



## The Baum Plan for Financial Independence and Other Stories

*John Kessel*

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John Kessel's latest collection — which includes the Nebula and Shirley Jackson Award winner "Pride and Prometheus" — is a long-awaited road map to the fantastic where *Pride and Prejudice*, *Frankenstein*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and Flannery O'Connor intersect. Kessel's four-story modern classic sequence about life on the moon, *The Lunar Quartet*, makes up the center of the book.

"A sustained exploration of the ways gender dynamics can both empower and enslave us. Kessel's wit sparkles throughout, peaking with the most uproariously weird phone-sex conversation you'll ever read ("The Red Phone")." A-

—*Entertainment Weekly*

Winner of the Nebula, Sturgeon, Locus, and Tiptree awards, **John Kessel** is the author of *The New York Times* Notable Book *Meeting in Infinity*. He co-edited the anthologies *Feeling Very Strange* and *Rewired*. Kessel and his family live in Raleigh, North Carolina, where he co-directs the creative writing program at North Carolina State University.

## The Baum Plan for Financial Independence and Other Stories Details

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## From Reader Review The Baum Plan for Financial Independence and Other Stories for online ebook

### Emily says

I was lucky enough to recently snag an ARC of John Kessel's *The Baum Plan for Financial Independence and other tales*, courtesy of Library Thing's Early Reviewer's program. The back cover copy promises witty intersections with classic literature like *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *A Good Man is Hard to Find*.

Subversive literary mash-ups seem to be all the rage today, and Oz doubly so. The last few years have seen the release of a manga, Alan Moore's pornographic *Lost Girls*, the excellent science fiction *Dorothy of Oz* comic, and the lackluster SciFi channel's *Tin Man*. The title story (Baum as in L. Frank) is unfortunately rather middle of the road, as such things go. Dot, a liberated gal of the mid twentieth, takes our narrator on an underground ride to a strange dream space where wealth is theirs for the taking. It's rather unfortunate that "Baum Plan," like many of the other mash-ups, has a rather indecisive ending. Kessel has a knack for the entertaining, and the pages kept turning, whether I was reading about a time-travelling Orson Wells or Victor Frankenstein doing the dance of manners with the cast of *Pride and Prejudice*. I was particularly impressed and amused by the ultra-short "The Red Phone," which surpasses Nicholson Baker's *Vox* in humor and sexiness.

The high point of the collection by far is Kessel's linked shorts about life on a moon colony. The world-building is excellent enough to be nearly invisible, and his stories about men in a matriarchal society are compelling enough that I literally couldn't put it down once I started the cycle.

With this collection, Small Beer press further confirms its reputation for producing excellence in the science fiction short form. I'll eagerly look for more as Kessel as an author, and continue to seek out new releases from this charmingly otherworldly imprint.

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### Alexandra says

I have had this collection on my electronic TBR shelf since... well, the info at the start says it was being given away free when it first came out in 2008, so I guess for six years. And I have had no recollection as to why I might have wanted to grab it; I vaguely knew Kessel's name but couldn't associate anything with it. Until I got to the last story.

This is the author of "Pride and Prometheus," which I read in 2008 (when it was published) and must absolutely have been the reason for me wanting more of his stuff. Because I really, really liked "Pride."

The collection is an interesting assortment of stories. Some riff off others - Austen, obviously, and Orson Welles, and *The Wizard of Oz*, and just possibly Orson Scott Card's *Ender's* series, at least for part of one story, and maybe X-Men too. Other stories are straight "lit'ratyoor" with nary a scrap of speculative about them; "The Snake Girl" is a bittersweet undergraduate tale, for instance. Some I really didn't connect with; "Every Angel is Terrifying" drags you in but it's the sort of horrified fascination where you can't look away. Others...

"The Last American" is one of those stories that is genuinely post-apocalyptic - there's been gross climate change and massive die-offs due to disease - and dystopic; it's the story of a man who was the president of America for 33 years, whose life spanned the 21st century. It's told, though, as a review of someone's new biography of the man, which has been constructed both as a sensory experience (normal) and with these odd inclusions of *text* - which is so not normal that you have to download a patch to allow you to experience it. This is the one with the Scott Card and X-Men resonances.

The centre of the collection (just about literally, perhaps metaphorically) is the "Lunar Quartet," described somewhere in the opening as a 'modern classic... about life on the moon.' But it's not life everywhere on the moon; it's life in the Society of Cousins, which is run as a matriarchy. You are surnamed for your mother, fathers are largely irrelevant, men have the option of living on centrally provided subsistence which means they don't get to vote... as a feminist I can tell you it sounds absolutely horrendous. It comes out that this is intended to curb men's propensity for violence and domination, but it just ends up sounding like an incredibly restrictive society where you almost don't blame some of the men for acting out. One of the stories is focussed on that, and I was also incredibly uncomfortable with the words coming out of the rebel's mouth - it was horrid, repellent, appalling. So Kessel takes the opportunity to start a new human society and imagines its possibilities, and is pretty damned ruthless in the process. It's almost enough to make you despair of hoping for real change. But I don't think that's what Kessel wants. I think he's just being honest about how hard it's going to be - and that crushing the spirit of half the population is never going to be the answer.

A good eclectic collection.

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## Orion says

A collection of short stories by NCSU author.

The Baum Plan for Financial Independence: A modern North Carolinian Dorothy takes a friend on an adventure.

Every Angel is Terrifying: A psychologically disturbed killer named Railroad seeks a fresh start.

The Red Phone: Two telephone operators handle a phone sex conversation for their clients.

The Invisible Empire: Feminist vigilantes in a fundamentalist Christian world.

A Lunar Quartet (The Juniper Tree, Stories for Men, Under the Lunchbox Tree, & Sunlight or Rock): Explores what it means to be a man in a feminist matriarchal society.

The Snake Girl:

It's All True

The Red Phone

Powerless

Pride and Prometheus: Jane Austen's Mary Bennet meets Mary Shelley's Victor Frankenstein at a dance.

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## Steve Tetreault says

**What it's about:** This short story collection spans a wide range of times and places, reaching back into the past and pushing forward into the future. The stories examine some common ground, but go off in some unexpected directions. Two different thefts go wrong in very different ways. A series of stories connects the past to the future where women rule a moon colony. And the fictional worlds of Jane Austen and Mary

Shelley have a crossover.

**What I thought:** There were some neat ideas. I particularly liked the stories that tied together in a grander narrative; in fact, I found myself skipping back and forth to see if the connections being made were direct, glancing, or just the coincidence of inspiration. Kessel seems adept at writing characters of either gender, and in working with different time frames - overall, I think this is a good study in the fact that people are people, no matter where or when they are.

**Why I rated it like I did:** The moon saga went on a bit too long, and with not enough resolution, for my taste. Also, I was reading an e-book edition, and the formatting was problematic, as it was uniformly incorrect throughout - all the same font, with double spacing between the paragraphs, and sometimes italics that didn't always carry through all of the passage they were supposed to. There were places where special formatting was clearly suggested, but not applied; and other places where I had to re-read passages to try to work out whether there was something I was missing due to the formatting.

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### **Rebecca says**

This is an incredible speculative collection. The story "Pride and Prometheus," in which several of Austen's Bennett sisters meet Dr. Frankenstein (and his monster), was particularly strong. I didn't expect to like this story as much as some of the others in the book--mostly, I think, because the insertion of undead/supernatural creatures into classic works has lately become a popular and tiresome gimmick. But this story doesn't suffer from twee irony at all. Kessel has rendered Mary Bennett heart-breakingly human. Her desperate hopes, sad realizations, and eventual wisdom moved me deeply. This collection also contains a set of stories set on a matriarchal lunar colony (Kessel's "Lunar Quartet") that forced me to confront my own inherent gender prejudices in a way that was anything but comfortable. Loved how unsettled I was! I recommend this book to those with an interest in science fiction, relationships between the sexes, and/or fiction that makes you think. Kessel's stories don't settle for a lazy morality.

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### **Don says**

"Genre-blending," to me, usually means "genre+literary" (whatever "literary" means). But a lot of the blending in this collection is "genre + genre," as in the historical-crime/fantasy story "Every Angel is Terrifying," or the future-crime/sci-fi first movement of the Lunar Quartet, "The Juniper Tree."

Kessel's historical/literary mash-ups were brilliant, too: Orson Welles in a sci-fi story ("It's All True")--who'd have thought? The name and spirit of Tyler Durden carrying on in a lunar colony in the second movement of the Lunar Quartet, "Stories for Men." "Pride and Prometheus" is a Nebula award winner for good reason!

My favorite thing, from a technical standpoint, is the near-flawless worldbuilding in each story, done such that the story's obvious themes are never heavy-handed or preachy.

What made it one star short of five was the third movement of The Lunar Cycle. The cycle is comprised of 4 stories, one of them almost 80 pages long--and we all know how I feel about stories that go on longer than the average story by Etgar Keret or Lydia Davis. Oddly enough, I loved the longest story ("Stories for Men"). It was the significantly shorter story immediately after it, "Under the Lunchbox Tree." It's obviously

supposed to be more low-key, but it still seems anticlimactic.

You can download the collection for free, from Small Beer Press, in multiple formats. I did, and I immediately knew I had to have the TPB.

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### **Jonan Grobler says**

It seems like John Kessel did everything he could to make people ignore this book. Not only does it have a title like, like the title it has, it's also front-loaded with some of the worst stories in the book.

Having read the whole book, I can more clearly see why those stories were placed in the beginning - it really does fit the overall arc of the book quite well - but it's definitely not doing the author any favours.

Which is sad, because this book is great. I got it in a bundle, which generally means I give it less mental room, and take it less seriously. I don't know why, but when I pay full price for a book, I really engage and give it my all - I'm going to get my \$9's worth, dammit.

An interesting theme runs through the collection of short stories; an exploration of how men and women relate to each other, and specifically from the male side (which makes sense I guess). The men in these stories are all hollow, empty & lacking purpose apart from the women in their lives; the women are active & taking action, moving the stories forward.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the centrepiece of the collection, the Lunar Quarter - it's set on the far side of the moon, in a colony called the Society of the Cousins, where our current patriarchal society is flipped on its head, and women are the ones who work & get to vote, while men stay at home and participate in voluntary arts programmes.

It was really fascinating to get this new, upside down view on things, and it really made me think.

In the end, Kessel doesn't have any solutions or tidy morals for us, which is as it should be; these are way too dense topics to really sum up in any way. But it's great to have these topics examined and looked at from all angles; it really made me think.

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### **Bookmarks Magazine says**

Critics were all excited to see another anthology from Kessler, even if most of the stories here have already appeared in top science fiction magazines. While some admitted they were at first skeptical of the motif of entering other authors' worlds, most felt that not only did Kessler pull off these stories with gusto but he did so in such a way that readers can enjoy his tales even if they have not read the original authors. While the *Strange Horizons* reviewer was not quite as impressed by the work as a whole and cited it as an uneven collection, he also found much to praise, especially in the lunar stories.

This is an excerpt from a review published in Bookmarks magazine.

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### **Laura says**

I read this in preparation for John Kessel's visit to the Cary Library. I was not that impressed at first, and I still think that I don't LIKE the stories, but at the same time I was totally blown away. It annoyed me that almost every story ended ambiguously. OK, yes, write some short stories that leave you saying... "what?", but not every single gosh darn one!

That being said, these stories are incredibly creative. I appreciated (even while hating what happened) the heck out of the Lunar Quartet stories - I've never seen the gender gap handled or thought about in that way before.

Can't wait to see him in person!

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### **Tim Hicks says**

This one left me with mixed feelings. Kessel has a deft touch in places, and some humour (I especially liked a dwarf named Advil); but there's an underlying gloom to it all. Some of his protagonists - I can't call them heroes - are schlubs, and some are just observers of their own lives.

In "Every Angel Is Terrifying" we have an out-and-out weirdo borrowed or extended from another author's work. This one's good. In the end, things don't go well in this story either, and it's sad, but somehow not as depressing as in the other stories.

"Snake Girl" is weak. Felt like a story written when Kessel was much younger and less skilled. There's an underlying strength in presenting the protag as almost an alien on his own planet - like so many his age - but the story just depressed me and felt heavy-handed.

I have to admit that it's refreshing in a way to see stories in which the protagonist's situation just deflates with a dull pfffft, sometimes at the end and sometimes in a long, slow decline. We certainly get a fresh look at the society in which each story is framed.

The "Lunar Quartet" stories didn't work very well for me, either, and some of the society's setup was a stretch - but it's nevertheless a huge concept to deliver in short stories, and from a few pages into the first story the society was on the whole believable. And the potential for trouble was visible.

So .. good ideas, some humour, but overall not a book to cheer you up.

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### **Jon says**

A good collection. I especially enjoyed "Pride and Prometheus," as a longtime Jane Austen fan.

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## **Patrick Brown says**

This could easily have been a 4 star book, but a few of the stories just didn't go anywhere. I'm all for ambiguity, but I have to feel like it's serving some purpose other than getting the author out of the story as quickly as possible.

Still, this book blends science fiction with "straight" fiction as well as anything I've read since Vonnegut. Like Vonnegut, the sci-fi elements of his work serve to satire contemporary society and culture. What was most intriguing about this book was the way many of the stories addressed gender and power. One story imagines a world where the women of the suffragette movement formed violent gangs, ala the KKK, to terrorize abusive men into changing their ways, even going so far as to assassinate Grover Cleveland.

Several other stories take place in a colony on the moon run by a society of "matrons," a colony where men live with very little power and where fatherhood is intentionally unknown. As a trade-off, men have few responsibilities, and sex is plentiful and without taboo. Girls are encouraged (and in most cases, forced) to move out at the age of 14 while boys live at home indefinitely. The ramifications of such a society cut both ways for Kessel, as the men and women struggle with the pressures of such an arrangement. In one of the stories, a comedian named "Tyler Durden" challenges the matriarchy, and faces grave consequences as a result.

Fascinating stuff, and well worth a read this summer.

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## **Hayden says**

Richard recommended this to me because one of the stories, "Pride and Prometheus," is about a meeting between Mary Bennet (the proto-nerd in *Pride and Prejudice*) and Victor Frankenstein. I liked that story a lot. Kessel doesn't try to mimic Austen's narrative voice; it's plainer language, which makes sense since it's from Mary's point of view, and she's not a witty social butterfly like Elizabeth. The story is significantly darker than *P&P*; there aren't too many Darcys to go around.

I also read the *Lunar Quartet*, four stories about life on the moon in about 90 years. They mostly take place in a single matriarchal colony, where gender roles are more or less reversed--though it's more complicated than that. Most men don't vote or do real work; instead they are artists, dilettantes, and sex objects. Though men definitely suffer some injustices and have legitimate grievances, the colony is painted as a better place to live than the patriarchal colonies.

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## **meeners says**

pride and prejudice meets frankenstein. orson welles meets time travel. the wizard of oz meets . . . ??? what might have come across as hokey in another writer felt genuinely speculative, in its best sense, here. the mixing of styles is less deftly done, but i did like the cleanliness and assured precision of kessel's prose when left to its own devices. particularly as it's used so often to pin down characters who are more aimless than not, or who find themselves cut adrift despite themselves (or cut adrift *from* themselves).

i admit that "stories for men" triggered one of the oddest reading experiences i've had in a while. i reacted

violently against almost every plot turn, i hated almost every character, i argued back against almost every word....and i still don't know how i feel about the story, days after reading it. i suspect that might have been the point, at least in part. and for that alone i'm giving this 4 stars.

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### **Russ says**

This is an excellent collection written by one of the better short story writers in any genre. Some of the stories are outright science fiction, while others are not quite so obvious.

The title story is the best one. Its main character, a petty criminal, discovers the truth underlying the world, becomes incredibly wealthy as a consequence, and may or may not be happy.

The other best story is "Stories for Men" about a lunar colony run along feminist principles. It raises a lot of questions about our own society and its assumptions about men and women. There are three others in that series which are almost as good.

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