stories run on. Baxter does create female characters; I give him that. They're all weak ciphers, but then, so are the male characters. But I don't understand the rape or the biological baby-breeding imperative bit. It did not make for an enjoyable read. Nor did the politics, and nor did the ending.

I know I just reeled off a huge number of negatives, and I think that's because I'm struggling to remember the plot and it's the negative bits that stuck most firmly in my mind. The book isn't a bad book, and the premise, and the science it's based on, is interesting enough. I really enjoyed the worldbuilding of Mars and Mercury, and I actually thought the ending to the political subplot was both ironic and fitting.

And so my search for personally palatable hard sci-fi continues. Oh, well. In the meantime, I guess there's always fantasy.

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## **Michael Brookes says**

This is some damn fine science fiction. It ticked all the right boxes for me for what I consider to make essential sci-fi reading. So much so that it's one of those reviews where I get to list all the good things, without having to worry about the negative. A rare please :-)

For me science fiction is at it's best when tackling big questions, or for tight character led stories, and we are fortunate in having both here. There are a few big issues being tackled here, such as how humanity tackles resource scarcity post significant climate change. It looks at how we expand into the Solar System, from a practical, and from political perspectives. And perhaps the main one is how we explore, and then colonise another star system.

In answering these challenges with well researched consequence the author builds a believable world encompassing humanity's future. Although the binary nature of the politics does lack the nuance you'd expect for such events. Beyond that he constructs an alien world that is plausible and fascinating. The alien ecology is drawn with respectable detail and I loved the main life forms of the builders. They struck me as a novel creation, and one that managed to feel alien, as well as understandable.

There's a strong blend of characters here, including human and AI. For the human characters Yuri really stood out for me. He possessed a practicality, but also a sense of being out of his own time that appealed to me. Even better are the various AI characters, they each had their own characteristics that demonstrated being of a different order of intelligence, and personality, but also differentiated between each other. In particular the robot companion added some feeling to the colonisation threads.

Set against all this is a somewhat esoteric mystery relating to a discovered energy source, and some trapdoors. The applications of these are explored, but their meaning is only hinted at in this book. I've already bought the next book in the hopes of finding out more!

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