



The Last Theorem

Arthur C. Clarke , Frederik Pohl

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The Last Theorem Details

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From Reader Review The Last Theorem for online ebook

Sean Rourke says

I love both these guys. They're unquestionably masters of their craft, and two of the greatest luminaries of science fiction. Having said that, this book is...well...very mediocre. I went on Wikipedia to find out if maybe something was going on during the development of the book, and it turns out that Arthur C Clarke was in the late stages of his life when he started this one. He owed his publisher a book, but hit a point where he felt like he just couldn't generate the ideas anymore. So, he reached out to his friend, Frederik Pohl, and asked if he could finish the thing. Frederik would write chapters and send them to Clarke, who would approve them as his health was failing. The result is a story that starts off pretty strong, but then just kinda descends into a weird sort of short hand where the human race goes into space, good things happen, aliens show up, and everything turns out great.

So yeah, all praise to the men involved, but it definitely came across as an orphaned project.

Alexis says

This book was written by two great, but very old, authors. It shows. Half of the book is Clarke and Pohl, often ignoring the 4th Wall, telling the story of a young mathematician in the manner of two benevolent grandfathers who're trying to impress their grandkids by throwing random mathematical tricks (some of them pretty neat, tbh) and info in the plot. In the other half they're dreaming of a world where the UN, with Sri-Lanka as the vanguard (!!) can bring about world peace, where Clarke's dream of the space elevator can come true simply because it's a great idea, and humanity, having ridded itself of conflicts, can focus on hosting olympics in space. Somewhere along the way there's a rather small alien invasion of sorts. And Ferma, who wonders why he's in the title.

Nothing wrong with hoping for a bright and glorious tomorrow for mankind a few days before you died, mr Clarke, but we, left behind, cynically see your naïveté. You already wrote this book when you were younger and it was better in its bleakness.

Iary says

[
What is the point of this book? What is the point of the main character? What is the point of the aliens?

I had the feeling that Sir Clarke wanted another kind of Childhood's End, but, unfortunately, somewhere between his and Mr. Pohl's contribution, things got really lost. The first part was actually good. Between Ranjit's angsty teenage years, the kidnapping and solving Fermat's famous last theorem, it represent

Megan Baxter says

I like Frederik Pohl, or, at least, I like Gateway, the one book of his I've read, a whole lot. I have enjoyed

most Arthur C. Clarke I have read. Reading a book by the two of them together sounded intriguing, at the very least. Unfortunately, it wasn't particularly gripping, and frankly, is a bit of a mess. The characters stay resolutely far away from the plot, and large sections of it are badly paced and just boring.

Note: The rest of this review has been withheld due to the changes in Goodreads policy and enforcement. You can read why I came to this decision [here](#).

In the meantime, you can read the entire review at Smorgasbook

Ben Babcock says

Overall, the word I'd use to describe this book is "shallow." Clarke and Pohl, two big names in SF, have managed to take two interesting concepts (Fermat's Last Theorem and alien sterilization of Earth) and turn them into a boring book. It's as if they said one day, "Well, we've succeeded at everything else in literature; now we have to succeed at writing a *bad* book!"

My major problem with the book is the lack of any consequences, or really, any conflict at all. At points the story threatens to inject a conflict--such as when Ranjit becomes an unwitting accomplice to pirates and subsequently spends two years being tortured in prison. For a moment, I thought that might produce some genuine unhappiness that could mar this otherwise oppressively upbeat book. Unfortunately, that was not the case.

Even toward the end, tragedy loomed on at least three separate occasions, yet somehow everything turned out all right. It's not that I have a problem with happy endings; I love a good happy ending. But happiness without struggle against adversity is hollow. I've read much better science fiction than this--this book feels like it was written for a fourteen-year-old as a "My first science fiction novel"--it's patronizing.

Our "protagonist", if indeed we can call him that, Ranjit, stumbles through his life without ever having to make any important decisions. Everything just sort of falls serendipitously into place. Oh, and along the way he discovers a miraculously short proof to Fermat's Last Theorem. Meanwhile, alien overlords have sent alien minions to sterilize Earth of dangerous humanity. But it's OK, because the overlords change their minds and then the minions befriend humanity.

As with the possibilities of tragedy I mentioned above, the book tempts us with the prospect of a meaningful theme when it touches upon the dangerous nature of an EMP-like weapon controlled by "the Big Three"--Russia, China, and the United States. Will this lead to an Orwellian future in which these Big Three control the only military forces on the planet? And will first contact with an alien species ironically lead to all-out planetary war even as the countries of humanity approach global peace?

Nah. It's much easier to just tell us in an epilogue that everything worked out fine, and thirteen thousand years everything was still going fine.

I'd have to say that even *The Da Vinci Code* better integrated an esoteric academic subject than this book. I understand that not everyone loves math as much as me, so I tolerate the explanations of Fermat's Last Theorem. But it wasn't even *interesting*. It had no relevance to the plot, because *there was no plot*. And since this book had Arthur C. Clarke's name on the cover, this has been the cause of severe disappointment for me!

Prashanth says

I respect Mr. Clarke, I really do. And, I like some of his books. Unfortunately, not this one.

The story line follows the travails of one Ranjit, a mathematical genius, from being a kid through his days of glory after solving "Fermat's Last Theorem", and his daughter's (ahem) alien abduction. I remember Mr. Asimov somewhere saying that a story for kids proceeds at breakneck pace, and adult fiction cannot do so. The story here finds the pace somewhere in that category. In summary:

1. Ranjit does some mathematics, and has some tricks up his sleeve
2. He has some powerful friends, and does stupid things like running away on a boat
3. He spends some time in jail, and solves an unsolvable theorem (which by the way is solved, but no one seems to like the proof because it is too complex)
4. Ranjit now settles down in Sri Lanka, and has kids. One of them can sail in space
5. The kid gets abducted by an advanced alien race, who seem to be too afraid of earth's nuclear abilities
6. All's well at the end. Everyone gets to transfer into some sort of galaxy discovering thingy and death is just the next level

Meanwhile, the parts that are not quite well explained are also moving fast:

1. Space elevator (yay!)
2. One-point-fives and some other alien brothers
3. All the earth's problems - incl. North Korea, and other such entertaining stories

Yes, the stories have been told more than a few times. It gets completely boring to almost expect what happens next. I could not empathize with anyone, almost wished Ranjit would just vanish from the jail, and the aliens kindly bomb us into oblivion. Full of details that does not entertain, does not add value, and loose ends that is outright obnoxious, how I wish for a better sci fi novel. This ain't even close.

Phoenix says

The Last of the Old Wine

Here both Clarke and Pohl revisit some of their perennial themes. In the case of Clarke its that of ancient intelligences watching in puzzlement over a humanity on the brink of either extinction or adulthood; with Pohl it's his fascination with the "Machine Stored" and the decay of other non-human civilizations. There was some novelty in terms of Clarke's examination of 21st century Sri Lanka through the eyes of his protagonist the largely self taught mathematician Ranjit Subramanian but both Clarke and Pohl have mined the same vein before, in Clarke's 2001/Childhood's End and for Pohl in the HeeChee Gateway series.

Its not the best that either have done but it was an enjoyable read like spending an afternoon meeting with old and dear friends, with the foreknowledge that this may be their last time. There are a couple of mathematical parlour tricks and one gets the sense of the drive and joy of pure mathematics in the pursuit of a solution to Fermat's Theorem that, unlike Wiles proof, would use the tools available to Fermat himself, or

pure applied science in the subplot concerning the space elevator.

I rather liked it.

Matt says

From what I have read Frederick Pohl actually wrote this book based on a few notes from a dying Arthur Clarke.

Pohl managed to turn this book into a tribute to Clarke's best known work including, but probably not limited to *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Childhood's End*, and *Fountain's of Paradise*.

There is an alien race in this novel called the One-Point-Fives which reminds me of the Daleks from *Dr. Who*. I'm not sure that Clarke was fan, but I do remember seeing a photo of him posing with a Dalek. Perhaps Pohl saw the same photo.

Iulia says

Poate fiindcă am citit-o în limba română?, poate fiindcă am văzut de curând *2001: A Space Odyssey* pe marele ecran și m-a?teptam la o poveste cu aceeași rezonanță psiho-intelectuală?, sau poate fiindcă trec printr-o fază în care, poate în mod nedrept, nu consider simplitatea ca fiind o valoare – Ultima Teoremă mi s-a părut o carte prea ușoară? în raport cu așteptările mele. Nu mi-a trezit emoții sau idei pe care nu le-am mai avut; nu a strălucit cu nimic. Personajele sunt prea ideale ca să prindă contur sau ca să pot să mă identific cu ele – nu mi-i pot imagina pe membrii familiei Subramanian altfel decât cu chipuri perfecte ca în reclame, fără nicio zgârietură literară?. Diversele specii de ființe cu care se întrepătrund destinul omenirii în această carte nu au nimic remarcabil – iar Marii Galactici nu reușesc să prindă o aură transcendentă?.

E o lectură plăcută pentru cine dorește o lectură plăcută?. Dar mie-mi place să fiu impresionat?. Așa că n-am să-i dau acestei cărți mai mult de trei stele.

Elly says

The book was, especially at the beginning, not at all what I expected. It was mostly a novel about a young man growing up, and not much mathematics, or science fiction in evidence. There is a second, smaller, storyline that is interwoven within this story which is very much sf. But in the end it was a very nice story, and I am happy to have read it.

One thing I missed: the actual 5 page proof of the theorem. It would have been so nice to read that... But given that the actual proof is 150 pages long, a short version will not be first published in an sf novel.

BTW I actually read the e-book in the Mobipocket format, not the hardcover.

Andrea Bampi says

Merita di essere letto anche solo perchè è l'ultimo progetto a cui abbia lavorato Clarke. Per il resto, pur essendo sicuramente godibile e ben scritto, fa veramente fatica a decollare.

La sensazione è che gli autori abbiano voluto un pà strafare, il contesto è da Space Opera, lo span temporale è di due generazioni, c'è un pò tutto l'armamentario classico della SF (operazione anche piacevole, innumerevoli le autocitazioni) ma per 300 pagine forse c'è un pò troppa carne al fuoco. Inoltre il vero difetto, secondo me, è l'evidente mancanza di collegamento tra i plot principali (presumibilmente scritti separatamente dagli autori): come prima (e ultima, purtroppo) prova a quattro mani tra ACC e FP, il mix di ingredienti, pur buoni se presi singolarmente, non è riuscito benissimo. In particolare tutto il "subplot" relativo al Teorema di Fermat (da cui anche il titolo) è simpatico ma alquanto fine a sè stesso, nonostante la vana speranza di una trovata geniale nel finale.

Peccato... in ogni caso, grazie a Arthur Clarke... per tutto

Yasser says

Il libro è molto bello, ma non è un capolavoro.

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Tatjana says

Zapanjuju? a knjiga! Fascinirala me je koli?ina ideja fino utkanih u radnju romana, lepo doziranih i uklopljenih, tako da imate celovitu viziju, a ne nabacane koncepte. Doduše, ima problema u tempu romana, pretpostavljam da je zbog toga došlo do velikog broja nezadovoljnih ?italaca. Tako?e, li?no, problem mi je bio sa nepoznavanjem i nedostatkom interesovanja za brojne matemati?ke probleme (ali tu je ve? problem do mene, a ne do romana).
Sve u svemu, potpuno sam zapanjena koli?inom kvalitetnog materijala koji je ušao u ovaj roman! Bukvalno bih mogla sada ponovo da ga pro?itam, sa pažnjom usmerenom na sitnije elemente, koje sam neminovno preletela usled dinamike glavne radnje.

Mohammad says

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Satyr says

Clarke || Pohl = Good
Clarke && Pohl = Bad

Dan says

In many ways, it's appropriate that this was Arthur C. Clarke's final work. It's sort of a love letter to him and his career, magpieing ideas from his best works, from the all-seeing alien beings to his love of Sri Lanka. There's countless little nods to Clarke's work and it's great fun to spot.

The trouble is, this isn't really a very good book. It is essentially the life story of a Sri Lankan boy who is a remarkable mathematician and manages to once and for all conclusively solve Fermat's Theorem. Apart from the remarkable achievement he doesn't really live that remarkable a life. All the way through there's a sense of doom that aliens are heading to Earth and right near the end they do and it's pretty much all fine.

There are some great ideas in here. The various aliens are well-described and well-talked about and I liked their slightly dystopian vision of the future Earth, which seems a decent prediction so far. The trouble is there are so many ideas shoved in here there wasn't really much time for an actual story. There's not really a plot, it's just a selected best bits of one man's life with a few good sci-fi ideas squeezed amongst them.

Despite the general feeling that this wasn't a good book, I found it fairly enjoyable to read. This may not make sense, but it does in my head. The book is well written and the characterisation here is really rather good, especially that of Ranjit, it's just that you get to the end of the book and think "is that it" and wonder what on Earth the point of the whole thing was.

I think the phrase that best describes my failing is thus: an enjoyable failure.

Claudia says

Why, when two great writers work together on a project, the result is so poor? Same happened with The Medusa Chronicles by Al Reynolds and Stephen Baxter. But this one is even worse.

I expected some hard sci-fi and what I got was the story of a young man (obsessed with proving Fermat's Last Theorem), with a lot of useless details and digressions, which did nothing to shape the character or help the storyline in some way. And this was just one thread.

The other is the story of some aliens, the Grand Galactics, some kind of masters in the universe, which after discovering that on Earth were detonated a lot of atomic bombs, sent another species of aliens, One Point Fives, to obliterate the Earth. There are some other species too, but I still wonder why were they introduced in the story for their contribution is rather secondary.

Maybe it sounds interesting but it isn't. All those details about Ranjit's life are way too many and pointless. Although he is a math genius, he is involved in some actions which are very hard to believe. The story abounds in lots of facts and tricks from number theory, some indeed interesting but most of them are there just to fill the pages.

The whole novel seems to have, at least for me, an air of mocking; not sure if it was desired to be a political satire, or just seems so because of the childish plot, cartoonish alien characters and the simple writing.

Furthermore, I couldn't suspend the disbelief. Not a single main action in the story seemed plausible to me. Yes, it's fiction but I rather believe in FTL speed being real than in the events Ranjit was involved in. Not to mention that after building Skyhook (the space elevator) and tourists being able to travel to the Moon, the first thing it was done was a sport competition...

It also has bits and pieces from other works and movies, the most evident to me being A Beautiful Mind (Ranjit & Robert's characters having a lot something from John Nash) and the original A Meeting with Medusa (the orbital race to the Moon in the sail space ships). I can't point the finger exactly which are others but most certainly this story has nothing original in it.

The one thing that kept me finishing it was the curiosity on how it ended and how proving Fermat's Last Theorem fits the plot – well, it didn't. Or I missed the point...

The feeling now is that I have read a story written in the beginning of sci-fi era, not in 2008. Really disappointing. The translation didn't help either, but that's another story and not the authors' fault.

Two stars for the number tricks.

Wayne says

I thought this was a good book. It was Clarke's last book (mainly authored by another sci-fi great, Fred Pohl, from 50 pages of Clarke's notes) and kind of stands as an homage to his work and ideas - it has a "skyhook" space elevator based on Sri Lanka (Fountains of Paradise), the Grand Galactics (aliens who resemble the Monolith aliens from 2001), his hope that mankind will outgrow religion (an unreasonable expectation given that mankind has always expressed religious thoughts and it answers questions for people that science cannot), and his love for his adopted country of Sri Lanka, etc.

It basically has two separate stories - one of the Grand Galactic aliens who detect humans' use of nuclear weapons and determine to exterminate them in the name of peace and one of the protagonist, Ranjit, a Sri Lankan man. The storylines intersect near the end of the book.

I found the Ranjit story to be the most compelling...it is just basically the life story of a young man - nothing special (except that he finds a short proof of Fermat's Last Theorem using the mathematics available to Fermat at the time). This story chronicles his life in Sri Lanka, intersecting some current political elements over time (piracy of cruise ships by Somalis, imprisonment and torture, the Iraq War, etc.), his dissatisfaction with his work, his subsequent marriage, and family life...pretty mundane stuff, but it was extremely well written and I could identify with it. The parallel Grand Galactic story was more of an added bonus. The Ranjit story could have stood on its own (with some obvious tweaking of the end).

I didn't care for the portrayal of America as the bad guy at the end of the story...I'm afraid that Clarke's opinion of recent past American foreign policy has become his vision of America in the (near) future.

The ending was also a little too pat for me...everything tied up nicely. Aliens befriended the Terrans instead of obliterating them, a non-religious version of the Golden Rule was applied by humanity, humans discovered eternal life by downloading their consciousness into computers, and humans took over after 13,000 years the role of the Grand Galactics in manipulating time, space, and the evolution of the universe. Interestingly, Clarke (and Pohl) deal with a lot of spiritual and religious issues for professed atheists.

It also has a lot of history, Sri Lankan culture, math, and hard science fiction (technological) elements, which I thought was wonderful. I learned a new way to calculate the number of combinations of a binomial system using binary numbers and how to multiply large numbers together by halving and doubling the multiplicands and adding them (Egyptian or Russian multiplication). Some of the hard sci-fi elements include using boron to produce hydrogen powered cars (glossing over some of the problematic chemistry involved) and electromagnetic pulse weapons. Pretty interesting stuff.

Keith Stevenson says

From the sublime to the not so. And it really pains me to say that. Arthur C Clarke died last year and it was a great loss indeed. It's hard to imagine a more famous science fiction author and one who had such a prestigious career. So when 'the final novel from SF grandmaster Arthur C Clarke', as the shout line went across the cover of *The Last Theorem*, came through the letterbox, and I saw that Clarke had co-written it with Frederik Pohl, another significant talent, I thought, 'Wow, this is going to be special.'

The fact is that — pretty much from page one — it wasn't, and as I read further and my hopes of any improvement were dashed I became saddened and really rather annoyed. I was sad because I no longer saw the spark of brilliance, the unique ideas that characterised Clarke's work. He was always a bit dodgy on characterisation, but it was the development and explanation of the science at the core of his work that drove you on through his novels. *The Last Theorem* is a rambling tale where not a great deal in the way of science fiction actually happens, and when it does, it certainly isn't startling or new.

The story concerns Ranjit Subramanian a young student living in Sri Lanka who takes up mathematics at university and goes on to get married, have kids and solve Fermat's last theorem which makes him rather famous. Meanwhile some aliens who don't like Earth developing nuclear weapons, let alone using them, send a destruction fleet to do what destruction fleets do best. The whole story is told in what I think was meant to be a light-hearted jokey way which just comes over as a bit condescending and supercilious. It's also 'told' rather than 'shown', despite the age old law of Creative Writing 101, which only serves to do what such an approach always does — distances the reader and robs us of the detail, the immersive experience, to really go with the narrative. There's also a kind of fifties sensibility running through the book that I really didn't like. Most women don't rate a second name and the more 'developed' women characters are devoted to their men and know their place. At one point Ranjit's friend turns up with flowers for his wife and a bottle of whisky for him and Ranjit to drink. I cringed in the background somewhere. As to the science fictional aspects, as you might guess from above, they are lacking in originality. Indeed Clarke basically rips off himself, recycling his skyhook idea from his earlier *The Fountains of Paradise* and using a mechanism for the aliens to communicate with mankind straight out of *2010: Odyssey Two*. This is not a fitting capstone for a lifetime of achievement, and that is what saddens me.

What annoys me is that the publishers went ahead and published it. I am not party to any conversations around how that decision came about. The only reasons that come to mind are they didn't know or realise that as a piece of writing it sucked or they didn't care because it was going to sell a boatload anyway or they were asked/compelled by Clarke's estate or there was some other legal requirement. I hope there is some other, saner reason.

The other thing that annoys me is that this book is being pushed and pushed hard in the shops. That means that readers who may not have read in the genre before will pick it up as it is purportedly one of the best books by one of our best authors and they will get a totally wrong idea of what we are actually about. Let's

move on to a happier subject.

Raj says

I'm a big fan of Arthur C. Clarke, but 3001 The Final Odyssey and now this have tested my loyalty. Both were written in the latter years of Sir Arthur's life (The Last Theorem was the last book published before his death) and both had good ideas that were poorly executed.

The EM shockwave of Earth's nuclear tests spread into space and eventually reach a race of mega-beings, called the Grand Galactics who immediately dispatch one of their client races to eliminate this upstart race. Meanwhile, young mathematician Ranjit Subramanian discovers a short, elegant proof to Fermat's Last Theorem and becomes embroiled in a secret organisation.

I really wanted to like this book, there were many good ideas but the writing was very poor, the pacing was very uneven and the characterisation was thin. The galactic invasion plot and the Earth-based plots never really meshed properly and the end was a complete mess, with no tension having been built up, and the conclusion just happens out of nowhere, leaving me wondering if a chapter or two had been missed out.

A disappointing end to a long and fruitful career.
