

Zen and the Art of Starship Maintenance and Other Stories

Tobias S. Buckell

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The stories of Tobias S. Buckell's *Zen and the Art of Starship Maintenance and Other Stories* explore relevant earthly topics in science fiction settings.

Fantasies are used to reflect on real atrocities, like the loss of collective memories and wanton losses of life, in these stories, which include premises like the mystery of a historian's murder and an alien suicide cover-up. In "Pale Blue Memories," a Black pilot questions his assumed enemies in order to thrive in a new world. Here and elsewhere, life in space is a chance for people to make better decisions than those that destroyed their home planets, such as resisting oppressors. In a few stories, crews make sacrifices to save stowaways—that is, to treat them better than crews are treated, in order to build nobler narratives. The impact of such decisions is magnified in space. In "Five Point Three Milligrams," a delivery's small volume stands between life and death for a new galactic colony.

In the Caribbean-evocative "The Mighty Slinger," a calypso band takes part in outer space cultural shifts, proving that "one small course adjustment at the start can change an entire orbit by the end of a journey." People command, rebuke, and connive against one another, becoming heroic as they face emergencies and never-seen-before items. And in stories that are more whimsical and inquisitive, robots call forth new definitions of friendship; AI reshape god images; aliens love cats. Author notes form a retrospective on the collection's overall message.

Funny, serious, charged, and innovative, the short stories of *Zen and the Art of Starship Maintenance and Other Stories* take prophetic glimpses into future possibilities.

MARI CARLSON (March / April 2023)

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