

Into the Known Universe: A Cosmic Love Story, Kinda

James R.D. Hilton

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Into the Known Universe is a rollicking science fiction farce that takes on arbitrary social restrictions with aplomb.

An office worker's regimented life takes a series of hair-raising turns in James R. D. Hilton's science fiction novel *Into the Known Universe*.

GaliCor owns all that there is to be owned and keeps it all under tight control—and that's just the way Stuart likes it. He is the most loyal kind of corporate drone. But even loyalty can't save him from being sent on a suicide mission for his terrifying boss. When he fails to complete the mission, his life and private office are imperiled. Thus, Stuart travels far beyond his corporate bubble with no protection beyond his trusty stapler and the firm belief that GaliCor will always give him what he needs.

Stuart, for whom the mere thought of having an imagination inspires horror, is hilarious in his blandness. He is the polar opposite of the "cargo" he has been ordered to retrieve: wild and fearless Janna, an alleged corporate spy. Their life on the run has an inauspicious beginning as each tries to kill the other, but in time they form a touching bond based not only on their hazardous circumstances but on their genuine desire to see the other achieve their dreams.

Stuart and Janna bounce from one improbable event to another, surviving via pure luck and their increasing affection for each other. The circumstances they face—such as being conscripted into an endless war against giant crabs and failing to be digested by an asteroid worm—are as menacing as they are entertaining and ludicrous. Their adventures ably demonstrate just how difficult it is to escape abusive situations when they are so normalized and familiar that they seem comforting.

Through outlandish scenarios and over-the-top characters—the chilling fate of GaliCor's unfortunate public relations officer is memorable—the story mocks a variety of contemporary concerns, including capitalism, war, and technology. Profit and pride are allowed free rein to the detriment of everyone else, even those who go to the most extreme lengths to protect those very concepts. However, the true role played by the rebellious Boycottists, who are at times implied to be fictional and at other times are shown to be very real, is vague, and a racial stereotype is used as an off-putting source of "humor" in one brief scene.

Reaching a jarring and grim conclusion, *Into the Known Universe* is a rollicking science fiction farce in which two human beings react in very different ways to the chance to break out of their socially prescribed cages.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (April 30, 2024)

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