



Juno's Song

Michael Kelley

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In the spirited novel Juno's Song, a writer awaiting an alien arrival overcomes his fear of death.

Electrified and soulful, Michael Kelley's novel *Juno's Song* includes Buddhist meditations on death amid possible extraterrestrial annihilation.

In 2036, sixtysomething novelist Sean hides in a remote watchtower on the Irish coast. His two children are in college and his wife has disappeared and is presumed dead; he does not anticipate many more adventures for himself. He has only his android butler, Alfred, for company.

As Sean works on his third novel, he wonders if Dick, the disciple of the villainous Russian guru he killed, will succeed in exacting his revenge. And on top of Sean's personal anxieties are global ones: aliens with uncertain intentions are planning a visit to Earth in September, and experts say there's a fifty-fifty chance that this will result in accidental (or intentional) human extinction.

Global panic about the alien arrival takes the place of climate anxiety in this world. Some, like Sean's friend Molly (a Pulitzer Prize-winning author), are hopeful about the upcoming visit; others, like Sean's guru Juno, put people's fears into context, noting that death is an illusion of the ego.

Flush with science-fiction concepts and spiritual stakes, this is a story of dizzying—sometimes bewildering—proportions. Sean pursues his ultimate goal of self-actualization via ayahuasca trip detours and hologram calls in metaverse spaces; meanwhile, scheming Russian gurus attempt to upload everyone's consciousness into a virtual hivemind. And the novel that Sean is working on is itself titled *Juno's Song*, though there's scant context to explain this meta detail. All considered, there's a lot to keep track of. Still, the book's various concepts are well buoyed by the self-aware, alliterative prose, which includes vibrant and charming imagery—as when Sean enters a virtual world by way of a neuralink hidden in a blue fez and swim goggles.

In the end, Sean's fear of death centers all, bringing the technology-heavy, fantastical story down to earth. Having lived a dangerous and spiritual life, he knows that his demise could as easily come in the form of revenge as via an alien attack. He is grateful to have the tools and relationships to explore the possibility of his end and prepare. His anxiety is neither affirmed nor negated. As he prepares to embrace the inevitable, his basic humanity becomes the book's most irresistible draw.

Wild, imaginative, and fantastical, the novel *Juno's Song* intertwines a first-contact storyline with the most basic human feeling: the fear of death.

BEN LINDER (March 11, 2024)

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