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On a desperately overcrowded future Earth, crippled by climate change, the most unlikely hope is better than none. Governments turn to Big Science to provide them with the dreams that will keep the masses compliant. The Needle is one such dream, an installation where the most abstruse theoretical science is being tested: science that might make human travel to a habitable exoplanet distantly feasible.

When the Needle's director offers her underground compound as a training base, Kir is thrilled to be invited to join the team, even though she knows it's only because her brain is host to a quantum artificial intelligence called Altair.

But Altair knows something he can't tell.

Kir, like all humans, is programmed to ignore future dangers. Between the artificial blocks in his mind, and the blocks evolution has built into his host, how is he going to convince her the sky is falling?

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Proof of Concept Details

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From Reader Review Proof of Concept for online ebook

Michael Hicks says

30% in, and I have no idea what's going on. The narrative is all over the place, the dialogue is clunky, and the story just isn't capturing me. This is a short read, but I'm giving up after two chapters. Thanks to Tor for the NetGalley ARC, but this novella just isn't for me.

Rachel (Kalanadi) says

2.5 stars - This was a disappointment, honestly. Rushed, didn't establish the world or characters very well, and the ending came out of left field. I think this would have worked better as a novel, as there would have been more time to establish the world and set things up so that events felt truly shocking and meaningful. As it is, I was just kinda confused and stopped caring by the halfway point.

Sean Collins says

Tried to pack too much conceptually into a short amount of pages. It has the bones of intriguing dystopian future world building, and could even map out better visually via anthology like PKD's *Electric Dreams* / *Black Mirror*, but as a novella didn't work as well. It would be interesting to revisit as a full length novel that takes more time to effectively introduce the lingo and tech used.

Anna says

I've had this obscure novella by Gwyneth Jones on my to-read list for a few years and recently located a copy on eBay. I'm not generally a completist, but have read a good many of Jones' novels. Her *Bold as Love* series is one of my favourite visions of the future: a guardedly utopian Britain in which technological civilisation has largely collapsed and government is by attractive rockstars. I highly recommend it. Her other sci-fi tends to be intellectually interesting but isn't as emotionally compelling. That certainly holds for 'Proof of Concept', which contains some fascinating ideas while not doing a lot to develop the narrator. The setting is an overpopulated world of environmental collapse, in which the richest 1% are funding scientific efforts at interstellar space travel. Nothing hugely original there. The specific setting of the story is far more distinctive and intriguing: a massive underground cavern, in which scientists and reality TV stars are sealed off together for a year. The purpose of this is to enable experiments on the Needle, which may allow colonisation of a distant planet. Kir, the narrator, has an AI in her brain and is trying to work out what the heck is going on. This eventually becomes clear, although the twist was not hugely surprising. I preferred the creepiness that built up to the revelation, as the atmosphere in the cavern was compellingly peculiar. Gwyneth Jones has a specific knack for evoking caves and underground tunnels; she also did so in *Spirit: or, The Princess of Bois Dormant*. I have no further commentary to make as, despite some excellent world-building details, 'Proof of Concept' wasn't as memorable as I'd hoped.

Justine says

2.5 stars

One of those books I really want to like more than I actually did. I love the concept, the characters have great potential, and I like some of Jones' wordsmithing.

But...the concept was not as well explored as it could have been; the characters did not come alive and remained quite two dimensional; and the clever wordsmithing did not make up for the sort of confusing muddle of a story.

So I didn't hate it, but I could have given it a pass and not missed anything.

Tsana Dolichva says

Proof of Concept by Gwyneth Jones is a science fictional novella put out by Tor.com. I picked it up based on a recommendation from a friend, and the vague belief that maybe I'd like Gwyneth Jones more now that I was older.

Proof of Concept had some interesting ideas in it but they did not overall make up for certain less interesting aspects of the writing and story. To start off, I found the start difficult to follow. The actual opening scene was OK, as far as these things go, but the subsequent section which, more or less, explained the point of the story was hard to follow. Especially since I was tired when I was reading it. I actually ended up going back and rereading a section because I realised I had no idea what was going on. I will note, however, that further into the book things pick up a bit and I found myself more interested in returning to reading it than I was nearer to the start.

I mentioned giving this story a chance based on a recommendation. The reason I needed a friend's recommendation to give it a try is because the only other Gwyneth Jones book I've read is *Bold As Love*, back in my early teens. Back then, I picked that book up because it had a pretty cover (so pretty, more so in real life than online) but didn't enjoy it. I thought at the time it was because I was too young to get some of the references (true but not the whole issue) but reading *Proof of Concept* I noticed a few parallels in character choices, mostly of background characters that bothered me the same way. So I think I'm just not a fan of Gwyneth Jones's writing and probably never will be.

That said, the middle and end of *Proof of Concept* were interesting enough to have me turning pages for reasons beyond wanting to get it over with. The plot centres around an isolation mission, with people sealed into a large underground cavern on a not-spaceship. The idea is that the scientists will perform experiments in a giant Faraday cage (or something, the basis was wishy-washy with intention) and the other half of the inhabitants were something to do with the media. I may have missed something, but I think it was a reality TV kind of thing, to be released after they all came back from the mission. (See what I mean about being confused? I only really managed to get my head around the science half of the premise.) Unexpected stuff starts to happen though, making the plot more interesting and culminating in a satisfying ending. I should be clear that I found the ending satisfying because it fit with my headcannon, but others might find the degree of uncertainty frustrating.

I would recommend Proof of Concept to fans of hard SF who don't mind a significant character-driven component to their stories. On the other hand, I wouldn't recommend it to fans of character-driven stories. I liked the main character, who is also a host for a quantum computer, but I didn't feel that she was enough to save the story. Not that she was a bad choice of point of view character, just that we could have gotten to know her even more that we did. Personally, I don't think I'll bother picking up anything by Gwyneth Jones in the future, but this is a very subjective analysis and you definitely shouldn't let me put you off if you haven't given her a shot (and being a novella, Proof of Concept isn't a terrible way to sample her writing).

3 / 5 stars

You can read more of my reviews on my blog.

Liviu says

short novel that is packed with ideas and ends in a very interesting way begging more books set in the same universe; in a future earth on the verge of definitive catastrophe, the super rich want to flee it for pristine planets and the new physics ("information space") gives them a chance to do so if theoretical ideas about instantaneous translation can be put in practice; and so an experiment is funded in a deep cavern isolated from the rest of the earth; things happen though not quite as expected

while not an easy read and with lots of things crammed in (see blurb for more details), the short novel is excellent sf at the current cutting edge of the genre - especially in its social descriptions

Bridget Mckinney says

I found the amount of in-universe jargon used for worldbuilding was just about impenetrable. Your mileage may vary, but I prefer more actual story and less futuristic technobabble.

Lilyn G. | Sci-Fi & Scary says

Although it is only 176 (kindle) pages long, Proof of Concept feels like a novel length read. Not in the 'it's just slow and boring and feels like it's taking forever way' that one might assume, either. Instead, Gwyneth Jones does a great job of giving the reader so much story in a relatively short amount of pages. As soon as she establishes the setting, she's off and running. The pace is fast, the dialogue is good, and there's enough death to make a sci-fi & horror hound happy.

Gwyneth Jones explores several ideas within Proof of Concept. Some new, some not so much. How would a group of extroverts and a group of introverts get along if trapped in an isolated environment? What if our current evolution of media and popular opinions being the ruling ones continues the way it has been? Facts will give way to who has the most popular opinion. Her GAM (Global Audience Media) virtual media representative seems disturbingly likely if that's the case. Also, her take on the first hosted AI is definitely something to be considered. (There's more, of course, but you'll need to read it yourself.)

Proof of Concept does require your full attention. This is not a story you can breeze through. There were

paragraphs, especially in the beginning, that I had to read a few times when I had gotten distracted. It's not a book that gives you multiple paragraphs of text you need to have a science degree to understand, though. You just need to be able to wrap your brain around some large words and hefty ideas.

The end of Proof of Concept had me exclaiming in frustration. Then turning back to the beginning to see what in the world I missed. Sure enough, even though I'd read one paragraph like three times, I still managed to miss the clue that would have set me up for the ending. It was something that, in retrospect, should have been if not obvious than at least not a surprise.

Side note: I was happy to see the nod to Stephen Hawking.

Overall, Proof of Concept was a great read and I can't wait to check out more work from Gwyneth Jones!

Disclaimer: I received a copy of this book from the publisher for review consideration.

Lindsay says

A rare miss for the tor.com novella line.

Earth is a disaster, ravaged by over-population and climate change. Humanity lives in decaying hive arcologies amid the poisoned and dying planet. A project that promises to be the first steps towards getting the masses of humanity off-planet via FTL is started deep under the Earth in an abyssal cavity and some of mankind's best and brightest are recruited, including our view-point character, a young girl with a quantum computer embedded in her brain.

Sounds awesome, right?

Instead it's a tense and largely pointless exercise in dystopic information blackouts and oppressive population control while the real action all happens off camera. It's not even fiddling while Rome burns; the main character has no idea what's really going on and by the time the reveal happens the reader (at least *this* reader) just doesn't care.

Don't bother.

Carly says

For such a short novella, *Proof of Concept* is packed to bursting with plot threads, thematic questions, and worldbuilding elements. The story takes place in a fascinating dystopian world where pollution and global warming have pushed the world's population into giant "hives" separated by toxic "Dead Zones" where impoverished non-citizens try to eke out their short existences. MegaCorps have a chokehold on culture and politic, and even scientific endeavor must be turned into pop-culture and seek the approval of the GAM (Global Audience Mediation AI). The issue of extreme population control is hotly contested, as is the future of the human race. The quest for hyperspatial travel is seen as humanity's last hope. To get funding, the serious scientists have partnered with the popular reality-show stars to live underground in isolation to create a proof of concept for hyperspatial travel.

The story is as packed with genre elements as it is with worldbuilding concepts: a Vernesque journey to the center of the earth, a coming-of-age story, a romance, and even a strong tang of mystery. There are so many ideas packed into this little novella; I just wish there had been a little more room for character development. The timespan of the story is so wide, the cast so large, and the worldbuilding is so broad that I think in some ways, the characterization and driving urgency of the plot got a little lost. I never got a real sense of the different characters, and while I think this contributed to the shock factor of the ending, I found it also rather unsatisfying. In particular, and quite at odds with the rest of the story, I felt that the end expected me to unquestioningly accept the author's definition of "good guys" and "bad guys" and accept that the "good guys" can do absolutely terrible things and yet remain the "good guys" by definition alone... more time spent on characterization of both the faceless antagonists and the tarnished protagonists would have helped greatly, I think.

One of the most interesting themes in the story involves Kir, a child "saved" from the Dead Zones to act as the "wetware" for an artificial superintelligence quantum computer. Is she a captive or a willing participant? Is she deluding herself when she believes the woman who cut her head open and installed an ASI inside sees her as a person rather than a tool? Is the thing who shares her head a being with its own identity or merely a sophisticated calculator, and despite the supposed firewalls, what influence does it have on her behaviour?

"You're going to put a supercomputer in my head. It's going to share my brain. Okay, I can't stop you. But what if he goes wrong and starts *eating* me?"

Overall, *Proof of Concept* is itself an interesting proof of concept for a world and idea that I think fully deserves a longer novel. If you're looking for a fascinating little novella, *Proof of Concept* is worth a look.

~3.5

~~I received an advanced reader copy of this ebook through Netgalley from the publisher, Tor.com, in exchange for my honest review.~~

Cross-posted on BookLikes.

imyril says

I'm underwhelmed. I struggled to connect with this novella from the start; maybe I'm just overtired / jetlagged, but it felt chaotic. The twist was telegraphed early, but there seemed to be a lot of unnecessary contortion and obfuscation that reduced the focus on the personal drama and flattened the characters. It's not a bad book, but it just didn't work for me.

Full review (less whelmed the more I think about it)

Trike says

This review is going to have to be spoilerific so I can talk about this book.

SPOILERS AHEAD.

This has an interesting idea that is poorly realized.

The global ecosystem has pretty much collapsed, so some scientists convince the ultra-wealthy One Percent to build an underground lab to test some next-gen physics that will enable humanity to travel faster than light (apparently by teleporting via quantum entanglement).

The Needle, as it's called (because something something "needle in a haystack"), is the test bed for this FTL experiment. Except we find out at the end that it's all a scam. The geriatric scientists have sold the super-rich snake oil... I think. It's hard to tell, because the writing isn't very good or very clear.

Herein lies the problem with this story: there's precious little science in the science fiction, and Jones spends so much time focusing on the POV character's feelings that when she does the big reveal at the denouement it lands with a thud. All along I suspected the leaders of the science experiment had an ulterior motive, and when Kir (our POV character) suspects that they lied about the titular Proof of Concept, it's pretty clear something shady is up, but then Jones just sort of drops it.

So I was left wondering if that was a red herring, but it's just bad writing.

Kir is among the group because she has a quantum computer named Altair in her head, and they need said computer for, I don't know, computer-y things. Since we never get to see what Altair does, there's no opportunity for misdirection.

None of the characters are fully fleshed out, so speculating about their motivations is impossible. This isn't a factor of this being a very short book, because I've seen more fully-realized characters in stories which are ten pages long. Ultimately I was left with the feeling that I was watching episode 4 and 8 of an eight-episode BBC series, having no clue what was happening.

The one really interesting idea Jones had in this book occurs at the very beginning, where the main characters are being interviewed by a holographic avatar comprised of the gestalt of social media users asking questions. Now THAT is a cool idea, which is quickly dropped as they go down into their bunker. But I really like the idea of a program which can synthesize all the input of thousands or millions of people on Twitter or Twitch and coming up with coherent questions on the fly.

We've already seen various experimental chatbots attempt this over the past couple of years, some of them with hilariously predictable results, such as when Microsoft's Twitterbot became a racist, sexist asshole (in less than a day!) based on the things it was encountering online. (Check it out: <https://www.theverge.com/2016/3/24/11...>) But ironing out the kinks of that seems like an obvious endgame and a clever way to streamline what people are saying. Too bad Jones never develops it past those first couple of pages, because the implications in other aspects of society are enormous. Newsreaders and talking heads who reflect the aggregate of online attention? How awesome and terrifying would that be?

Anyway, the book ends with the murder of Kir's boyfriend, who was secretly recording the experiment. This is seen as a big deal, but I don't know why. It seems like half the global economy is focused on the exchange of ideas and entertainment online, so why not fund the Needle by selling subscriptions to the feed? A reality TV show where the ultimate aim is to teleport an entire installation across the galaxy? Where the conflict is like the Big Brother TV series with two completely disparate groups trying to work together to save humanity?

All of this feels like a gigantic missed opportunity.

Ultimately, the sham is revealed when they call an end to the experiment after the murder and natural deaths of the elderly scientists in charge, but for some reason it takes weeks for them to reconnect to the surface. This is a built-in issue, not any sort of problem with the connections or the surface... except that there IS a problem with the surface, in that the entire world has died while they were underground.

Which was the ultimate point of the whole thing. All this talk of quantum mechanics was just bullshit to get it financed.

Which also doesn't make any sense. Surely in the future there are just as many doomsday preppers among the richest people as there are today. (Yes, that's actually a thing, have a look: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/201...>) Many of the world's millionaires and billionaires have built survivalist camps complete with underground safe spaces, some of them converted mines or missile silos. And these guys are doing it on the *suspicion* that civilization is going to collapse. In Jones' future world, most of the Earth has already been utterly ruined, with massive dead zones all over the place. Of course there would already be places like the Needle.

Maybe the folks in charge were just trying to scam the rich into funding a bunker for average people, but that's not made clear, either. I would have bought into that idea. Problem is, there aren't enough people down there for it to be a viable ongoing situation. I just don't think Jones has thought this concept through enough.

Anyway, that's the gist. Now you can skip it. Go read *Wool Omnibus* by Hugh Howey instead. That's the better version of this idea.

Nikki says

Received to review via Netgalley; publication date 11th April 2017

I'm not sure if it's my reading comprehension or the book at fault, but I did have some trouble understanding the technology and political background to this. There's stuff which is obvious (overcrowding has forced people into hive-like cities, people want to go to nearby habitable planets) and then there's the science and the politics of funding the venture and... whatever all that means.

However, on the personal level it worked: Kir's connection with Margrethe, her difficult relationship with Bill, her half-a-relationship with the computer in her own head, Altair. The hothouse effect of the confined living space felt real, as did the consternation spreading through the group. The ending worked as well, though it felt a little rushed.

Overall, not the most effective of the Tor.com novellas, but that's a pretty high bar to try and clear. It was entertaining enough to keep me reading.

Originally reviewed for breathesbooks.com.

Irene Grumman says

"On a desperately overcrowded future Earth crippled by climate change, the most unlikely hope is better than none." (Back cover blurb) That hooked me into an intelligent, interesting novella whose heroine is a brilliant survivor with a strange companion. I'm delighted to discover this author and look forward to seeing her other stories.
