



The Sunborn

Gregory Benford

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Their historic mission to Mars made Julia and Victor the most famous astronauts of all time. Now, decades later, they are ordered by the Consortium to Pluto, where they will rendezvous with another starship led by the brilliant, arrogant Captain Shanna Axelrod. Here, on the frozen ammonia shore of Pluto's methane sea, Shanna has discovered intelligent creatures thriving in the -300 degree temperatures. But even as their findings shift from the amazing to the inconceivable, the two crews must overcome their own intense rivalry to work together. For the most remote reaches of the solar system are filled with unimaginable wonders...and countless forces that will crush all human life.

- The author's most recent hardcover for Aspect, *Beyond Infinity* (0-446-53059-X), was published in 3/04.

His previous Aspect novel, *The Martian Race*, was published in hardcover in 1999 and paperback in 2001, and has netted almost 50,000 combined copies. It was a Locus magazine Recommended Book of the Year.

- Aspect is publishing the six titles in Benford's classic Galactic Center series in new mass market editions: *In the Ocean of Night* (2/04), *Across the Sea of Suns* (3/04), *Great Sky River* (8/04), *Tides of Light* (9/04), *Furious Gulf* (2/05), and *Sailing Bright Eternity* (3/05).

- Gregory Benford is a professor of physics at the University of California at Irvine, and he is the recipient of two Nebula Awards, the United Nations Prize for Literature, and the 1995 Lord Prize for his contributions to science, among many other honors.

The Sunborn Details

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From Reader Review The Sunborn for online ebook

Angela says

Julia and Viktor, the first astronauts to land on Mars, are sent off to Pluto to investigate a number of strange phenomena. The solar system's coldest, most distant planet appears to be heating up and developing an atmosphere. Stranger still, another expedition has discovered life on Pluto, in an environment where it shouldn't exist. Benford has always been fascinated by the possibilities inherent in extraterrestrial life, and he takes advantage of his own scientific specialty, plasma physics, to create some extraordinary creatures. The competently constructed plot details the unraveling of a series of mysteries via the application of scientific method spiced with credible intuitive leaps. What fails to satisfy, however, are the characters. Julia seems too perfect, while her husband, Viktor, is little more than a nice guy with a funny accent. The second exploratory ship's captain, the daughter of the billionaire who financed Julia and Viktor's original Mars trip, comes across as a Paris Hilton with an advanced degree in biology. Her scenes with Julia, which involve stereotypical assumptions about how powerful women must interact, can be painful. Hard SF fans will find this an adequate read, but Benford has done far better work in the past. (Publishers' Weekly review)

The sad thing about this book is I don't even remember reading it. Most previously read books at least trigger some tinkling of a memory once I re-read a synopsis...this one? Not so much. I guess *Publishers' Weekly* got it right.

Al says

In this unexceptional and somewhat slow-moving follow-up to *The Martian Race* (1999), Benford sends Julia and Viktor, the first astronauts to land on Mars, off to Pluto to investigate a number of strange phenomena. The solar system's coldest, most distant planet appears to be heating up and developing an atmosphere. Stranger still, another expedition has discovered life on Pluto, in an environment where it shouldn't exist.

Vincenzo Bacci says

a good story about first contact and entirely new ways life could develop. It's a sequel to *Martian Race*, which I did not read, but I think it did not influence my understanding. Plenty of hard science and technology. Characters tend to be unidimensional. Good pacing, satisfactory conclusion with open-ended possibilities.

Lucas says

I didn't realize this was a sequel to 'The Martian Race' (which I haven't read) until a quarter of the way through.

The magnetic creatures are similar to what's near the black hole in one of the later Galactic Center novels. There isn't much explanation for how they could actually live and persist.

Lyle Blosser says

A worthy successor to *The Martian Race*. Neatly and with enjoyable imagination combines the discoveries being made on Mars and the new ones being made on Pluto and in the our solar system. Sometimes the characters came across as a little wooden, but still quite an enjoyable read. The conceptual leaps were wonderfully envisioned and carried the book grandly. A real sense of wonder infused the tale and let me feel like I was truly in the far reaches of our solar system, with vivid and poetic descriptions of the alien yet common threads of intelligence and communication.

Bruce says

Liked the ideas about alternate forms of life. The plot occasionally lost focus, and I found the interpersonal dynamics between characters a bit weak.

Overall, the ideas and underlying science won out.

4 stars

Douglas says

Ok read, but not as good as "*The Martian Race*".

Jamie Collins says

Although it was nice at first to catch up with Julia and Viktor, still on Mars 20 years later, I lost interest in this at the halfway point. I liked the first book, which was a small, realistic near-future story about a mission to Mars. This book makes a huge leap to vast interstellar plasmatic alien beings doing experiments on Pluto. The new new protagonist, Axelrod's daughter, is a dreadful, unconvincing character and Gregory's rather shallow writing isn't up to this task.

Tim Martin says

The Sunborn by Gregory Benford is an excellent "hard" science fiction novel, set in the year 2044, a future in which humans live in stations orbiting the Earth, on the Moon, and have had for around two decades a scientific research station on Mars. Though the only ones who live on Mars are scientists, engineers, support personnel, and administrators, the time is coming soon when settlers will begin arriving in earnest, aided by

improved surface habitats on Mars, bioengineered life forms that can survive in domes, capable of handling the reduced sunlight, increased ultraviolet radiation (even with shielding), still relatively thin air, harsh Martian soil (even after it has been turned into soil of a type usable by terrestrial plants), and reduced gravity.

Also aiding the appeal of the Red Planet are the lives, trials, and tribulations of the Martian explorers themselves, nearly every moment of their lives visible to many millions of people, thank in part due to the evolving culture (an outgrowth of today's reality TV and 24-hour media cycles) but also in part because that while there is a strong governmental and scientific component to Martian (and solar system) exploration, there is also a very strong commercial component as well, outgrowths of such incentives into space as the X-Prize and the fact that private industry has such a huge role off the Earth's surface. Corporations and consortiums involved in the solar system relentlessly seek profit in their expeditions, exploiting everything from movie rights to memorabilia to odd Martian minerals to new chemicals with industrial and medical applications.

Part of that appeal - eagerly trumpeted by the corporation in charge on Mars as well as the news media at large - are the lives of the two most famous Martian residents, Julia and Viktor, the "Mars Couple," members of the first expedition over 20 years ago who remained on Mars, almost every moment of their lives played out before everyone on Earth. People have grown up witnessing their triumphs, such as the discovery of complex anaerobic life on Mars (the interesting and enigmatic Marsmat, something dubbed by one of the characters as the "Stromatolite Empire"), their tragedies, such as the death of various team members, and even their simple good luck (many label their apparent good health and youthful appearance as a result of something dubbed the "Mars Effect," a concept the corporation was not above exploiting back on Earth).

Unable to survive back on Earth due to decades in the lighter gravity of Mars and unwilling to go to administrative posts on the Moon when pressured by their bosses, Viktor and Julia jump at the change to go on a brand new fusion spaceship, the *_High Flyer_*, the first of its kind, rocketing at high speed to the "far dark," the edge of the solar system, the planet Pluto. They are to join Captain Shanna Axelrod and the crew of the ship *_Proserpina_*, the first ship to reach Pluto, where they made an amazing discovery; not only is there life on Pluto, but there is an intelligent native species there, one they dub the Zand. Or is it native? The Plutonian life forms, biochemistry, and ecosystem are like nothing that has ever been seen and their discovery is just the tip of the iceberg as to how deeply alien the outer edge of the solar system truly is. Shanna, Viktor, Julia, and their crews are also ordered to study two potentially very troubling phenomena; why the heliopause - the turbulent zone where the solar wind meets the interstellar plasma beyond our solar system - continues to move closer and closer to the Sun, and why Pluto is heating up when models show that it should in fact be cooling down. Were these odd occurrences connected? Do they pose a threat to Earth?

I liked *_The Sunborn_* a lot, it was a good book. I found the title appropriate, and like the novel itself, was full of layers of meaning, new layers being revealed, peeled back like the layers of an onion, revealed to the reader as the book progressed. The book had diagrams to illustrate a few key points, a rarity in fiction. The three main characters (Shanna, Viktor, and Julia) were well-developed and fairly complex individuals, though most of the rest of the crew of the two ships was less distinct. The aliens were quite alien, interesting, and well described, with chapters told from their point of view. There was a good amount of action, yet not to such an extent as to be extraneous, unbelievable, or irrelevant to the plot. Though I learned after reading the book that it was in fact a sequel to an earlier novel by Benford, *_The Martian Race_*, it did quite well as a stand-alone book (though I found his portrayal of Mars interesting enough that I may read the earlier volume at some point).

My complaints are very few. I thought that the humans were able to translate the alien's language a little too easily. Benford spent a fair amount of effort explaining how alien languages might be translated - no hand-

waving here - but I thought that it would still take more time and effort to translate an alien language than he allowed for, though he does make a case as to why he thinks one can achieve a working dialogue in a few days (this is not a major point with me and a necessary aspect of the plot). As noted, I think the secondary characters could have been a lot more distinct, but again, this is a very minor point.

A very good book, it compares very favorably to other pre-interstellar spaceflight novels set in our solar system, such as the Charles Sheffield trilogy that began with *Cold As Ice* and Ben Bova's epic "Grand Tour" series that includes such installments as *Venus* and *Jupiter*

Gordon says

Thoroughly enjoyed this. Although parts of the plot move so quickly as to be disorienting and the characters are mostly rather flat, this book more than makes up for it with its sizzling ideas. Totally captivating!

Chris Newman says

Good read for fans of near future SF...

Absorbing and packed full of science fact within the fiction. A good read but a little bogged down in some of the chapters.

Erica Anderson says

I absolutely loved the first several chapters of this book, which describe the continuing adventures of Viktor and Julia on Mars. Their exploration of the possibly sentient "Mars mat" was grounded in speculative biology that I found both believable and fascinating.

This section ends with Viktor and Julia being informed that they're to leave Mars to join a mission to Pluto. Switch to Pluto, and the discovery of a sentient species existing in a methane-based world. The captain of the Pluto mission is incredibly annoying--a fact that is recognized by her entire crew. I kept hoping they would space her, but no such luck.

And then it gets really weird, with the discovery of entities that exist in wave form. I don't have much background in physics, and maybe it would have helped if I had. I didn't understand the science and, while I could follow the plot, I didn't find these new entities at all believable.

SF authors face a massive challenge in writing non-human entities that are believable and truly alien. That's why we get so many humanoids with an extra mouth or two arms or whatever--recognizable, but different. Creating a truly alien alien that also engages readers is a tough undertaking. And the wave-based entities, with names like "Serene" and "Recorder," just didn't work for me.

So that's where I gave up. Despite the great beginning, the combination of a supremely annoying character and entities I just couldn't believe made *The Sunborn* a DNF for me.

John says

I liked the "hard science" in this book. Everything about this book is completely believable (and it get's pretty far out toward the end). I must say, though, that I think Benford is better when he is a collaborator (and he has collaborated with some of the best, such as A.C.Clarke). His plot seems a little plodding at times, and hence it took a bit of effort to get to the end of this one. Still, the concepts explored in this novel are pretty amazing and thought provoking, and the characters turned out to be compelling. I'm hoping for a sequel!

ConnieM says

I love sci-fi and this one gratified my fancy for space operas. Corny? Totally. Interesting concepts abound based on real, up-to-date discoveries from the world of astrophysics, Mars probe data, the Voyagers new and wild data (yes, folks, those little sweethearts we sent out of the solar system over 35 years ago are still ticking away, sending unbelievably valuable and unexpected information). I recommend this book if - and only if - you are interested in these kinds of things. If you want a book written like poetry and filled with all kinds of intertwining plots, allegories and dynamic character development, this is not the book for you. This is a space opera at its best. Love it for that.

Rebecca Williamson says

Fun science issues, but a little too thin on plot and characters for my tastes.
