

## On the Steel Breeze

*Alastair Reynolds*

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## **On the Steel Breeze** Alastair Reynolds

It is a thousand years in the future. Mankind is making its way out into the universe on massive generation ships.

*On the Steel Breeze* is the follow-up to *Blue Remembered Earth*. It is both a sequel and a standalone novel, which just happens to be set in the same universe and revolves around members of the Akinya family.

The central character, Chiku, is totally new, although she is closely related to characters in the first book. The action involves a 220-year expedition to an extrasolar planet aboard a caravan of huge iceteroid 'holoships', the tension between human and artificial intelligence... and, of course, elephants.

Lots of elephants.

## **On the Steel Breeze Details**

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Author : Alastair Reynolds

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# **From Reader Review On the Steel Breeze for online ebook**

## **Danielle The Book Huntress (Back to the Books) says**

Not the easiest read, with a lot of technological concepts to integrate. However, it was a fulfilling read. And a form of therapy for an artificial intelligence phobic person like myself.

Reviewed for Bitten by Books. <http://bittenbybooks.com>.

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## **Robert says**

Typical Reynolds: untypical Reynolds.

This novel follows on from Blue Remembered Earth, telling the tale of human space exploration through the history of the Akinya family. It could be read independently but it'll work better if you've read it's predecessor - and why wouldn't you? That was a superior piece of SF. This is, too!

Three colour-coded members of the Akinya family split up and go very separate ways -light years apart - yet they all end up embroiled in history-making adventures and they all end up influencing each other.

There are lots of Reynolds themes here; no FTL, body modification, grand scale in space and time, mysteries upon mysteries. There's very little trade-mark gothic grotesquery, though - even less than in Blue Remembered Earth - and heavily disguised insofar as it's present at all. There are still some brutal acts, though - horrendous if you can actually grasp the scale of them, which is difficult.

Reynolds is rarely just telling a tale for its own sake though, and here, among other things, he's looking at humanity and war: is war so ingrained in human nature that the only way to prevent it is alter human nature itself? Is surveillance and external control that almost entirely eliminates violence worth the price of almost total loss of privacy? Themes tackled by numerous SF writers, past and present, maybe but they keep coming up because they don't ever seem to get less relevant, important, urgent.

There's a lot of wildlife in this book, which I had fun noting. See how many different species you can spot.

Blue Remembered Earth left a lot unexplained; you get a few answers here but over all more questions and a bigger cliff-hanger - there's a lot of people in a lot of jeopardy and some big adventures to come in the third volume of this series. I'm looking forward to it!

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## **Bradley says**

Consistently hi-quality. I haven't read a Reynolds novel that I've disliked. I'm always surprised, pleasantly, by how he can turn relatively innocent main characters into normal people thrown into massively world-changing situations and yet still allow them the opportunities to make the big decisions that change the galaxy anyway. These are very fun and satisfying novels. Every time I think to myself, "Well, this is probably not my cup of tea, I'll just get through this one and then move on to another author," I get to the end

with frantic enjoyment in my heart that puts me in knots.

Suffice to say, I then have to go get another of his novels. Thank god he's still alive and writing.

Fantastic fun, all. Future history rules, ATW! :)

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## **Tudor Ciocarlie says**

Although quieter than the Revelation Space books, *On the Steel Breeze* is still a mind blowing novel. It centers around a fascinating question - it is possible for a Galactic Civilization to be born in a universe like ours, where greater than light travel is not possible? The answers are even more intriguing than the question, and show that the space-opera subgenre can still feel fresh and interesting.

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## **Outis says**

The speculative edge of *Blue Remembered Earth* is replaced not so much by *Monolith/Mandala* shenanigans (as I feared) but by artilect stuff. Pretty standard fare? Not quite. This is a Reynolds so the light lag complicates matters.

In spite of serious plot issues, the middle of the book especially is a more engaging read than the prequel on a superficial level. If you're looking for space adventures with less violence, less impossible physics and less Anglo supremacism than is typical in the genre, this could be a great book for you. That is, if you're not too picky about stuff that doesn't make much sense and that's been blatantly put there to serve the plot or to make grand events hinge on a handful of characters (but they why would you be looking at the sequel of BRE?). Reynolds often writes stuff that would pass in a fast movie but not in such long books.

A novelty however is that the narrative structure is aligned with a cool plot device. It made the beginning of the book drag a bit but when I understood what Reynolds was doing I thought it was brilliant. Unfortunately, the end of the book abandons this approach and devolves into the usual structure (fast and nonsensical POV cuts).

Now I'll delve into a few important themes without belaboring the material which was already in the prequel...

First, the AI stuff which rubbed me the wrong way. BRE already had some bizarre essentialist bigotry but that stuff plays a much more important part in this book. Reynolds even used the word "essence". It's not merely the characters which occasionally blurt out ill-considered opinions: it's now become some kind of ground rule of the setting, complete with technobabbly plot points. So the author must actually take this stuff seriously.

The one thing that most marred the book in my eyes was how much the issues relevant to both present-day politics and the future of humanity such as surveillance end up being superceded by some kind of essential man/machine conflict, complete with the half-baked resolution we've seen many times in other stories. Much of the plot and especially the ending was predicated on that stuff.

The gen ship stuff I was looking forward to was eclipsed by the "new" (read impossible and overly convenient) physics which afflicted the setting with Revelation Space-type gigantism, as I feared. But there's still some cool stuff, including a *Paradises Lost* vibe.

One thing which stands out is the so-called slowdown problem which I could not resist reading as an allusion to contemporary issues such as climate change. On the one hand, the relevant global (or rather galactic?) planning is so mind-bogglingly lacking in foresight and plain insane I could not suspend disbelief. But on the

other hand, what's going on in our world is no less insane. So on some level I thought it was plausible. The cognitive dissonance type of effect would be brilliant if it was indeed what the author intended. But then why ruin it with such a convenient techno-fix?

Another interesting feature of this part of the story one may read as a paralleling current events is the denialists, their politics and their motivations. I'll not say more because I don't want to spoil this part.

I thought the relationships of the narrators with their partners wasn't convincing, and they're not always merely background. The partners were unconvincing as characters actually. Maybe they were intended as male versions of female stereotypes.

The economics of the book is bad and more importantly unimaginative. That's become too common in the genre.

The information security stuff was as nonsensical as I've come to expect. There are some howlers. It would be a bigger issue if that was the only problem with the plot.

We already knew Reynolds takes into account the weaponization potential of the energies involved in interstellar travel. So there's a smattering of Atomic Rockets-type material in this book.

Nitpick: there are too many codescending recaps and reminders aimed at dead tree readers who aren't paying attention.

In sum, a mild disappointment for me but still a good read. Others might enjoy it more. There's plenty to like.

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## **Claudia says**

Despite of general opinion that is slower than the Blue Remembered Earth and does not have that sense of wonder, I found it better than the first; mainly, because its scope is greatly increased and second, because of the focus on the psychology behind the actions of the two trios: Chiku and the artelects. Moreover, a good part of the story takes place in Lisbon, which is my favorite city and it was so easy to immerse myself in the book, to be side by side with Chiku when she drank her coffee above the Santa Justa elevator or taking a stroll in Belem.

It has, of course, plenty of tech stuff, interstellar voyage to colonize Crucible, alien artifacts, enhanced elephants and lot more. The world building is as perfect as ever; it is, after all, AI R' strength.

It does not have much character development but instead it depicts the extent of what colonization does to a whole society: the struggle, the dedication of few individuals, the fights between others and of course, the utter selfishness of humans as a whole, mainly based on fear and ignorance: *"Explain this to me: why do people have to keep on being such fucking idiots?"*

Although is viewed as a standalone, it has deep roots in the first volume, therefore I would recommend reading them in order.

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## **Tamahome says**

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## Tommy Carlson says

This is the sequel to Blue Remembered Earth. I didn't like that one much. I don't like this one much either. I mean, I didn't hate either one; I just wasn't thrilled.

Most of the characters lack any sort of agency. Things happen to them or push them into certain actions. It doesn't help that much of the story is told in flashbacks. It's an odd choice in dealing with time dilation. I don't think it was a good one.

All that said, it's well written and contains more in the way of big ideas than the first book. It feels more Reynoldsesque. It's really a 3.5 star book, but I can't bring myself to give it four.

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## Richard says

A surprisingly disappointing sequel. The first book was hit and miss, but was interesting enough to keep me going. This book, though.... Reynolds has a knack for finding the least interesting plot development, making that the center of the narrative for an interminably long stretch, and then following that by having a character show up to give the protagonist a detailed, after-the-fact account of events happening elsewhere that would have made a much more engaging focus for the story. This happens more than once in On the Steel Breeze, and it left me wondering if this book might have been the author's first, rather than his tenth or eleventh.

This is a real shame, because the Akinya family still has a lot of potential. But the series is consistently undermined not only by the problem mentioned above, but also by an excess of supporting characters having little purpose, constant repetition of the same limited information, and (by the end of the book) a moral incoherence that makes characters' reactions to plot developments seem completely bizarre and implausible. Yet as harsh as I might sound, I feel more disappointed than dismissive, because Reynolds does seem to be a talented writer in many respects. Enough so to make me think the flaws of this book should have been entirely avoidable.

**\*SPOILER WARNING\***

Some glaring examples:

- 1) Both Pedro and Noah are given very limited skills by comparison with the Akinyas, with the result that neither of them has much purpose in the story beyond dying at convenient moments. And for this very reason, neither death really has the impact I suspect it was intended to have.
- 2) The Tantors are a great concept that gets incredibly short-shrift. We meet a few members of one generation almost in passing, and then later their descendant, Dakota, who we are told is tremendously significant without being given actual evidence to justify the claim. Much more could have been done with

them here, especially given the bloat elsewhere in this overlong novel.

3) Why exactly was Chiku Red necessary? What vital part did she play that couldn't have been handled by someone else or simply left out entirely?

4) Given the number of pages devoted to the visits to Venus and to the Akinya estate, they both felt, in the end, much less important to the novel than they could have been. Neither was much more than an excuse for a very contrived action sequence that added little to the story (including Pedro's death for the reason given above).

5) The providers are untrustworthy. I got it the first time. Was it necessary to kill so many trees in making this point again and again?

6) Arachne kills millions of human beings in three holoships, but Chiku's primary concern is with the colonies of elephants on the other two ships. And in the discussion that follows, the death of so many people is dealt with by the characters in a manner that is, at best, perfunctory, while they explain away Chiku's complicity in a staggering crime as a simple matter of being a little too rushed to think things through. I think even Peter Singer would find this moral framing perverse, if not outright monstrous.

7) Given the vast (and unconvincing) power wielded by Arachne, Eunice felt utterly insignificant and inconsequential. When she (with the Tantors!) finally gets an opportunity to step forward and influence the future of Zanzibar, we see nothing of the dramatic events which ensue. Instead the narrative devotes page after page to Chiku doing effectively nothing--and then gives us a dull account after the fact of what could have been an exciting political confrontation played out across a massive holoship.

\* SPOILERS END\*

I put this book down with the same nagging feeling I had with *Blue Remembered Earth*. There are things here to like, and evidence of real talent, but all the potential promised by *On the Steel Breeze* is undermined by inexplicable authorial choices. I wish I had some reason to try book three, but there's just not enough here to justify it.

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## **Cara says**

Brilliant, rivetting read! I have not enjoyed a(n Alastair Reynolds) book this much since *Pushing Ice*. The thrill of each page turn took me back to Reynolds' *Revelation Space* days. Just when I thought I might end a chapter and give it a rest for the night, the last couple of paragraphs compelled me to continue. Couldn't put the book down, so much so, that on the last day I ploughed through it during my classes (lecture notes be damned)!

## **SPOILERS AHEAD**

*On the Steel Breeze* surpasses its predecessor and hints at very exciting developments to come in the third book. I loved the introduction to the new generation of characters and references to the old (I was quite upset to read of Geoffrey's passing, but thrilled to be introduced to the artelect "Eunice"). I have grown very fond of Chiku Green and can hardly contain my anticipation of the conclusion to *Poseidon's Children*.

I felt that there was less intrigue in Book 2 and it was much more predictable than many of Reynolds' other novels, but I enjoyed a return to the exploration of the organic vs machine intelligence. I especially liked the idea of a 'lesser', infant machine-substrate consciousness (Arachne) having to deal with a much more ancient

and powerful machine-substrate consciousness (the Watchkeepers). I was also surprised by Travertine's genderless pronouns (and I kind of want to ask Reynolds if he's been reading Tumblr SJW blogs or Livejournal's FanFiction Rants).

The only criticism I have of the book is that there seemed to be too many fortuitous events that transpired to help the main characters, more so than in *Blue Remembered Earth* (or any Reynolds' novel for that matter). There was very little character development but that was at the expense of the story so it isn't really a criticism (there is always a mysteriousness about Reynolds' characters that I enjoy). I also didn't care for the quasi-cliffhanger ending (but only because I'm impatient for the conclusion).

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## **Gerhard says**

This semi-direct sequel to *Blue Remembered Earth* is problematic, mainly because it is two novels in one:

The first is an account of the rise of artificial intelligence on Earth to produce an egalitarian society akin to Iain Banks's *Culture*. Known as the Mechanism, this all-knowing, all-seeing presence, however, becomes 'corrupted', which leads to an inevitable stand-off between humans and machines.

The second is about humanity's first expedition to an Earth-analogue planet in a caravan of generation starships. Called Crucible, the habitable planet is also home to a mysterious alien structure called the Mandala.

The two narrative strands are combined when the expedition discovers that the Mechanism has been 'lying' about conditions on Crucible, leading to a desperate attempt to not only find out what is going on, but to subvert the intentions of the Mechanism.

The main viewpoint character is Chiku Akinya, of the famous Akinya clan (her mother was Sunday Akinya; you can read OTSB as a standalone novel, but won't get all the references to the clan history).

Chiku is actually three characters, as she has had herself cloned: one is on the Crucible expedition, another is in the solar system, and the third embarked on an attempt to discover the lost spaceship of Eunice Akinya. The trick here is that all three essentially share one consciousness. I found the first transition between the Crucible Chiku and solar system Chiku to be quite jarring, but one does get used to the shifting point of view as the novel progresses.

I suspect Reynolds decided on this triple viewpoint approach as he is quite rigorous about his science: no wondrous *Star Trek* warp drive to subvert the speed of light (apart from Post Chibusa Physics, of course); this means quite a big chunk of the narrative is spent explaining the implications of relativity - not exactly the most gripping subject matter. Combined with the often heavy-handed philosophising about human vs. machine culture, this makes for a curiously stodgy narrative.

Reynolds also makes some fatal authorial decisions. Towards the end, there is a wonderful scene where Eunice Akinya leads a rebellion on the holoship Zanzibar, at the head of a herd of augmented elephants. Elephants on a starship, how cool is that!

Except Chiku only learns about this sequence of events when she is on Crucible, fighting the Mechanism, and taps into a feed from Zanzibar to find out what is going on with the caravan. Obviously Reynolds was



faced with a bit of a dilemma: focus on the Crucible landing and the Mechanism struggle, or the story of the holoships, but not both, or he would have ended up with a rather unwieldy novel.

He should have gone with the elephants.

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### **Robert says**

I would suggest reading BLUE REMEMBERED EARTH first, not necessary, but it adds so much to the depth of story, making ON THE STEEL BREEZE a wonderful experience, beginning to end. Alastair knows how to end his stories and have me craving his next work.

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### **Jason says**

4 Stars

On the Steel Breeze (OtSB), book two in the Poseidon's Children series by Alastair Reynolds is a tremendous work of science fiction and a real page turner. It does not have the technical specs of the first book Blue Remembered Earth, nor does it have as much character development in it. It also comes up short from the first in regards to the depth and complexity of the plot and story. That being said, OtSB is a much better page turner and maybe even more enjoyable of a read as it is an easy page turner.

In On the Steel Breeze, Reynolds really centers on the machine versus the living plot line. He delves deep into the philosophy, the science, and even the feelings behind sentience. Arachne near and Arachne far as well as our artificial heroine Eunice Akinya are great counterpoints to our three Chiku's and the Mermen. I love how the maiden voyage for humans reaching out to our nearest "like" star is preempted by a hostile takeover and voyage of a machine intelligence.

Reynolds mixes in doses of cool science but this series is on a much more accessible level than his brilliant hard science series of Revelation Space. He throws in a great futuristic political culture and environment. He explores dynamic space environments on planets and in the interstellar space. He creates a group of characters that are easy to identify with and to empathize with.

If you have read the first book, then this is a must read for you. If you have any love for the science fiction then you must put Alastair Reynolds at the top of your must read list. I really had fun reading this one and cannot wait to see where it goes next...

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### **Lori says**

A very enjoyable read! I've dithered about giving this 3 or 4 stars, and realized the difference between the 2 is a 4 makes me ponder "deep" stuff, while a 3 very much engrosses me but when I'm done reading, it's out of mind.

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**Bcvs says**

I couldn't put the book down but once I did, I didn't want to pick it up again because it made me feel uncomfortable. It was a feeling of wrongness. Of desolation and futility.

An odd one.

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