



Burn

James Patrick Kelly

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Colonization is the theme of this exciting, complex page-turner that provides a provocative and entertaining look at Thoreau's classic eco-text *Walden*. Eccentric billionaire Jack Winter has bought the planet Beekman's Pea, renamed it Walden, and created a utopia in which members renounce the technologies of human civilization. Marginalized by these newcomers, the planet's original inhabitants are resisting the colony's dominance by setting fires to Walden's artificial ecology. A member of Walden, Prosper Gregory Leung is a veteran firefighter who believes in protecting Winter's utopian vision, but when he is wounded, he begins to learn of the terrible price that the people of Walden are paying for their paradise. Interwoven with themes of environmental responsibility, political struggle, and courage, this adventure novel nimbly combines political and social relevance with a flawless and gripping narrative from a veteran science fiction author.

Burn Details

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From Reader Review Burn for online ebook

Tyson Adams says

On the Upside, no one will take your calls.

Prosper Gregory "Spur" Leung wakes up in a hospital. All he can remember is the fire and his skin burning. After the docbot patches him up he makes a few calls and heads home to his farm on the utopia of Walden - a planet being gradually terraformed to forest, orchards, and farms. Those few calls make the homecoming... interesting.

Every time I put this book down I made the same comment, 'I don't know what this book is about.' Even now that I've finished I'm still at a loss as to what the point of it all was. In the background, there are some ideas. In the foreground there is a naive protagonist you could use to explore those ideas, but I'm not sure the ground overlapped at any point.

That isn't to say that this book isn't well paced, exciting, and entertaining; it is. There are some interesting themes as well, like environmentalism and competing interests. I breezed through and enjoyed reading the book, but can't help but feel that the story was missing something.

I received an advanced review copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

Noah M. says

I read this because I thoroughly enjoyed one of James Patrick Kelly's short stories in a Nebula Awards anthology. This book didn't quite live up to that promise. Whereas the story was bombastic with its futurisms, this is subdued and gentle.

I was generally unimpressed until about thirty pages before the end (it's only 170 pages). At that point, a forest fire kicks up and his world suddenly becomes a lot more interesting. There's very little at stake up to that point, and while the world he draws is interesting there just wasn't enough for me.

The forest fire was quite something though. I had never really read anything dealing with that particular breed of disaster, so it was interesting to see it explored in a good bit of detail. This might be the best science fiction firefighting novel since Fahrenheit 451, though Burn is about more literal firefighting.

So I wouldn't exactly recommend it. But I'd definitely read more by James Patrick Kelly. Oh, the book is also available on his website under the creative commons license, so you don't even have to pay money to read it.

Kavita Favelle says

Characterisation and interactions between communities is at the heart of this short book, far more than the typical science fiction tropes of technology, but the story is a good one, with lots of tension and a fast-paced and exciting ending.

John Wiswell says

Burn covers a lot of weirdness in a very short period. Until the end I couldn't discern if it was meant to be a drama or comedy – if we're lucky, Kelly intended it as a hybrid. We have Planet Walden, inspired by the philosophies of Henry Thoreau, which instead of amounting to a culture of transcendental individualists instead consists of luddites fighting the pyromaniac natives. Our main character suffers harsh burns and, while loitering in hospital, accidentally dials a foreign child ruler "High Gregory" via a hilariously inept translator-phone and winds up winning military assistance for "punches."

None of the outlandish elements amount to much. Our eccentric super-child High Gregory gets about as much attention as the main character's estranged wife, and neither of them does anything drastic. It's almost a novella of vignettes, reflections on ideas or this fictive existence. Every chapter is prefaced by a quote from historical non-fiction and the themes of Zionist struggle, post-traumatic issues and intercultural mess exist throughout, yet never grip as though this is even a pulp conflict story.

Eventually *Burn* dedicates itself to an almost unbecoming seriousness. The main character is inextricably emotionally linked to his backwater culture, and this is a little tragic, and the goofiness of off-worlders tames down. We realize the lives lost in the battle before the opening aren't going to resolve, that the marriage won't be fought for, and we won't witness the new contingent creating any major stir on Walden. It turns the novella into a thematic cul-de-sac, not going all the way on condemning Thoreau but going far enough along for the objections to be obvious, inviting you to mull over the tenets it's pillorying rather than to follow mounting complications from all the neat set-building. Instead, *Burn* is the little tract that could, garnished with unusual characters and SciFi inventions along the way.

Leif Moldskred says

I liked the main character and found the setting interesting and the writing kept me invested, but once I'd gotten to the end I felt the story hadn't gone anywhere.

Michael Burnam-Fink says

Burn is a tense novella that manages to stay one step ahead of the fireline of literary collapse, right through the end. Prosper "Spur" Gregory Leung is a firefighter in the Transcendental State of Walden, a planet that has rejected most technology in favor of a historical human lifestyle and the virtue of simplicity. Walden is locked in a guerrilla struggle with the puk pucks, the previous inhabitants of the planet who still want automation. The battlefield are the immense planetary forests, genetically altered fast spreading trees the Waldenites are using to strangle the puk pucks, and the arson fires the puk pucks use to fight back.

Spur starts the novel recovering in a hospital from severe burns and the psychological trauma of letting his wife's brother and his best friend Vic die as a puk puk traitor. Random calls connect him with The Gregory of L'ung, a galactic child with the power to make luck, among other arcane skills. Now Spur has to go home and confront a mass of curdled small village politics while playing chaperone to an interstellar potentate.

I really enjoyed the tense small-town interactions of people who have known each other from birth, and the way Spur parries their keen Yankee questioning. The final bit, with a sudden fire threatening the town, is suitably dense with firefighting jargon. I don't think *Burn* quite properly engaged with the central conceit of technology changing the way people live, or rather Kelly couldn't mesh his ambitions with the words on the page, but what would have sunk a novel is brushed past in the shorter form.

Bradley says

I was perfectly willing to suspend judgment on this book... and I did, refusing to look up any reviews until long after I was thinking about what I read.

I wanted to like this a lot more than I did. I don't mind pastoral-type SF all that much, but it has to be rich in the internal life and lots of great ideas being bandied about. The fact this was a reaction to *Walden*, a perfect Luddite if there ever was one, was also fine by me. I had problems with the guy, too, but not all the way. I like nature, I like technology. I do not want to simplify my life so much that I lose out on the necessities. At all. James Patrick Kelly basically makes the same argument in this novella.

Firefighting on this regressive world. If only there hadn't been such restrictions, more could have been saved.

I don't think there's any kind of counter-argument. Not realistically. Or at least, not in this century.

So what do we have to fall back on within the story? Characterization, a little worldbuilding, a kinda meandering live-your-life-tale that fits more in FAVOR of *Walden* than the counterargument, and then the big action and the reveals after the fire.

Of course, that's where I'm most interested. The many worlds and post-near-singularity galactic civilization. You know, uploaded minds. That kind of thing.

As a mirror to all that happened on the planet before, it kinda hammers a nail in the coffin.

There are some open-ended questions that make me squirm, too, regarding his wife, but that kinda detracts from the rest of the novella rather than adding a new dimension. I did kinda like the MC before that. A memory wipe is a total PKD issue and it might have been better explored in much greater detail throughout the tale or left out of the end entirely. It just raises way too many questions and concerns regarding all these *Walden* people.

Such as the idea that they might all be in a zoo.

Maybe that's the point. I WANTED to like this more, but the ideas are kinda all over the place and I'd like to come away from this story chewing on a single good idea rather than a number of unsatisfyingly explored ones.

Ralph Blackburn says

Burn by James Patrick Kelly- Winner of the 2006 Nebula Award, this novella takes place on an already settled planet in a recreated utopia called Walden, where the latest arrivals have decided to cover the planet in dense foliage and seek a simpler, gentler sort of life.(see Thoreau). The original settlers don't agree and decide to rebel by burning great swatches of forest. The main character is a fireman, who's job is to stop the burning but is becoming weary to the task. He contacts an alien prince of another world and before he knows it aliens have arrived to help the utopian settlers. after that things move along at a sedate pace up to a somewhat convincing conclusion. This just didn't dazzle me as much as some of James Patrick Kelly's previous stories. Not to say it was bad, no, the ideas and the structure were very interesting, but the whole didn't satisfy. Maybe too obvious

PRL says

Very well written, but not what you'd call a happy book.

Mike says

James Patrick Kelly is an excellent craftsman of the short story, but this novella introduced too much while resolving too little. I found the behaviour of the protagonist's wife inexplicable, and it was unclear what anyone wanted or was trying to achieve - nor did anyone seem to achieve much.

It seems to have been primarily intended as a (excuse the pun) burn on Thoreau, but there was no real substantive critique of the utopia built on Thoreau's ideas, and not much exploration of its ideology, despite plenty of opportunity. Missing the chance to be a novel of ideas, it also failed to have much of a plot or explore character in any depth, and I was left wondering what the point of it was.

Bryan says

Engrossing, but not challenging. Interesting, but not intriguing. Charmingly weird, but not wondrously strange. There's nothing wrong with this little book (it will draw you in to its very believable world), but there's nothing exemplary that will leave you stunned.

Does it have to be awe-inspiring to be worth the time it takes to read? Not necessarily. I particularly enjoyed all the forest-fire-fighting descriptions. (But then, I have prior experience in fighting forest fires, having spent the four or five summers in northern Alberta doing just that.)

There are many questions left unanswered, and the ending is largely unsatisfying. I did care about the characters (even the goofy "High Gregory"), and enjoyed the setting, but really thought that the author was going for something big. Instead, we may or may not have had the seed of a change in the mind of one character. And no idea if that will be "lucky" for him, or not.

This is only my 4th audiobook ever, and I have to admit that some of my enjoyment was diminished by the

muffled audio quality. However, for this review, I have strived to report only on the story, and not on the medium.

It's short, so it's worth your time, but it's not begging to be reread any time soon.

S.r. Algernon says

I liked the worldbuilding and the quirky characters. I think if it were a bit longer, it could have explored the ideas that it raised more deeply. Overall, a nice look at the clash between the human need for simplicity and the complexity (ecological and technological) of the larger world.

Juliana Rew says

I'm a long-time fan of James Patrick Kelly, but have only been exposed in the past to his shorter works, such as the Nebula-winning short story, "Mr. Boy."

What distinguishes Kelly is his ability to create worlds that are *different* from the ordinary. Of course, that is natural for science fiction, and world-building is expected. Kelly's skillful at it, of course, but it is his imagination that takes it to the next level.

Burn is set on a planet 400 years in the future that has decided to simplify life and drop out of the thousand-planet human community. The founders of this society have purchased Morobe's Pea, a planet ruined by its native human inhabitants, renamed it Darwin, and shut out all outside communication.

But what would you do if you were a native, and the new owners came in and told you to get lost/relocate/disappear? Does this sound like certain events in our own world?

Rebellious natives have taken to burning the forests the Darwinians have planted to reclaim the environment. The protagonist, Prosper "Spur" Leung, is a volunteer firefighter pledged to stamp out the suicide burnings in order to preserve his family and community's old-fashioned farming way of life.

Spur has been badly burned in the latest fire and out of boredom discovers the Upside, the thousand linked human worlds his society has rejected. In particular, he accidentally meets a child on the network, who turns out to be the powerful equivalent of the Dalai Lama of the galaxy.

I especially enjoyed the entourage of wise children accompanying

Leung's new benefactor. They reminded me of the Lylmik in Julian May's Galactic Milieu Series, who have been shepherded into "coadunation" by the entity known as Atoning Unifex.

As this child tours Spur's society, another giant fire threatens to take all they have built. Kelly paints a realistic portrait of the fearsome destruction fire can cause, one many of us in Colorado can readily identify with.

Spur is torn between preserving his pledged lifestyle and understanding the despair of the original inhabitants. The child asks: Is man really capable of living alone? Spur can't say.

Will the Upside meddle in their affairs, or leave them to their own self-destructive war? The answer is both startling and regenerative.

Wilson says

Short and sweet story of a different kind of sci-fi society, lovingly imagined with a plot and characters that last long enough to be developed but which never outstay their welcome. I'm impressed by how much is packed in to what felt like a short story, though that could be partly because I was enjoying it enough to read it quickly too!

Jon says

It's an interesting blend of inspirations, Walden and the Dalai Lama and Backdraft and suicide bombers. Comes together nicely.
