

Close encounters of
the literary kind:
perception in "out of
all them bright star..."



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Many science fiction stories feature aliens, especially the interaction between humans and the extraterrestrials. These interactions range from one-on-one encounters to merely experiencing the aliens' culture from afar. No matter the nature of said encounter, the human nearly always leaves changed in some way. Usually this change occurs in how the human perceives the world and alters their personal paradigms. The short stories "Out of All Them Bright Stars", "Arena" and "The Star" all feature a narrator who encounters an alien or an alien race and walk away changed forever. This change due to such an otherworldly experience dramatizes how encountering something new and different can drastically alter how someone views the world and their personal morals and beliefs.

Nancy Kress' "Out of All Them Bright Stars" offers an extremely direct encounter between the narrator, Sally, and a visiting alien named John. When John comes to the diner Sally works at, his presence disturbs the environment and other workers. Yet, Sally immediately goes over to "it" and treats him like any other customer (Kress). While she is doing so, her boss, Charlie, comes over and harasses John, telling Sally, "You get him out of here...The government says I have to serve spics and niggers but it don't say I gotta serve him!" (Kress). Immediately after several government officials enter the diner and take John away, who, as he leaves, says, "I am sorry, Sally Gourley...I seldom have the chance to show our friendliness to an ordinary earth person. I make so little difference!" (Kress). The entire encounter rattles Sally, who spends the remainder of her night reflecting on the events and questioning her perception of the world and other people.

Before the encounter with John, Sally's view of the world is simplistic, where she labeled someone as one thing, such as "bully" for Charlie, and that was their only characteristic. Yet, her contact with John and the events that transpire broadens her perception, and she recognizes the complexity of people. Before John calls her an "ordinary earth person" Sally "never thought of [her]self as an ordinary earth person" before, meaning her world view was focused predominantly on herself, where she viewed herself as an individual rather than part of a collective, or, ordinary (Kress). Once she begins to recognize how similar she is to others, she starts to view everyone as people with lives and personalities as dynamic as her own. Sally notices that Charlie unconsciously refers to John as "he" rather than "it"—something that takes Sally a while to do (Kress). Through this small gesture, Sally realizes that in some ways Charlie is better than she is—even in his prejudice he still recognized and referred to the alien as a person rather than a sexless animal or object. No longer can Sally see Charlie merely as a bully and person to dislike, for she recognizes that who he is not defined entirely by his bully label, "He's a bully, but I want to look at him and see nothing else but a bully. Nothing else but that. That's all I want to see in Charlie" (Kress). This unveiling of the complexities and shades of gray of life angers Sally, "I'm furious...furious mad, as mad as I've ever been in my life", as she cannot return to her simpler, easier to understand, paradigm (Kress). She directs this anger at John, for their encounter is what sparks this sudden change in her life.

Arthur C. Clarke's short story 'The Star' features a similar paradigm shift, except with religion. While the narrator does not directly interact with

another race, he does stumble upon a vault filled with the archives of a race destroyed long ago by their star going supernova—encountering their culture and history. As the narrator explores more about the alien race whose culture he excavated, he starts to question his religion and ultimately comes across knowledge that rattles his entire belief system. Despite being initially steadfast in his faith, after discovering a vault filled with the history detailing “the warmth and beauty of a civilization that in many ways must have been superior to our own” the narrator begins to question what kind of god would allow the genocide of a race “in the full flower of its achievement” who “were not an evil people” (Clarke). Even with this questioning, it is not enough to make his faith falter, yet, when the narrator, an astrophysicist, calculates the exact date and range of the supernova, he has physical proof that shatters his reality: the famous star of Bethlehem was not an ethereal miracle, but rather the light of a star exploding and wiping out an entire civilization. Had the narrator not discovered and encountered the historical archives of the past alien people, he would likely have continued his life as a firm believer of his Jesuit faith, but by feeding his curiosity about the destruction of a race so similar to his own, “the ancient mystery was solved at last” and with it, his belief system completely changed forever.

Similarly, Frederic Brown’s “Arena” describes a more belligerent encounter between humanity and an alien race, resulting in the protagonist, Carson, being emotionally and physically scarred. While in a stalemate facing a battalion of enemy alien ships, Carson is whisked away into a closed off arena where a superior being dictates that they fight to the death, and the loser’s race will be completely annihilated. Initially, Carson opts for

diplomacy and peace, hoping to barter a treaty with the “ Outside”, “ Can we not have peace between us...Why cannot we agree to an eternal peace — your race to its galaxy, we to ours” (Brown). Once rejected, the gravity of the situation begins to weigh on Carson—he doesn’t want to be responsible for “ death to the entire race of one or the other” but has no other choice (Brown). Out of desperation to ensure the survival of the human race and himself, Carson tosses aside his morals and ideas for peace, and brutally kills his opposition. He returns to his previous position, welcomed by his captain exclaiming, “ Come on in. The fight’s over. We’ve won!” (Brown). Only Carson knows what role he played and the sacrifices he had to make during his encounter with the alien race—his only souvenir being “ tiny, almost unnoticeable, perfectly healed scars” (Brown). Following his encounter with the now destroyed alien race, Carson is left with physical scars and emotional trauma accompanying the knowledge that he assisted in the genocide of an entire race.

All of these stories feature unique impacts resulting from encounters with alien races, all of which cause a paradigm shift in the protagonist. “ Arena” and “ Out of All Them Stars” feature direct interactions and resulting personal changes, while “ The Star” gives a more indirect example of how knowledge can lead to more than expected, resulting in a significant change in belief and perspective. The alien races in these stories represent new ideas and possibilities that threaten what is currently known and accepted as truth. Once encountered, the knowledge gained can entirely alter perspective and can never be unlearned, resulting in a permanent change.

Works Cited

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