



Imperial Earth

Arthur C. Clarke

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Imperial Earth is the fascinating odyssey of Duncan Makenzie, traveling from Titan, a moon of Saturn, to Earth, as a diplomatic guest of the United States for the celebration of its Quincentennial in the year 2276. Titan, an independent republic, was originally colonized from Earth three generations earlier. Duncan's initial challenge is to prepare, physically and intellectually, for the 500-million-mile trip to Earth. Once there, he is caught up in a sweep of new experiences, including the social and political whirl in Washington, a strange visit to a carefully preserved ancient city once prominent in the 20th century, and a search for and meeting with a woman he loved since she visited Titan years before.

Imperial Earth Details

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From Reader Review Imperial Earth for online ebook

Lindsay says

Overall, I really, really liked this book --- I withheld one star for some minor complaints that made it fall short of perfect for me, which I will get to later.

It's very well plotted --- things are introduced early on in the story, in the vignettes capturing the protagonist's childhood on Titan, that all get woven into the plot much later, when he comes to Earth to give a speech at the United States's quincentennial celebration.

It also has great character development; the protagonist, Duncan Makenzie, is a clone, and Clarke does a wonderful job of drawing subtle distinctions between Duncan and his two elder clones (whom Duncan thinks of as both his father and grandfather, and also as much-older brothers ... which they are!) to show that even though they are genetically identical, their lives have given them different outlooks, personalities and skills, even though they remain close enough to guess each other's thoughts and complete each other's sentences.

The character I found most intriguing wasn't any of them, however. It was Karl Helmer, Duncan's best friend in childhood (and lover in adolescence --- apparently this future society is "bi-normative" as opposed to heteronormative, because most of the characters assume Duncan is bisexual and Duncan himself says he finds people who are exclusively gay or straight to be somewhat odd) who fell out with Duncan and hasn't spoken to him in years. Karl is very intense, and also very emotional. He's also a genius at math and physics, and it is in his capacity as brilliant physicist that he re-enters the story much later. You don't often see characters in science fiction who are both highly emotional and also masters of some rigorous discipline like astrophysics --- more often science-fiction writers seem to go with the Coldly Impersonal Scientist trope, or The Scientist Who Loves His/Her Work More Than Anything Else.

The last thing I thought was really clever and wonderful about this book is the two worlds it depicts --- Titan, where the atmosphere is made out of methane and ammonia; and Earth, where civilization has advanced to such an astonishing degree that there's no more violence (even Duncan, the rugged colonist, has never handled a weapon, eaten meat, or killed anything), everything is very safe, and Earth's high-technology civilization coexists peacefully with its resurgent wilderness.

The main thing I didn't like was an odd failure of characterization: the one major female character, Calindy, never seemed quite real to me. Part of this is because most of our first impressions of her come from Duncan's rosy, soft-focus recollections of her from early adolescence, when he and Karl both became infatuated with her, but some of it does come from Clarke's failure to give her a discernible inner life.

Finally, there was one scene near the end of the book that made me very, very uneasy. Duncan was going to get himself cloned, to perpetuate the Makenzie line, and while he's doing that we find that the surrogate mothers have volunteered for that duty *because they want to have children*. That sounds laudable, but consider that when most women say they want children, they mean they want to keep the children, and raise them. Precious few women just want to go through pregnancy and labor, and then hand the child off to some stranger. (Read Ann Fessler's history *The Girls Who Went Away* for some corroboration of that statement). To make the ethics of this arrangement even murkier, Clarke gives the impression that many, if not all, of these women are developmentally disabled, which calls into question how well they understood what they were signing up for.

Anyway, it's a terrific novel, well realized, well plotted and well characterized, with only one jarring exception, and one troubling detail in its utopian future society.

Palmyrah says

I just re-read this after an interval of roughly 35 years. Written to commemorate the US bicentennial in 1976, it's basically propaganda for space travel and technological innovation, aimed at young Americans. It is set in a future where space travel within the solar system is common, colonies have been established on (at least) Mercury, the Moon, Mars and Titan, and the American political model, tempered by a degree of enlightened authoritarianism, has been extended throughout the Solar System.

The central character is a man from Titan, locally rich and very powerful, who is travelling to Earth to clone himself an heir. He does not, however, behave as you might expect such a person to behave. Instead, he comes across as a cerebral, tentative, effete introvert – a bit like the author himself, then. The other characters are even less convincing – they're just outlines, not even cardboard cutouts.

But the point of the book is not the characters. It's the gee-whiz technology and the surprising science facts. As a young reader, I found these sufficiently diverting. Sadly, I no longer do. Part of the trouble is that here we have Clarke in 'prophet of the Space Age' mode, but his prophecies are trivial and cockeyed.

Clarke himself once divided insufficiently radical predictions about the future into two kinds: failures of nerve and failures of imagination. In this book, he displays few failures of nerve, but several, unusually for him, of imagination. He foresees (at least implicitly) the personal computer, the mobile personal assistant, the mobile communicator and the internet, but he doesn't put them together and completely fails (as, to be fair, everybody did) to realize the massive consequences that would result from their amalgamation.

Consequently, his vision of how information is distributed in his imagined future is very centralized, bureaucratic and in some ways almost authoritarian. And when he gets down to the details of user interfaces, menus and things like that, he visualizes a very clunky, library-catalogue-type presentation, not terribly user-friendly at all.

What Clarke failed to anticipate is the effect of competitive consumer capitalism on the design and presentation of technology. Its absence here proves the truth of the distinction between 'constructive' technologies (whose consequences may be foreseen) and 'disruptive' technologies (which change our lives in unpredictable ways). Having failed to imagine the disruption, Clarke ends up profiling a future that looks more old-fashioned than the reality of our present day. Actually, it looks a bit old-fashioned even from a 1976 perspective.

To sum up: this is an entirely disposable part of the Clarke canon, lacking any of the sense of wonder he deploys to such magnificent effect elsewhere. Avoid unless bored and seriously stuck for reading matter.

Jake says

Unexpectedly romantic are the words that describe *Imperial Earth*. For many years I have known this novel only by its title. Based on that title, I had assumed the novel would feel bold and grandiose in every respect.

So I was not prepared for how unexpectedly intimate and introspective it is.

If novels like *2001* and *Rendezvous with Rama* are operas, *Imperial Earth* is more of a play. And I love a good play. Get me musing about deep aspects of humanity and science, and I will pardon the absence of a climactic spectacle. That is not to say that *Imperial Earth* lacks adventure. The first third of the novel, depicting life on Titan and a voyage to Earth in 2276 (think Quincentennial) is enthralling.

The ideas and themes of *Imperial Earth* are similar to *2001* and *Rendezvous with Rama*. But those novels portray actual 'first contact' scenarios. *Imperial Earth* explores why we haven't had first contact and might never. Hence, the novel delivers a generally bittersweet portrait of humanity as a species who is as likely to fizzle out as blow itself to smithereens. However, I am not saying the novel is a universal downer.

As a serious Arthur C. Clarke fan, I relished how he explores the potential of radio technology along with the continued relevance of the oceans to humanity's potential. Clarke masterfully weaves them together to develop the plot and leave readers pondering. The result is a surprisingly poetic lesson about how the frontiers of the past can become the decadent cesspools of the present.

This is also one of the more prophetic of Clarke's novels. Written in the 70s, Clarke is already able to anticipate the long-term decline in pioneering that will--and did--follow the Apollo space program. And though he lacks the vernacular of "smart phones", Clarke tellingly depicts an Earth culture that has developed a fetish-level dependence on communications technology.

I can't say that I felt this novel was a masterpiece, but neither would I dare regard it as one of Clarke's lesser works. *Imperial Earth* is high-quality science fiction. Clarke grapples with humankind's potential by depicting the external and internal stumbling blocks we must overcome to succeed as a species...or rather, to continue succeeding.

Bottom line: If you are a Clarke fan, don't miss this one. It might not wind up your favorite, but *Imperial Earth* is Arthur C. Clarke in his prime—both as a novelist and a thinker.

Daniel Kukwa says

I think SF author Ben Bova must have read this and had his socks knocked off; the flavour of "Imperial Earth" is all over his lovely Grand Tour novels, and you can see in Arthur Clarke's book the inspiration for Bova's more recent epic series (and it's all win-win, as far as this SF fan is concerned). It's an odd title for a novel that is an exquisite exercise in peaceful world-building, but Clarke creates a living, breathing future you can reach out and touch. Mind you, some of the dreamy tropical reef exploration feels a bit out of sync with the rest of the book, but it's a mild tangent that doesn't detract from the rest of this sumptuous novel.

Yukino says

Anno nuovo, nuova sfida..leggere almeno un libro al mese con la parola che verrà sorteggiata.
Questo mese era Terra.
Così ho trovato "l'occasione" per leggere finalmente questo libro.

E' un libro molto tecnico che a tratti può risultare noioso, ma a me è piaciuto. Mi ha catapultato nel 2276 su Titano, e poi sulla Terra.

Belle le descrizioni dei luoghi, delle usanze..di tutto. il viaggio è stato emozionante..mi sembrava di essere nello spazio.

Clarke a me piace. qui sembra che sia dedicato solo alle descrizioni di un mondo futuro che non porta a nulla, e ad un certo punto la storia si infittisce.

Per gli appassionati del genere.

Steve says

In 2276, the US is celebrating the 500th celebration of its independence, and the colony from distant Tritan is sending a member of its ruling family to speak. Duncan Makenzie, the third 'generation' of Makenzies, the younger two being clones of the patriarch, is in his early 30s and will make his first journey to the home world, Earth. This means that Clarke creatively develops Titan, a colony on a moon of Saturn that is very inhospitable to earthlings, but where we've built a colony that's working. Communication and transportation have been worked out (with the wry observation that the handheld devices seem an awful lot like those we have now, more than 250 years before this is set).

From the moment that Duncan meets with his 'grandmother', the story develops nicely, with Duncan a character to enjoy in the novel situation of a human adult's coming to Earth for the first time. Earth's fascination with history gives Duncan and the reader interesting perspective on how things were, and how they got to be different. The cleverness of the story and the development of Duncan, as well as how a childhood friend and a woman in Duncan's past come to affect his trip to Earth draw one in nicely. For this reader, the beginning that seems rather dry nearly led me to abandon the book. I'm glad I stayed with it, finding my comfort when the focus turned to Duncan alone, with his meeting with 'grandmother' Ellen. This is a read both worthwhile and enjoyable.

sologdin says

Nutshell: copy of a copy of the colonial administrator on Titan travels to Earth to make yet another copy of himself, gets re-involved in love triangle, gives congressional speech at US quincentennial, &c.

Doesn't ever really get off the ground for me. Not until the final third of the volume does the love triangle reactivate, along with an arbitrarily associated techno-financial intrigue. The latter involves the construction of a very large radio telescope to pick up kilometer-sized radio waves that originate in "star beasts," "hundreds of thousands of kilometers across" living for millions of years in the interstices between stars (284). Yeah, I know, right?

Reads like an anthropology of earthlings by an alien for numerous sections (social, geographical, archaeological, zoological). Lotsa humor generated this way, from malapropisms, misrecognized history, and so on. It's like the opposite of *Rendezvous with Rama*, where now the aliens explore us, which is about as exciting.

Tries to do something slick with a section (174-82) involving a tour of the salvaged *HMS Titanic*. Narrator is

from *Titan*. Haha CLEVAR! Not sure what the comparison is supposed to be, though.

Cool to track the lapses (not that such lapses toll against the writer--who, after all, can predict the future in all its particulars?): all possible information is stored in various locations, and can be accessed electronically--very internet--but since the library on a ship only holds ten people, it bottlenecks at that point (75)--so, no ipads?

As I mused in discussing Orbitville, spacefaring narratives have their own magic systems with regard to FTL travel. In this one, we're pre-interstellar travel, but the magic still arises in some engaging discussion of the asymptotic drive, which involves hooking a vessel up to a singularity (87-91). Cool thing is that the singularity is fed hydrogen, and accumulates mass--so they get too heavy eventually for the vessel and must be discarded. Where in the flying fuck do they dump all the used black holes, then? Tell me that, Mr. Clarke!

Earth has developed some useful practices in the near future: public servants are selected by lot from a pool of qualified persons, and those who want the job are by definition not qualified (111); motor vehicles run on autopilot (116); the profit motive is extinct (191).

Thoughtful interpretation of *Moby Dick* (210-11). Plenty of self-derogating anxiety of influence moments, such as when the narrator "did not relish playing a role in some sleazy, old-time spy or detective melodrama" (219), though the novel is not fairly described in those terms. Flash of Clarke's genius in telling how Earth "probed the surfaces of distant stars, detected their hidden planets, discovered such strange entities as neutrino suns, antitachyons, gravitational lenses, spacequakes, and revealed the mind-wrenching realms of negative-probability 'Ghost' states and inverted matter" (241).

Recommended for barbarians from the outer darkness, those coming from an aggressively egalitarian society, and persons outraged that a god should be afflicted with lice.

Illyria says

This book is chockful of twists and surprises. At the beginning it looked like nothing more than an exuberant, gratuitous, though admittedly juicy, narration of life on Titan, the biggest of Saturn's moons. Clarke's description of hydrocarbon clouds and ammonia snow, the rose-tinted atmosphere and the wax formation that wraps around lukewarm volcanic effluvium is mesmerizing, as is his characters, the Makenzie twins, separated by decades, because they are clones. Add to that the fact that book was written in the seventies and yet it had predicted such things as palmtop organizer and the internet, and the kind of propulsion engine powered by mini black holes, the kind only mentioned in the Star Trek series so far. Add to that pentominoes, polyominoes, joy stick, null-G sex and asymptotic drive, and you have your perfect recipe of a jolly romp in space. Still it didn't seem to promise much beyond mere advertisement on life on Titan, and I admitted to a slight feeling of disappointment.

But then on the 500th anniversary of the USA, Duncan Makenzie was invited to give a speech before the assembled representatives of Earth and its colonies. The story switched to the vivid, poignant exploration of an estranged home by Duncan, who not only has to train hard to acclimatize himself to Earth's stronger gravity, but also meets his first horse (...*First Monster from Outer Space*.... Understandably, since the horse is a Percheron weighing upwards of a thousand kilos, bred in the past to carry fully-armored knights), his first butterfly (*an exuberant--no, arrogant--loveliness*, is first taste of honey, his first underwater murder

Then suddenly, with the sudden appearance of a gemologist, it seemed that the book had turned into a whodunit, full of mysterious, exotic things like titanite being smuggled and a friend slash ex-lover falling off radio telescopes.

And yet, in the end, the book gives another twist, a profound, unutterably grand, and yet chillingly frightening, capped with a speech rife with courage and heroism it would've made Abe Lincoln proud.

As usual Clarke presented his readers with solid science and a healthy dollop of dry humor, but also as usual, he staggered the mind with a vision of such mindstopping scope and scale. Hence the five stars.

Nick says

Well this was pretty cool.

Descriptions of Titan, of space travel, and of a depopulated and reforested earth are all great. I also like the idea of Washington DC as a giant smithsonian. Settings are all great as usual.

The social/cultural observations which are thrown in are pretty neat too. For example (spoilers) the main character is black, but this is only revealed halfway through the book as an inconsequential detail. He is also bisexual, as are most people. Religion and meat eating have also pretty much died out. Also large concentrations of wealth no longer exist.

One... interesting thing was reading this book as a non-barbarian. Clarke has this almost Venus Project like techno-socialist mentality. It is evident that he believes technology combined with careful central planning will alleviate as much of mankind's woes as it is possible to eliminate. The main character is also a politician, and the president of the US is a prominent secondary character.

Hard scifi elements were all present and well done (described in vivid and precise detail). Spaceships powered by black holes, zero gee sexytme, atmosphere mining of Titan, enormous radio telescopes, COOL ASS ALIENS, smartphones, the internet, "experience machines", etc. Also I love reading about how these people are supposed to be still using tape for data storage and using command prompts on their smartphones. Lol.

In terms of plot, it was basically standard Clarke. The major plot points are all science based, and there are a good amount of twists and revelations. Even so, plot is not the main show IMO.

Booknerd Fraser says

It's been a while since I picked up Clarke, and somehow I missed this when I was younger. In a lot of ways, I'm glad I waited, because there are some parts of this that would not have effected me the same way when I was younger.

It's probably the best character work Clarke ever did. The main character tours Earth - well, the US, mostly, in 2276, coming from his home on Titan. So it's part future travelogue. It's fun to see how close Clarke comes to things just 30 years later (the Internet, personal mobile devices) and where he doesn't quite make it

(the "smartphones" aren't phones, nor are they exactly connected to the "internet", but are boxy, and everyone still used command line interface!!!). One was a little chilling - that the Empire State Building would again be the tallest building in Manhattan.

That's not all, however. I liked the scientific mystery plot bound up with his own life near the end.

Clarke, I think, unlike Asimov or Heinlein, improved with age.

?????? ???? says

Ahmad Sharabiani says

Imperial Earth, Arthur C. Clarke

Brayden Raymond says

Right so at first this book honestly felt kinda like Duncan was just logging his journey to Earth. It felt weird with no clear plot direction to me, other than to get a clone etc. However that quickly changed and things picked up. Like a snowball rolling down a hill. Clarke builds and builds the tension within this novel until it finally spills over the edge. The resolution fits quite well and left me feeling content. Especially with the twist at the end that I had pegged a few pages before it was revealed. All in All I was extremely pleased with this book and will definitely be picking up another Clarke novel in the near future.

Stella says

As wonderful as is to be expected from Clarke. Love love love his vision of Earth in the not so distant future.

Denis says

Though far from a perfect novel, this was a wonderful speculative trip to the future; the year of America's Quincentennial, to be precise. It was published in time for its two-hundredth ('76).

Note: Isaac Asimov wrote the excellent "The Bicentennial Man" for the same occasion.

What Clarke wrote was a simple story of a man "Duncan Makenzie" who visits the Earth from a colony at Titan for diplomatic reasons - and also in order to clone himself while there.

The story as a whole is very optimistic, as is most of Clarke's work.

Again, though not much of a plot and such, I enjoyed it very much.
