



## Cards of Grief

*Jane Yolen*

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**Jane Yolen's award-winning story about an alien civilization forever changed by the incursion of human social scientists and a mysterious ancient prophecy**

The year is 2132 when members of the Anthropologist's Guild set down on the planet Henderson's IV, or L'Lal'lor as it is known to the native population. Charged with the nonintrusive study of alien cultures, the crew discovers a society containing no love or laughter. It is, instead, centered around death—a world of aristocratic and common folk in which grieving is an art and the cornerstone of life. But the alien civilization stands on the brink of astonishing change, heralded by the discovery of Linni, the Gray Wanderer, a young woman from the countryside whose arrival has been foretold for centuries. And for Anthropologist First Class Aaron Spenser, L'Lal'lor is a place of destructive temptations, seducing him with its mysterious, sad beauty, and leading him into an unthinkable criminal act.

Told from the shifting viewpoints of characters both alien and human, and through records of local lore and transcripts of court martial proceedings, *Cards of Grief* is a thoughtful, lyrical, and spellbinding tale of first contact. It is a true masterwork of world building from Jane Yolen, a premier crafter of speculative fiction and fantasy.

## Cards of Grief Details

Date : Published December 1st 1984 by Ace Books (first published 1984)

ISBN : 9780441091669

Author : Jane Yolen

Format : Paperback 193 pages

Genre : Fantasy, Science Fiction, Fiction

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## From Reader Review Cards of Grief for online ebook

### Scott Allen says

I have had this book on my Kindle for years. I bought it because it was on sale a long time ago and it sounded really good, but then other books caught my attention more than this one. The only reason I picked up this book at this point was because a colleague in my department suggested we participate in an informal book club. The idea behind the book club is to read things that we wouldn't normally read--trying to stretch ourselves in our reading habits. So, I got to choose the first book, and my colleague asked for something science fiction. I figured that this book would be a good first choice.

Cards of Grief is a very interesting novel. Yolen, at the end of the book, states that this is the only science fiction novel she's ever written, but it isn't even really science fiction. This is more of a fantasy novel with some sci-fi elements. Cards of Grief is about an alien civilization that is under observation by humans. The humans live in a space station or ship that circles the planet and they travel down to the surface on occasion. But that part of the plot is muted and the least interesting part of this novel. The alien civilization, their culture and practices, are what keeps you reading Cards of Grief. It is interesting because while these aliens appear human in many respects, they are very different from our own culture. The main difference is how their entire civilization revolves around the emotion of grief. We might say that our culture focuses on love or anger, but their's focuses on grief. They spend much of their lives grieving their dead loved ones, preparing to grieve for dying loved ones, and hoping that people will grieve when they die. It is interesting how this has shaped their entire civilization.

The writing style is probably the most interesting part of Cards of Grief. It is not presented in chronological order, we don't see the action through the eyes of one or two characters, nor do we have traditional dialogue throughout the story. This novel is told through the notes of the humans that orbit the planet--through the transcripts of their interactions with the denizens of this planet. There are recorded stories, monologues, and transcribed interviews; these are what flesh out the world and this story. It certainly is a very interesting structure. I wouldn't say that I was ever lost while reading Cards of Grief, but it made for a very slow burn of a read. Plot points are unwrapped slowly rather than the break-neck pacing that most modern stories adopt. Everything is told in past tense too. The action of what characters are talking about happened in the past and they are recounting it to another. In the beginning it made me question whether these characters were reliable as narrators, but in the end, I don't think I ever came across something that didn't jive with what another character said. I don't think this story would have been as effective if it were presented in another manner. Yolen understands what she is doing and creates a style that really flavors the book as a whole. The style makes this novel and is what makes the plot and characters interesting.

Yolen is a fine writer; perhaps not the poetic, imagery heavy prose I usually gravitate towards, but Yolen does a good job. I enjoyed this novel for what it was. I am happy that it wasn't longer--I don't think she could have sustained much more in this plot. It was slightly higher than average book for me. I rated it a 7/10 on my own scale, but here I would rate it a 3.5.

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### Camilla Hansen says

I'm at a loss for words after finishing this piece. I don't think I could find the words to describe the book either, even if I gave myself a week to think it through. It was such a special journey, one I enjoyed the entire

way through although I was not sure what to expect at first.

It certainly contains a lot more poetic feeling than science fiction in some sense, but it's not the dry and perhaps rather presumptuous type of poetry that at least I have encountered countless of times during my life. I'm not a big fan of poetry in general, actually, due to these encounters in the past.

What made me speechless? The book provides several perspectives on grief, many known to us but perhaps not as well considered as others. Yet there was something about the execution that made me keep turning pages like crazy, that made me ponder on the differences between the two cultures, and that left me a little... sombre. Perhaps that is not the right word, though.

Definitely worth a read.

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### **ambry says**

I was in the mood for anthropological sci-fi and this delivered, with sparse but evocative depictions of a society whose values and morals are just far enough from ours to be disquieting. The short and fragmented nature of the book means individual *characters* don't get much opportunity to show depth, but neither do they quite vanish into the archetypes that the Cards designate for them. (The Cards themselves are one element I wish *had* gotten greater (or no) attention, as they show up toward the end as rather an afterthought. A friend mentioned this book was originally two separate stories, one about the Cards and one, well, with everything else; I believe it.) I particularly appreciate the handling of LGBT issues within the alien society-- and the ways in which the humans' preconceptions blind them to at least one alien character's motivations.

I do wonder why Yolen describes this in the afterword as her only sci-fi novel, since I would definitely consider the Pit Dragon series sci-fi (and the first volume predates the publication of this by two years). But perhaps publication order doesn't reflect writing order, and she didn't bother to revise the afterword for publication.

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### **Sara Hagen says**

Jane Yolen's first novel for adults. Probably not her most polished work, but definitely an interesting concept.

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### **Danni says**

Jane Yolen writes a wonderful adult scifi. Is there anything she can't do?

Through recordings and interviews, this is the story of humans first contact with a planet whose culture revolves around grieving. The study was unfortunately tainted by anthropologist Aaron Spenser, who is under review for Culture Contact Contamination and has gone native.

Through revealing Spenser's mistakes, the novel must first explain the backstory — beginning as prince B'oremos discovers prodigy griever Lina-Lania and brings her to court to serve the Queen.

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A fully immersive novel in which Yolen has created a fascinating new system of politics, grief, relationships, and sexuality. Beautifully written and genuinely fantastic.

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### **Julia says**

*I loved this* and it only makes me wish Yolen wrote more for adults and teens. I miss her books. This is science fiction, but it reads like fantasy. Gray's culture is centered around grief and she is being studied by anthropologists in a heartbreakingly first contact situation.

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I owned a copy of the paperback and lost it in a flood seven years ago. I read on this on Kindle.

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### **Jessie says**

I've read this book several times, enjoying the poetry of the writing, the uniqueness of character, the wonderful alien culture. But it wasn't until this last reading that I fully followed the story. This time, I read the chapters in the order listed in the timeline and fully followed the storyline. Then I read it again from beginning to end. Jane Yolen is often considered a children's or young adult author. The simplicity of style is deceptive. The themes in this story of love, betrayal, death and change are beyond the comprehension of some adults I know.

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### **Tasula says**

This book brought me to tears by the end - primarily because of the subject, the end of life and the loss of loved ones, and also because most of the main characters had so little joy in their lives. But despite the subject it was not depressing, it was beautiful.

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### **Sineala says**

This book is beautiful, sad, and strange.

I didn't even know Jane Yolen had written any novels for adults until I found this the other day. It reminds me a lot of some of Le Guin's works, like *Always Coming Home* -- and how could that ever be a bad thing?

*Cards of Grief* is a very short SF novel about first contact told via recordings and interviews, of a matriarchal planet that has essentially perfected grief. And nothing else. Their lives revolve around grief. Naturally, one of the anthropologists falls in love with one of the grievers. If you think you know how this is going to go, you're probably wrong. Due to the style, which is both lush and ritualistic (due to the prose styles, and the fact that a large portion of the book is grief poetry rituals) and oddly disjointed (due to the transcript format), the book for me kind of whiplashes between Very Close and Very Very Distant. I have to assume that this was on purpose, but it means that reading it isn't entirely pleasant. But then, I don't think it's supposed to be.

It wasn't at all what I was expecting, but the characters are very compelling, and on the whole it was an

interesting read. If you happen across it, I recommend it.

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### **Brownbetty says**

A Jane Yolen that reads like an Ursula K. LeGuin, how curious! Of course, it doesn't actually read like an Ursula LeGuin, it merely resembles her greatly in form; the book is presented in the form of a series of documents, recordings, and debriefings, concerning the contact of anthropologists (xenologists?) with the people on the planet L'Lal'loria. The book explores their "grief-centred culture [which is:] as much art as religion," and Lina-Lania, chief griever to the Queen.

I'm just going to get this right out there; this was a slow, haunting book to read, and after I was finished it annoyed me to hell. The book seems to believe it was about grief, but I would disagree: the culture did not actually focus on grief as such, (that is, the loss to the living) but rather memorialized and celebrated the dead, for whom the only proper attitude could be mourning.

(I'm not sure I'm making this distinction well, and I hope no one reading this is recently bereaved, but grief is really a selfish emotion, it seems to me, in much the same way that love can be. When we grieve, it's about what *we* have lost. I don't mean to say grief is bad, it's just that it's about one's own hurts, and a culture actually organized around grief seems to me monumentally narcissistic and maladaptive.)

Despite that they weren't really making "grief" into an art-form, it made me want to clobber them. The only thing they could really look forward to was their deaths, when they would have their bid at real immortality, if their griever was skilled enough.

The rest of the book is your bog standard "Our two cultures were destined to meet in tragedy" story, which, don't get me wrong, takes skill to carry off, but I'm not quite sure if there's anything deeper underneath it. LeGuin is an anthropologist, her books are always about societies; I'm not quite sure what this book is about, if anything.

Filed under enjoyable to read, frustrating to contemplate. Karen Aich, you won't like it for stylistic reasons.

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### **Ungelic\_is\_us says**

I keep meaning to read more of Jane Yolen, so when I found this little column at Half Price Books I snatched it up. It's relatively short but rather engrossing. Very reminiscent of Ursula LeGuin's anthropological space opera novels, Yolen brings her own very interesting perspective and style to the first contact story. The story centers on the first human studies and interactions with a humanoid culture that is centered around grief (although not death); I found it very interesting in deliberate contrast with our death- and grief-averse culture. The aliens' society is also rigidly classist and matriarchal, but more open-minded about sex (between opposite and same genders) in some ways--I don't want to spoil the story, so I won't be more concrete with the details of how they differ from us. The plot is very carefully constructed using verbal accounts transcribed from "recordings," using the (unreliable) first person narrator to great and poignant effect.

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## **Elsi says**

Outstanding science fiction novel by one of my favorite authors. While browsing the online catalog at my local library, I noticed that several of Jane Yolen's books had recently been republished in electronic form by Open Road Media , so I borrowed Cards of Grief thinking that it would be a "nice" read. I mean after all -- this science fiction novel was awarded the Mythopoeic Fantasy Award. Yeah -- I wasn't so sure about a cross-over SF/F novel. I tend to like the ones that are clearly Science Fiction or clearly Fantasy.

Wow! My expectations were greatly exceeded. First of all, I would never classify this novel as Fantasy. It's pure and simple a "first contact" science fiction novel. Well, OK. I'll stick with "pure" since the story is anything but "simple". It was amazing. Complex enough to fully engage me, but clearly and straightforwardly told.

I could burble along for hours raving about how good I thought the book was, but you should simply pick up a copy for yourself. If it's not in your local library's catalog, it is available through the Kindle Unlimited program. Read the blurb above if you're curious about the plot. Or just trust me -- it's good.

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## **Pam Baddeley says**

Firstly, the 'Cards' of the title do not appear until the very end of the story which is set on a planet where the whole culture is centred around the idea of "grief" but really mourning, as in commemorating the dead. The culture is matriarchial due to the peculiar biology of the race, or rather the two races who can interbreed, wherein the men are only fertile for about five years maximum in early adulthood. They are ruled by a Queen from the Royal race who turn out to have some odd biological properties, but the Queen is aging and has produced only sons.

A young woman who is taller than those around her and is therefore probably a child who is half Royal - the young men are sent out for a year when first mature to 'sow' their seed as widely as possible to try to produce more Royals - has a gift for creating poems-songs (the arts are very closely associated) for the dead or 'grieven' as they are called and is recognised as such by Prince B'oremos who is nearing the end of his wandering year.

The girl, called Linna-Lania, from the line of Lania, but hereafter called the Grey Wanderer because of the character in her early poem - or just Grey by the Royals - is brought to court and becomes the Queen's Own Griever after accelerated training. One sinister, to our viewpoint, development of the grieving cult is that people routinely take 'the Cup' - a painless poison - when either they are terminally ill and suffering, or else just because they have disappointed others in some way. For example there is a throw away remark at one point about a servant who is responsible for a curtain not hanging right who will probably have to choose between dismissal (which might lead to a life of penury in this culture) or suicide via the Cup. Similarly, Grey's own innocence leads her to make a remark which has fatal repercussions for a family member.

Into this rather static and possibly stagnating society comes a human mission who at first study the population via hidden recording machines but who eventually intervene directly to initiate first contact. This we're told leads to the trivialising of the grief cult by the end of the story - yet there were already signs that the whole thing was a rote observance in the sections where Grey is discovered. There is a more immediate and personal impact on Grey herself however.

The story is told in a disjointed fashion via transcripts of the recordings made by the humans and therefore darts about in the history further complicated by the fact that for some reason, unexplained unless I missed it, shipboard time passes far more slowly than on the planet so that five years goes by there while 50 planetary years go by. I found this a bit distancing, and it was difficult to really engage with the characters. I also found the set up of the two races, so fundamentally different physically yet able to interbreed - and also to do so with humans - a bit difficult to accept and couldn't imagine any evolutionary pressure which would have resulted in males being fertile for only five years, given the far less onerous burden of fertility on men than women. So although superficially the book is science fiction, it comes across as being rather more of a fantasy - though in my opinion even fantasy should have internal consistency and believability. Therefore for me the story rates a 2-star rating but because of the quality of the writing, I have raised this to 3 stars overall.

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This is a strange book. It is filled with interesting ideas but it always feels distant and disconnected, not because of the "recordings" format, but because of something else missing. I never felt drawn to any of the characters.

### **Laura says**

Haunting and lyrical, *Cards of Grief* is a unique book, unlike any I've read before.

Told out of order in as a series of recordings and interviews, the story of first contact between the planet Henderson's IV and the Anthropologist's Guild is recounted. The people on Henderson's IV base their society around grieving, and the author creates a well-developed, interesting and alien culture. The inhabitants have a very different way of looking at life and death and as one of the anthropologists is drawn deeper into their world, the reader is drawn into their fascinating culture as well.

It's one of the few books I've read that I wish was *longer*. The story completely works as is, but it is a short book. I would have liked more with these characters and further development of their relationships. The prose is beautiful and musical, and the book has a melancholy tone, which matches its exploration of grief. I will admit, the story is odd in places, but it's one of those instances where I read it at the perfect time in my life and it really resonated with me.

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The closest comparison I can draw is *The Left Hand of Darkness*. For fans of that novel, and people who enjoy thoughtful sci-fi/fantasy with unique cultures, this is a must-read.

### **Liaken says**

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This is a strange book. It is filled with interesting ideas but it always feels distant and disconnected, not because of the "recordings" format, but because of something else missing. I never felt drawn to any of the characters.