



Skinship

James Reich

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In James Reich's science fiction novel *Skinship*, a generation ship containing the last human beings endures a ponderous journey whilst combating a mutiny.

Applewhite is the first navigator of *The Charcot*, a living ship carrying the last people from dying Earth. His job is to handle the improbable nature of space travel while keeping the ship pointed in the right direction. This job is made near impossible by a mutiny championed by the Printers, the secretive sect responsible for the production of physical goods.

The Printers want to redirect the ship toward a more hostile planet. Countering the mutiny is Archivist Monamy, a nonhuman keeper of collective human memories. Monamy keeps Applewhite's stored consciousness safe every time the crew turns on him. The taut cat-and-mouse chase builds to a harrowing moment when the crew must decide to which planet *The Charcot* will divert.

Life aboard the skinship—named for the exotic material that contains and expands it during the travels—is shown through the eyes of Monamy, Applewhite, and a handful of human passengers. The nonhuman crew are responsible for the humans but are detached from their charges by their very nature, resulting in an unsettling relationship. The prose becomes almost eerie in its depictions of the inhuman crew and their ultimate goal of “a planet overgrown with white plastic, the inhabitants of the skinship drowning, reaching from the wax-like figurines from Dante, trapped in the apocalypse of artifice.” It is intimate, too, as when it focuses on Applewhite or Monamy's thoughts to explain the surreal ship setting, the Printers, and to consider whether humans can thrive among the stars.

Skinship combines body horror with ecological horror as human beings attempt to survive in an unforgiving universe aboard an ever-evolving ship crewed by automatons.

JOHN M. MURRAY (January / February 2025)

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