



The Companions

Sheri S. Tepper

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Humankind has arrived on Moss to discover if any intelligent native life exists there, and to assess the planet, recently discovered by the Derac, a nomadic space-faring race, for development - and profit. Multi-coloured shapes of dancing light have been spotted; strange sounds are heard in the night; the researchers name them the Mossen and send for a linquist to ascertain if it is evidence of intelligent life. Jewel Delis has accompanied her half-brother Paul to this verdant paradise. Her task is to help Paul decipher the strange language of the Mossen - but she has a secret mission too. A new law on Earth means the imminent massacre of all beasts great and small, so Jewel must discover if Moss holds the promise of sanctuary for the doomed animals - once humankind's beloved companions. Time is running out for Jewel's creatures, but it might be running out for Humanity too: the Planet Moss, itself a living entity, is not sure it cares for any of the species currently living on its surface.

The Companions Details

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From Reader Review The Companions for online ebook

Amanda says

[Humans turning into dogs, and then back again, at will? That's not science, no matter how many surgeries you undergo. (hide spoiler)]

Joseph Carrabis says

There can be little doubt that Sheri Tepper did lots of research and world building. Lots of it. Unfortunately, she put all of it in the first two-thirds of the book. By the time I got to the actual story, I could've cared less.

Philip Chaston says

A green feminist tract: another mirror of the present masquerading as speculative fiction and transparently illiberal in its conclusions: that the bad part of humanity (warlike, pack creatures, alpha males) was genetically engineered and the good part (co-operative, preserve the planet etc) is the baseline. Whatever the political orientation, racialist or feminist, such deterministic stories dumb down the human.

Kerri Northey says

Complex aliens, political struggle and dysfunctional interpersonal relationships make this by far the best Tepper novel I have read. In places the depiction of alien species and ecologies is equal to the work of David Brin. Unfortunately the end is somewhat rushed and the author reverts to the heavy handed morality tale present in so much of the rest of her work.

Stevevis says

Companions is the Sherri S. Tepper book which made me decide that she was a genius and is now my most favorite author of all time. It's a very complex book with several planets and many different species, from sentient dogs with human slaves to a living moss. The story combines feminist ideals with ecological concerns and a desperate attempt to transcend cultural differences as well as languages expressed in music and scent in order to save the universe.

SHERI S. TEPPER-- Author of many books including these I have read and recommend: After Long Silence, The Awakeners, Beauty, Companions, The Family Tree, The Fresco, The Gate to Women's Country, Gibbon's Decline and Fall, Grass, Plague of Angels, Raising the Stones, Shadow's End, Sideshow, Singer From the Sea, Six Moon Dance, True Game, and The Visitor. All of Tepper's books have strong

female characters, ecological plot twists and complicated storylines in which many characters must struggle with political, religious, and other restrictive cultural norms to reach the outcome of the story. Although Tepper's plots are often complicated and feature many characters some of whom are quite alien, she manages to make the stories easy to follow. Her detractors claim that she is too preachy in pushing her feminist and ecological values.

ala says

This book might have worked if it had been expanded into a series of 4 or more novels of the same length. As it stands, Tepper bit off more than she could chew, or at least relate convincingly in one book. Too bad, because it started off with promise, and I was hooked for the first 300 pages. However by the end the relationships ended up falling flat, failing to probe much psychology or show growth. All alien species: bugs, tentacled, lizard, whatever acted some variation of human. The war element, supposedly planned over generations of bug-alien lives ("invented in the minds of the ancestors") was derailed when a lizard alien daddy coincidentally observed what happened to his female offspring. That easy? Really? After thousands of years of planning? Why now? Too convenient...

Other things that bugged me:

The dogs -- I was all for them until they started acting like humans too. They leave their trainers because they are told that they are superior beings deserving of more honor. Really? Doesn't sound like the tail-wagging, unconditionally loving, slobbery thing I have...

The world -- was... also human! Faithfully guarding the entrance to the "special time-warp paradise thingy" (which is never explained adequately, in my mind), wiping out disrespectful merchant families if provoked...

The willogs -- tree creatures that grow themselves eyes and ears and write poetry? I was a fan of Treebeard, but in a scifi novel I'd like some explanation of how cognizance is formed -- wood brain? leaf brain? moss brain? something, please.

Jewel and her brother Paul -- we are told he traumatizes her and indeed he seems like an egomaniac, semi-sadistic jerk, but no good explanation for why other than that his mommy was too. Jewel sticks with him because he takes her on trips off-world and his apartment is nicer. But why does he need her--because she does his laundry? Don't they have robots or something for that in the future? Anyway, the whole thing seemed a missed opportunity for probing dysfunctional brother-sister relationships, need/abandonment issues, whatever. Something to make the characters deal with something and grow.

Jewel and Wit -- Though repeatedly being told they never really loved one another and didn't have much in common, they remain obsessed with one another for years (even though Wit disappears early on). Why? Because their smell is "imprinted" on one another. But no worry, there's a cure for that -- wash away the imprinting. At least give me a relationship that I could have cared about for a few hundred pages, if the solution was going to be Jewel taking a bath.

Oh and did I mention that all the aliens act human? Sure there are the zen monks that have tentacles, the neanderthals that are reptilian, the crusaders that are spiders -- but nothing truly alien worthy of Card or Leguine or even Tepper herself in Grass. At least the evil alien zhar shape-shifters (spooky) could have been scary. But they act so, wait for it... human! Don't inspire much shock or awe.

Things I liked:

The idea of smell used as a language is cool. Moss had potential for being an interesting planet. Ecological themes -- interesting idea about what might happen on earth with extreme overpopulation.

To wrap up, too many elements were introduced for the author to probe any element with insight. The ending is rushed, with improbable, deus ex machina saves the day plot developments. I give it two stars instead of one because: 1)writing/language isn't awful 2)Jewel character might have been interesting if given a chance 3)first 300 pages had promise -- too bad it went downhill...

Alexandra says

I can't begin to say how angry I am at the blurb of this book. It doesn't even begin to hint at how awesome and wide-ranging and epic it is. Without prior knowledge that Tepper is amazing (which I knew from reading *Beauty*), I would have had zero reason to expect this to be at all something I would like.

The blurb tells you that humans have arrived at Moss to see if there's intelligent life - which is true; that Jewel is accompanying her half-brother "to help Paul decipher the strange language of the Mossen" is not true, since she's no linguist, and that "she has a secret mission too" is only half-true, since it's not exactly an official thing that she's doing. "A new law on Earth means the imminent massacre of all beasts great and small" is strictly speaking true, but it suggests that there are still many such creatures on Earth which is simply not what we are shown - almost all non-human creatures have long since been got rid of. And that "the Planet Moss, itself a living entity, is not sure it cares for any of the species currently living on its surface" is I guess kind of true but doesn't give any indication of the complexity of what's going on. And I certainly couldn't write the blurb, but I'm not paid to do so.

So what should it have said? Well, clearly humanity have space travel, but personally I think it would have been good to include the fact that humanity is part of a vast interplanetary network involving dozens of different species, and in fact there's a hugely important narrative thread that involves several different species manoeuvring around one another for dominance in ways that are depressingly familiar. That puts quite a different spin on the narrative than simply "humans are exploring new planets!!"

As well, like in *Beauty*, Tepper includes a significant and fairly blunt environmental message. Earth is basically nothing but enormous and depressing tower blocks; people get around wearing veils and robes so they don't get in the faces of all the strangers they have to share very little space with; the oceans are nothing but algae farms, sewers, and oxygen farms. This is clearly shown to be a less than ideal way of living, and at least some of the aliens are shown to be disapproving of humans because of the way they treat their planet and other creatures.

Tepper is also making other political, philosophical statements. One character says, upon revelation that they have a faster-than-expected communication method and why haven't they always used it: "Because time spent is part of living ... Slowness, ripening; slowness, dancing; happiness spent in doing, smelling, understanding. If everything is all the time instantaneous, prompt and sudden, then no one is having any time to enjoy! Life becomes a plethora, a glut, a surfeit of instantaneous amusements barely leavening the job, the task, the thing to get through somehow that life becomes. Who would live a do this, do that, right now, hurry up, finish, all the time finish? Such life no peace! It is a disease." (434)
Take that, modern life.

And while the politics are important and not exactly subtle, this is also not only a polemic but a deeply riveting story about Jewel - who has had one deeply unpleasant childhood and whose relationship with her half-brother is nowhere near as congenial as the blurb suggests, and found meaning in caring for the few remaining dogs on the planet, who must now be found alternative places to live. We get flashbacks to her childhood and therefore have a deeper understanding than might otherwise be possible; I really like that she is the narrator, and that she's reflecting on her own views and development. I love that Tepper gets around the awkward fact that she wants to include information from places that Jewel has zero contact with by saying, as Jewel, "oh yes, I found out about this later..." - it's transparent but it's also entirely gleeful and it works.

I loved this book and I love Tepper. I loved the gradual revelations about people and species and history, I loved that there was still some mystery at the end, I loved the politics and that it wasn't all entirely easy.

Nance Cedar says

Why are humans and dogs so close? What happens, if Earth gets too crowded for any creatures not human? Tepper involves numerous aliens and worlds to answer those questions. It left me sure that we need our pets.

Nic says

I imprinted young on Tepper's writing, and I enjoyed this book immensely, despite it containing substantial elements that are variously clunky, cringeworthy, and Problematic. It's second-wave feminist environmentalist science fiction, with everything that implies, both good and bad.

With an overly twisty plot, some schadenfreude at the expense of the defeated villains that is nasty even by Tepper's standards, and all the black-and-white morality of late Tepper, it lacks the intellectual and emotional power of something like *Grass*, but I'm glad I read it, anyway.

Katherine says

This novel really needed a good editor. It's about Jewel solving the mystery of her husband's disappearance - so many pages devoted to her escaping for her evil mother-in-law's machinations. It's about inter-species diplomacy and averting war? It's about the arkivists' saving species from extinction on earth and battling those that would see all non-humans expelled from the planet. No, it's about crab people and scent creatures and moss demons. And what are concs, are they simple as they appear to be or more sinister? And what happened to that race of creatures that could shape shift?

I stayed with it on the strength of talking dogs, and the idea that dogs domesticated early humans so they would be provided food and shelter. Up in the end, all o the relationships kinda fizzle out and all the enormous problems just sort of go away.

Kris Sellgren says

Sheri Tepper considers the politics of trashing a planetary environment. In this future, all non-sentient animals are banished from Earth as requiring too many resources (air, water, food) -- a heart-wrenching threat for us animal-lovers. But humans are just one of many sentient species in the Galaxy, and Earth is just one planet. The villains were too villainous, however, without shades of gray. Also, too many dogs, not enough cats.

V. Briceland says

Those who dismiss Sheri S. Tepper's books as too strident in their feminist and ecological concerns need only take a look at the 2012 U.S. Republican presidential campaign for retort. It provides almost too many examples of the ways in male public discourse at the very highest levels that women—and their reproductive systems—are reduced to mere vessels, sluts, and handmaidens, almost as extremely as they are in Tepper's dystopian *Gibbon's Decline and Fall*. That Tepper always has axes to grind in her novels should not lead anyone instantly to dismiss her. They're valid axes.

That said, *The Companions* is one of the few Tepper novels I never bothered to re-read after its initial release. When I picked it up again recently with no clear recollection of the plot, I was only a few pages in when I remembered dismissing it as "Tepper's dogs-in-space novel", in 2003. And yeah. It does have dogs in space.

What I didn't notice the first time around, however, was how beautifully-written huge chunks of the novel actually are, and how rich the world-building, and how complex the linguistic systems that Tepper explores. The primary story of Jewel Delis and the dogs she's attempting to save is both affecting and sweet, and had me sniffling back tears by the book's end.

True, a lot of the book's climax seems accomplished by having the main characters explicate a heck of a lot of material, and sometimes the book's premise seems almost too richly elaborate. But there's force and sheer will powering the novel's plot, colored as always by both Tepper's intertwined fatalism and humanism.

Kristin Lundgren says

This is another winner by the engrossing Sheri Tepper. As with her other books it is very different from each other she has written, and different from mainstream SF. In this one, about 700 years from now, the Earth has been stripped of most vegetation and animals, and people live in 100 sq mile "urbs", consisted of ten tower blocks each way. There are people who live down near the bottom of these 200 story towers, and those who live at the top, in penthouses that were in trust for their families use. The rest are occupied by the number of people who need the space and no more. They are connected by a series of tubes that go up the buildings and down and sideways, and over to the next. Pets are not allowed, and are kept either in the penthouses, or on exempt 40 acre estates that have been turned into preservationist lands. There is a movement to ban all animal life on earth as it is taking up too much air, water and food, and so a band of humans, who appreciate the love of companion animals, have gotten together, loosely spread apart, and in secrecy, established breeding programs, buying up small, unwanted planets, seeding them with vegetation if needed, terraforming, or for animals like dogs, small prey, so that eventually all the animals can be released

onto these planets. But the announcement of imminent extermination sends the arkists into a flurry and they take off for the planets, ready to begin new lives with their animals.

Jewel Delis works with dogs, having discovered a group that has been breeding a group of dogs to be bigger, faster, and stronger and healthier than their forebears, more like the dogs of old. Her brother Paul, a self-absorbed, childish but brilliant linguist, takes her on his trips to other worlds to study language and she uses her time to look at alien cultures, and try to learn. Eventually she chooses to accompany him on a voyage to Moss, one of three allied planets. She brings the dogs with her, as well as their trainers, since the edict has gone out and they must be moved. When they arrive at the planet, it seems as if there are no animals, birds, and no "intelligent" life, although that is still being disputed by scientists sent there to discover if there was, since different rules would govern the outcome.

What follows is a marvelous, heart-tugging look at what animals mean to humans, the bonds they face; what constitutes intelligent life; and what it means to understand the world you live in. Filled with aliens both good and bad, wars, and some marvelous new life forms, it is a joy to read. Read once before in 2007.

Tracy says

I just finished reading this book. I decided last summer that it would be fun to read a Tepper novel a year, and this one was June 2008's selection.

I found The Companions more metaphorical than many of Tepper's other novels. In this science fiction novel...

er, only the setting is science fiction. It's actually a mystery...

er, well, it's not only a mystery and it's certainly not a procedural!

The ideology is very feminist

but it's style is epic!

Anyway! You get the idea - Tepper takes on a lot! It's pretty admirable, even if sometimes, it seems like she gets an idea and just runs with it!

In any case, this time, Tepper takes on our treatment of animals. Pets. The environment.

Here, in Earth in the distant future, the world is completely covered by humans and the immense skyscrapers where they live. There is no room for anyone, and a group of fanatics has arisen that wants to kill all animals. Most animals are gone.

The Tepper heroine this time is a woman who decides to help dogs survive in this terrible world. She becomes involved with a group of people who have power, but only if they keep their goals hidden from the fanatics. What they are doing is illegal but moral.

Meanwhile, and there are a lot of meanwhiles in this epic novel, the heroine also has access to other worlds. Her half-brother is a great translator, and it appears that some being can speak on a fairly new world. The heroine goes with her half-brother and a number of dogs in order to -- supposedly -- simply help translate. However, there's always more than that going on in a Tepper novel, and this one couldn't ever be the exception.

I enjoyed contemplating the status of pets. Have we enslaved dogs...or have they enslaved us? The epic nature of the novel - where more and more beings and more and more plotlines, and more and more secrets! arise makes for a long book, but I found it ultimately satisfying.

Leo says

So I finished reading this book, really great book - 1st, each page had on average 1 word which I didn't know, which was NOT a hinderance at all - I'm jsut saying, there are some really cool words in it. I will make a list of "hard words" some other time.

The book has a Dune scent to it - that is, anyone who liked Frank Herbert's Dune series - will reckognize some very distant similiarities regarding the complexities of the worlds involved in the story.

In a way it reminded me a lof of dune's well though-out plot and what not, I really liked this aspect - and although it was paced rather slowly at some chapters, the overall story-telling was supreme, and I just kept on reading really loving it.

Basically, earth + some years over, there's space exploration, other races, but mainly - most animals are extinct from earth, and the story is about a sexy girl trying to preserve, amongst other preserving people, the "fauna" of earth.

But that's pretty much liek saying that dune is about the eco-system of the world arakis, ya know? True, it's kinda about it, but it's always like a "super plot" and there are TONS of other stuff going on which are really interesting and shit.

Anyway, it's a long read, kinda, but really worth it - it starts out as sci-fi, you know - set in the future, with technology advancements and shit like that - BUT, there are elements of fantasy all over the place.

A really good merger if ya ask me :).

Peace.

Susan says

Made it about halfway through. Awfully bleak and constant stress about the dogs. No, thanks.

Sharon Grutsch says

Sheri S Tepper is my favorite sci-fi author. Even with the social and political bend. She still tells a wonderful story. And this one along with Grass are my favorites of hers. I wish I could get my hands on her earlier work. I've heard they don't have the same political tone as the newer novels.

Nicholas Bollaert says

I read this on someone's recommendation, and I will admit I was slightly biased against Tepper after being traumatized by The Gate to Women's Country. While I found this story engaging and interesting, I believe it suffered from the "10 pounds of crap in a 5 pound bag" problem.

The story is all over the map and spans multiple worlds, races, ideas, etc. and gets somewhat disjointed. About halfway through I wondered how the hell does this story get wrapped up in one book? She just keeps adding more and more like it is a Game of Thrones with spaceships!

The answer, sans spoilers, is Deus Ex Machina :-p

That said, there are some interesting ideas and some emotionally moving scenes that made the read worthwhile.

Mike says

This is Tepper's Treasure Hunt book. She borrows from other authors and puts it all together in a book that doesn't quite fail and doesn't quite succeed.

First, who does she borrow from? Well, she definitely follows the David Brin "Uplift" concept for the main underpinning of the book. Brin does a much better job of building the concept of alien races planting, growing and tending younger races as they reach for the stars. Tepper's races are less developed than Brin's, but she definitely borrowed the idea from him.

The concept of a planet being "alive" is explored in many other books, but most notably in the later Asimov-inspired "Foundation" books. His planets however, are not as passive and inviting as Moss and perhaps Tepper has improved on his idea. Genetic engineering and application of same to other races and beings is taken directly from Niven's "Ringworld" series and he does a better writing job with the science of it than Tepper does. So much more could have been done by Tepper in this regard.

Other lesser homages are given to Tolkien (delightful tree-like people), Orson Scott Card (animals turning the tables on humans) and Joan Vinge (use of hallucinogens to escape the overcrowding and chaos of Earth). Of course, no author is completely original, so these things are not slams.

My only problem with Tepper (always) is that she becomes "preachy" when she should be telling a story. She is a phenomenal story-teller (see "Grass" and "Beauty") and has haunting female characters ("Gate to Women's Country" and "Northshore/Southshore"). If she spent more time on those than the constant return to environmental issues and population control, it would come off better. Her long expositions which drip of sermonic elements are hard to read at times. Tolkien once warned C.S. Lewis of this in one of their many conflicts as part of the Inklings. He suggested that Lewis write a good story and leave the sermon in the details of the story instead of the exposition. "Leave the author out of the story" were Tolkien's words.

Tepper, leave yourself out of the story...at least, hide behind a tree while doing it. Or some grass. Perhaps some moss even.

Althea Ann says

A mature and well-crafted work.

I personally find the sci-fi scenario where humans are squished together in huge building complexes that they rarely leave, and all other lifeforms have been forced into extinction due to humanity's lack of caring or

active malevolence, to be truly terrifying, as it is all too likely that that is truly the direction that we are heading in.

I thought Tepper's point that a race that cannot co-exist in its natural environment is unlikely to be able to co-exist with itself is also relevant....

I find it incomprehensible that the forces behind environmental destruction are often those also touting Christianity as a prerequisite for civilisation...

If an all-knowing, benevolent god created all life on this earth, then is not wantonly destroying that life the worst blasphemy imaginable? An insult to god's creation?

But - that's what they're doing, and I liked how she linked the anti-environmentalists to far-right religious groups in her theoretical IGY-HFO group.

HOWEVER

(view spoiler)

Also, I think that she didn't really do enough with the discussion of genetic tampering that was brought up with the use of Zhaar technology. Is it ethical to tamper with a creature's natural way of existence to "improve" it? Is it really "saving" the species? This is a complex and relevant issue, and it was mostly avoided.

Making the Simusi so wholeheartedly and irrevocably evil, after linking them with the lovable and benign dogs, also created some oddities in the plot, I thought. It seemed that Tepper couldn't make up her mind whether "pets" are enslaved or not. Sometimes it seemed like she was arguing FOR having domestic animals, with all the old saws about friendship between species, and maybe the dogs think they've domesticated us - then in the scenes with the Simusi and their human slaves, the parallels are drawn (very heavy-handedly) to indicate that we have terribly enslaved domestic animals.... I was like, say what you want, but make up your mind!
