



We Who Are About To...

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A multi-dimensional explosion hurls the starship's few passengers across the galaxies and onto an uncharted barren tundra. With no technical skills and scant supplies, the survivors face a bleak end in an alien world. One brave woman holds the daring answer, but it is the most desperate one possible.

Elegant and electric, *We Who Are About To...* brings us face to face with our basic assumptions about our will to live. While most of the stranded tourists decide to defy the odds and insist on colonizing the planet and creating life, the narrator decides to practice the art of dying. When she is threatened with compulsory reproduction, she defends herself with lethal force. Originally published in 1977, this is one of the most subtle, complex, and exciting science fiction novels ever written about the attempt to survive a hostile alien environment. It is characteristic of Russ's genius that such a readable novel is also one of her most intellectually intricate.

We Who Are About To... Details

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Author : Joanna Russ

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From Reader Review We Who Are About To... for online ebook

Tasha Robinson says

I picked this up because I ran across a webcomic praising it to the skies, and claiming it was a satirical feminist twist on the old "surviving a spaceship crash and restarting civilization on a new world" trope, where the men immediately wanted to repopulate the planet, and the women stood up to them and claimed autonomy over their bodies. That sounded amazing, and I wanted to see where that premise went.

But that's not what the book is about at all. It's about a group that survives a spaceship crash and then has to deal with the fact that one of their number is a crazy, bitter nihilist who resents their every effort at survival. The book does change up the usual trope, but it focuses on that nihilist's point of view fairly exclusively, without making her particularly comprehensible to people who don't share her views. The characters largely seem like familiar types, but they behave so oddly that roughly every other page was a "Wait, what?" moment for me. And then there are these flashes of lucidity that seemed like they'd go somewhere fascinating — like when the youngest, strongest man realizes he can just hit the woman who's leading the party, and win the latest argument that way, and all the survivors have to decide what to do about it — but those lines of inquiry just peter out entirely. The last half of the book feels stretched out and arbitrary, and doesn't do much with the protagonist to justify her choices, or the story's direction.

Bart says

(...)

The main gist of what I wanted to say is that *We Who Are About To...* is a lot more than a feminist novel. Framing the novel only as such — an easy mistake as Russ is the author of the better known *The Female Man*, and maybe even more importantly as identity politics is important in today's discourse on culture — does the novel tremendous disservice. Not that its feminist stance is not important, on the contrary, and well-done at that. But I'll refrain from elaborating further, and urge you to read the entirety of Duchamp's take — if you've read the book already that is, as the first experience of this book suffers badly if you've had too many spoilers.

(...)

I'll refrain from elaborate comparisons to *The Handmaid's Tale*, a book that's about forced pregnancies as well. Atwood's book is 10 years younger, but it's a lot less radical in conception. More importantly: as a social analysis, it is also a lot less believable, as I wrote in my review.

(...)

Please read the full review on [Weighing A Pig](#)

Vishy says

The way we discover new books and writers is sometimes quite interesting and serendipitous. This is how I discovered Joanna Russ' 'We Who Are About To...'. I read a review of Ursula Le Guin's 'The Left Hand of Darkness'. In the comments section, one of the commenters had recommended Joanna Russ' book and I went and read about the book and about Joanna Russ in Wikipedia and I was so fascinated that I couldn't resist getting it. I finished reading it yesterday. Here is what I think.

'We Who Are About To...' is set in a future time when space travel is advanced and people can travel instantaneously across long distances. A few men and women are on board a spaceship. An accident happens when they are travelling and they end up in an unknown planet. The planet has been 'tagged' in the past (tagging indicating that it could be potentially explored in the future to find out whether people can live there) but it has not been colonized. There are five women and three men in the group. They have enough food for a few months, but they are not sure about the living conditions in the planet – they don't know whether the water is safe, whether the air has problems, whether there are dangerous animals. Most of the indicators which they are able to measure with instruments seem to suggest that the planet is safe. One of the men says :

"if it's tagged, that means it's like Earth. And we know Earth. Most of us were born on it. So what's there to be afraid of, hey? We're just colonizing a little early, that's all. You wouldn't be afraid of Earth, would you?"

Most of them want to explore the planet and put down roots there. The men want the women to bear children. Most of the women agree with it. Except the narrator, our heroine. (I don't think her name is revealed, but I am not sure now.) Our heroine wants to be left alone. She tells the others that after their food runs out they will struggle. They don't have medicines if they get ill. Someone might fall and get a bone broken. The planet looks safe at first sight but on further exploration it might turn out not to be. On the comparison of the planet with Earth, she thinks :

Oh, sure. Think of Earth. Kind old home. Think of the Arctic. Of Labrador. Of Southern India in June. Think of smallpox and plague and earthquakes and ringworm and pit vipers. Think of a nice case of poison ivy all over, including your eyes, Status asthmaticus. Amoebic dysentery. The Minnesota pioneers who tied a rope from the house to the barn in winter because you could lose your way in a blizzard and die three feet from the house. Think (while you're at it) of tsunamis, liver fluke, the Asian brown bear. Kind old home. The sweetheart. The darling place. Think of Death Valley...in August.

Our heroine feels that they are so far away from human civilization that no one is going to find them. And when their food runs out they are going to die. She says that as that is going to happen in the near future, they might as well shelve any other plan and prepare to die now. The others don't agree with her. They keep her under observation so that she doesn't do anything unexpected. But one day our heroine leaves in the night and travels afar and finds a cave where she rests. The others find her after a few days. A fight ensues. Some unfortunate things happen. Then our heroine does what she had planned to do. She gets ready to die. She describes it like this :

"ars moriendi is Latin. It is a lost skill. It is ridiculed and is practiced by few. It is very, very important. It is the art of dying."

The first one hundred pages of the book describe our heroine's interaction with her spaceship mates. The next seventy pages describe what happens when she gets ready to die.

I found the central theme of 'We Who Are About To...' quite powerful and interesting. If we are not spiritual or religious, it could be our own story told in science fiction form – on how all effort is meaningless

(except for making our life comfortable and happy when we are around) and the only inevitable thing is death. If we are religious or spiritual, of course, we will vehemently disagree with the story's central idea, because according to us a better world awaits us after death. The book also describes what happens when a few people end up in a isolated situation cut-off from the world – on how normal rules don't apply there, on how new rules are formed based on the power structure, on how women are taken care of but are also suppressed because of their ability to bear children. The book also explores the theme of freedom – whether we can really practise our freedom when what we want is at variance with what most others want, and the price we have to pay for practising this kind of freedom. In some ways, Russ' book made me think of 'We' by John Dickinson which I read a few years back and which had a similar theme, but a different ending, and which I liked very much.

'We Who Are About To...' is a powerful book. I wish I could say that I loved it. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case. I couldn't love the book as much as I hoped to, when I started it. I can't really fathom the reason why. A significant part of the book was slowgoing. I like slowgoing books but here at places I had to really plough through. The second part of the book is a long monologue by the heroine. Though some readers might be put off by long monologues, I love them. But still overall the book didn't click for me. It didn't have the kind of impact that my favourite books have. I was hoping to feel sad or happy or cry or think deeply when the book ended. But none of this happened. However, I am not giving up on Joanna Russ yet. Maybe Joanna Russ grows slowly on you. I have one more book by Russ – 'The Female Man' and one more on the way – 'How to Suppress Women's Writing'. I hope I will like them more.

I will leave you with some of my favourite passages from the book.

We always make such distinctions between those of us who are us and those of us who are tables and chairs and then some table turns up and thinks at you, criticizes you, talks to you, looks down on you. Likes you.

If Earth had been hit by plague, by fire, by war, by radiation, sterility, a thousand things, you name it, I'd still stand by her; I love her; I would fight every inch of the way there because my whole life is knit to her. And she'd need mourners. To die on a dying Earth. I'd live, if only to weep.

One does see, really, in the dark. If you wait long enough. Not real dark, underground dark. But even in a bare night you can see if you wait long enough. Just don't look directly at things. You can even tell water from non-water.

Starving doesn't drive you mad. But solitude does.

Meaning preserves things by isolating them, by taking them beyond themselves, making them transcendent, revealing their real insides by pointing beyond them.

Have you read 'We Who are About To...' or any other book by Joanna Russ? What do you think about them?

First Second Books says

I was amused by this book because I think it's a reasonable example of how I'd respond if I ended up crash-landed on an alien planet with a small group of people (possibly minus the murder, but you never know). They'd be all like, 'let's establish the building blocks for a civilization!' and I'd be, 'you guys, you know

that no one's ever going to find us and we only have food for two months, right?'

Sarah says

I read *The Handmaid's Tale* when I was pregnant with my first child. So, of COURSE I read *We Who Are About To . . .* shortly after the birth of my second. Thus, the supreme inconvenience of pregnancy, the utter danger of childbirth, and the crap-shoot of infant survival were pretty high up in my mind while I read.

I don't think I've ever read a book where "survival" was the dumbest option, but I do remember a comedy bit where the guy said that in the event of zombie apocalypse, his survival tactic would be to shoot himself in the head. Frankly, that really did seem like the best option to me. Food in cans never gets better, guys.

Meanwhile, my husband has been reading some of the less bad *Dune* sequels. *Dune* always struck me because of the detailed world Herbert builds. No aspect of *Dune*'s flora or fauna or anthropology has been neglected. So, it was a real change of pace to be dumped on Russ's little weirdo planet where nobody knows anything about anything and nobody will ever have the time to figure it out. It had never occurred to me that just because plants grow in a place, that doesn't mean there's anything there for you to eat.

Nevertheless, our protagonist answers the question of why the heck early people would pay attention to the movements of the heavenly bodies in the very first place: sheer goddamned boredom.

I mean, really. Why else do humans do anything?

I hesitate to call this a "feminist" book, because it offends me that women have to have our own category despite the fact that we're A) over half the population and B) arguably more important for the survival of the species. We keep ONE rooster, if you know what I mean. Nevertheless, I think this book gets right exactly how hard colonization is in even the best of circumstances. I remember reading Card's *Homecoming Saga* and the women just started popping out babies like the helpful Mormon ladies they were. Nobody talked about how hard reproduction is. Nobody dies, that I can remember, in labor. None of the children are born with defects or dead or any of the other highly statistically probable things that are bound to happen in a tiny, inbred colony. No no. You know what got lauded in that book? A gay dude takes one for the team and makes it with a lady. High five, pansy, for reaffirming the preeminence of masculinity by doing like two minutes of work!

It is also possible that I am just bitter about Orson Scott Card. You can forgive me this, surely.

Anyway, the narrator of this story is under no illusions about how the world works. Her flashbacks give you some idea of the civilization humanity has built for itself and her experiences in her old life have made her an astute observer of human nature. She had an idealistic part of her life as a "neo-Christian," and so she knows what fervor for the impossible can do. This is why she's dead set against it. She's also an educated woman, and so she knows what a return to barbarism will do to them. That is foreshadowed fairly early in their stay when the knuckle-headed young man decides he's had enough of listening to the whiny bossy-pants woman.

But of course, it would be very easy to get a little depressed about this book. Most of the people end up being pretty much how you would expect. But, you have to keep in mind that the whole thing, much like Offred's story in *The Handmaid's Tale*, is a diary. So, these experiences are recounted to you as she remembers them,

so naturally the people are going to behave in ways that conform to how she expects. She's been beaten into cynicism too hard for it to be any other way. Plus, if she is really as hopeless as she says, why bother to keep a journal in the first place? Even she wonders about this, asking who she expects to find it. And yet, here we are, reading it. Who are we? Was she, after all, wrong to lose hope?

We can't know. And this lends a palpable tension to the whole book. I more or less knew where the book was going before I began reading, but even so I felt a twinge of hope for these people. On the one hand, I completely agreed with the narrator regarding the facts of the situation, but on the other *I* know it's fiction and anything can happen and very often does. There's a long history of proving the nerd wrong. But then, the ghost of Cassandra is always there to haunt us. (In this book, literally so.)

So, like all books that are kind of downers, I don't know where to stick this in my headspace. It's well-written and gripping. I wanted to return to it when I put it down. The characters were a little stereotyped in the Gilligan's Island kind of way, but I think the author knows this. I can see this book being a real reaction to all the survival fiction out there where brave men (and women sometimes) beat all the odds to live happily ever after. I know that when I read that genre, I think about myself in the same situation and I just know it would be the end of me. Those books can portray civilization as corrupt and nature as restorative, but in reality it isn't that simple.

The narrator comes from a civilization where most of the technical problems of survival have been eliminated, but instead of creating the utopia that mankind seems always to be striving for, they have just created more of the same. Wealth is power, new ideas are dangerous, most people do busywork that keep them out of trouble. Nevertheless, she would return in a heartbeat. She has friends she loves, music she adores, experiences she would like to have again. The wilds she has come to lack the corruption and banality of humanity as she knows it, but it also lacks the simple pleasures of, say, having a glass of water without worrying that you are slowly poisoning yourself. Nature is only restorative to humans if it's temporary -- if one day, you can go back to someplace with your lessons learned or you take the nature and you turn it into the civilization you left behind. The planet they land on offers neither option.

In the end, the narrator prevails. But was that the best outcome? We just can't know.

John Walsh says

The most depressing science fiction novel I've ever read.

Charlotte Dann says

Found this book pretty insufferable, especially towards the end, despite its interesting premise and voice. I made a full video on it too.

Nate D says

The unacceptability of outsiders. The inability of society to accept, discuss, or process perspectives that run

sharply against its primary thrust. Not even so much *against* as just completely *oblique* to, even.

Essential sci-fi premise: survivors of a crash-landing on an unknown and unexplored planet.

Essential sci-fi elaboration (particularly golden era): civilization goes on! plucky survivors maintain hope, persevere against all odds!

Essential reality: if no one knows where to look for you, in the vastness of space, you will never be found. If you don't know where you are, almost anything will probably kill you. If you can eat the flora or fauna, surely some of it can eat you too. Mineral or biological water impurities that no human body has ever encountered. Unexpected atmospheric effects. (Even granted breathable air -- the ship computer ran some calculations, found that at least.) If you crash land on an unknown planet with no way to contact anyone and no information, it is sheer delusion to imagine you are any better than dead. Dead on a delay of hours, days, maybe weeks, but don't fool yourself. (We're all already dead on a delay of years, of course, this just brings that a little closer).

Or so might explain the narrator of *We Who Are About To*. (Like Xorandor this is sci-fi by dictation). While her fellow survivors immediately go about enacting every golden age sci-fi trope of maintaining civilization in the face of impossible odds, she quietly and without despair acknowledges the odds as impossible. The power and horror of a simple, calm contradiction of the fundamental drive of civilization. ("civilization must go on!" they say. "civilization is fine. we're just not part of it anymore" she says.) What she's objecting too is both the kind of menacing self-assurance of the new plans, but also the conventions of the genre she's fallen into. The drive to maintain this irrelevant veneer of civilized order, and organized plot-movement, is a kind of mania. Maybe not just in space.

On the other hand, how do people act without societal prescriptions gathered about them? Also not so great.

Just leave me alone.

David says

This is a mediocre book with a dreadful introduction by an author (Samuel Delany) who really should know better. Delaney's introduction mentions the Cold Equations, butchers the plot, and then quotes a critic (Katherine Cramer) who hasn't read the story either. This is the sort of hatchet job I would expect from a tabloid. Sir, you disappoint me.

Peter Tillman says

An interesting compare & contrast with Golding's "Lord of the Flies":
<http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2...>

Slate's Noah Berlatsky is more impressed with Joanna Russ's dystopic vision:

"Joanna Russ was neither confused nor ambivalent. *We Who Are About To*, released in 1977, is a clear-eyed, bleak excoriation of the interpenetration of masculinity, colonialism, and death. The short novel is about eight people—five women and three men—whose spaceship has gone off course and dropped them on

a distant, unknown, semi-hospitable planet.

According to science-fiction and boys adventure tropes, this should be the start of a story of adventure and excitement—or at least, à la Lord of the Flies, of devolution and satisfying violent confrontation with horrifying atavism. The people on the ship are familiar with these stories, as the narrator wearily informs us. The escape pod has barely landed before the others on board are engaged in “excited talk of ‘colonization,’ whatever that is.”

The narrator herself isn’t dreaming of colonization, though. As soon as the ship goes off course, she knows that on a world without food, with unknown dangers, billions of miles from rescue, they are all going to die. In fact, that’s the first line of the novel. “About to die. And so on. We’re all going to die.” The action of the novel—such as it is—is not about fighting for survival, either against the natural world or even against the other passengers. Rather, the narrator’s problem is that the other passengers won’t accept that they’re as good as dead. As a result, they decide that the women must agree to breed. ...

For Russ the horror of colonization isn’t some sort of romanticized savagery. On the contrary, colonization is ugly and terrifying precisely because of the boring dead weight of sexist norms, to which humans stubbornly cling even in the face of certain destruction. Violent masculinity isn’t exciting. It’s a series of clichés justifying power, cruelty, and death. "

Time for a reread, I think. Last read circa 1980, I think. If I had a copy, it's long gone.

Jeff says

This is just a near-perfect novella, in my opinion. A fascinating take on how we face death, and how we ought to, wrapped up in a neat little sci-fi plot. Also: And ending that doesn't back away from the difficulties that death presents.

Jayaprakash Satyamurthy says

First published as a standalone book in the year and month of my birth, this vast little novel starts with a familiar sf premise: 8 space travellers marooned on a distant planet. Russ subverts the usual colonial narrative in perhaps the expected way, but then goes further, much further, questioning and exploring beyond even the relatively sophisticated remit of a feminist subversion of genre clichés. This is a great novel, set very close to the bone, to the marrow of meaning and life and oblivion and death. A big, big book in its 118 pages.

Bert says

Sometimes I get a bit confused by things from the 1970s. Like, this was definitely good, a prickly bit of hip, underground sci-fi, and I wasn't always sure what was going on, which I'm fine with but I guess isn't ideal. The last 20 pages were great.

Nicole Cushing says

I stumbled upon this book at ReaderCon and decided to give Russ' work a whirl. This is the first of her books I've purchased. I'm open (but not chomping at the bit) to read her again.

I'm very much conflicted in my opinion about this novel. On the one hand, I felt it was as original and intriguing a take on alienation as I've ever read. There's a nihilism here, too, that I found appealing to contemplate. But, on the other hand, there's a matter of the late Ms. Russ' style. A blurb on the back of this book advertises it as "her most sheerly readable novel", but I found the narrative indulged too much in a sort of neurotic digression. While to some degree this works in terms of communicating the protagonist's character, I felt this "novel" (which, at 118 pages, feels more like a long novella) could have benefited from being whittled down to a novelette or small novella.

Jimmy says

I don't always read sci-fi, but when I do, I read sci-fi that doesn't resemble sci-fi.

I read Joanna Russ.

Oh yes it's in a future and on a distant planet. But Russ makes sure that none of that matters because they're stranded. All of those gadgets and gizmos of the future matter not a wit as they slowly devolve backwards into the 21st century, 18th century, something something B.C. Humans, savages, animals.

Thus stripping sci-fi of its sci-fi-ness (well, except a few little things... the broomstick was a hilarious touch, I can see Russ still laughing about it somewhere, that witch!), and what we're left with is a philosophical text, an internal monologue, a feminist statement, a reality TV show, an allegorical thriller.

A desert island book. One of the oldest age-old quandaries. A group is stuck with no hope of rescue. What is their first response?

'Civilization must be preserved,' says he.

'Civilization's doing fine,' I said. 'We just don't happen to be where it is.'

Survival! And babies! Let's have babies and ensure the human race goes on! But like *Bartleby*, our narrator would prefer not.

And no. No follows from yes.

One of the twistiest and most prevalent of human logics, that idea of survival. And that idea of survival being an act of heroism and courage. You hear it all the time from survivors of cancers and whatnot. No disrespect to them. But in this culture we REVERE survivors... to the point of parody. Still, you have to think: does it really take that much courage to go on living? To fight for breath is natural. To hold your breath against your body's insistence, to deny living and face death head on, that is what takes courage.

Well, I'm not sure I believe that either, but at least this narrator does. And she's entertaining about it too.

She's funny and cynical and witty. Her fellow passengers don't quite agree with her, to put it lightly, but they are no match for her. She's so much smarter than they are. The ironic thing is that she's the one who survives longest.

Or maybe the ironic thing is that because they are no match for her the book is less interesting. Or maybe not because it's only fitting that she has no real conflict: she is the best match for herself. Thus her friends come back as hallucinations, knowing all her weak spots and just what to say to her because it's the truth. And because we all have truths that hurt us.

At first I thought the narrator started out too convinced of her point. I thought maybe it would be more believable if she were more emotional, not as adamant, and then slowly came to her point as she lost hope of ever being discovered. There was no struggle within her at the beginning of the book. No looking at the situation and trembling just a little, which is just human.

But then when she was left alone, I could see the depths of her personality and I knew that it was the right move. She is just such an interesting and fully developed character, and there *is* development. In fact she becomes less adamant. Or at least she has more shades of moral misgivings, more points of human frailty. Her history is brought to life and you understand where her philosophy is coming from and why.

Brilliant. Funny. Insightful. Biting. Thought provoking. All the good book review cliches. Only fitting for such a un-cliche book.

Zulu says

I substituted this book onto my list because I figured it was time to flesh out my Russ reading instead of relying heavily on *The Female Man*. I didn't know what it was about before diving in, although Delany's introduction gave some un-subtle hints.

So the first-person narrator and seven other people, passengers on a hyperspace/tesseract space ship, are stranded on a random planet when the ship explodes. Delany says Russ was deliberately playing with the two contrary ideas that a) most plane crashes are 100% fatal and b) most SF stories about space ship crashes involve surviving, colonizing, and/or meeting friendly aliens. So Russ decided to buck the trend and write a more desperate sort of space ship crash, a more realistic and psychological approach than the gee-whiz-wow short story environment at the time (1976). Given that, I think this one will do nicely for my New Wave research.

I really liked this first-person narrator! She's a tough cookie. I'd call this book a great example of withholding in first person (something my first-year creative writing students need a lot of help with). She never deliberately conceals anything from us, but by the end we know that she's more than meets the eye, especially to the seven other survivors. She's clearly had combat training, knows a lot about incapacitating drugs, and faces the situation with clear eyes in a way the other seven can't. Basically, she knows this: *they are going to die*. Nobody else gets it. They're all bright-eyed and hopeful and hearty about the colonizing possibilities, which to be realistic are nil. For many reasons: the planet they're on is not even surveyed, they don't have the equipment to test whether things are edible, the weather while livable is not comfortable, and it might be summer now but what about winter, etc--your basic character v. nature--but more troublesome is the human element. First, even if they could survive, only two of the five women are fertile, and one of the men has congestive heart failure. Two women and two men does not a viable gene pool make. Even more

importantly, as the narrator sees coming from the start, she is not ready to surrender to the re-emerging patriarchy. It takes about two days for the biggest, dumbest, most socially awkward of the men to realize that dumb and awkward don't matter on a planet with no laws and no civilization; only big matters now, and he can use that. Everyone agrees that the women should bear children, and the narrator's basic impetus is not to harm anyone, but to avoid being raped.

She leaves them. In other words: she takes herself out of the control of the patriarchy and asserts her agency. She knows she's going to die anyway: she doesn't even take much food with her, less than her share. She doesn't deprive them of anything. She just absents herself. But they can't stand it! They have to hunt her down and make sure they control her. She rather knew they would, too. That's kind of what makes me cheer in reading. She does something unharmed but independent, knowing that it won't be tolerated, and when they come to get her back, then she opens up her can of whoopass.

I'm the opposite of Delany. He thinks the book gets all the more interesting in the second half when the seven are dead and only the narrator is left. Me, I preferred the first half when the narrator had foils (living not hallucinatory foils, that is). But I can see the appeal of the second half: the narrator, knowing she *will* die, sets out to deliberately die, through starvation. She could last six months on the supplies they have if she chose, but she's afraid of beginning to hope, she's afraid that she'll become like others and lose her realistic assessment of the situation. She wants to die because it is realistic and inevitable that she will die. That's fascinating stuff. But for me it doesn't quite make up for the fact that the back half of the novel is one character sitting in a cave starving and occasionally hallucinating. However, the choice to die, the ultimate in agency, is so counter to what I imagine was largely being published at the time that now I'm curious about the novel's reception (it was first published in two instalments in *Galaxy Magazine*).

Delany compares it with "The Cold Equations" and I can see it, but again the New Waveyness of it shows through. "The Cold Equations" is about gadgets ultimately (payload vs fuel), and the choice is not a choice, but pretty much amounts to murder: if the girl hadn't agreed to die, then the pilot would have killed her. In *We Who Are About To...*, the narrator chooses death at her own time and pace because it is the only human control she can exert. She is not forced to die--in fact, she kills to preserve her right to die. Rather than gadgets, what is at stake is human agency. It isn't about characters bound by the limits of technology, but characters bound by the limits of their social thinking (patriarchy vs individualism). That's New Wave, baby. I kinda love it.

mark monday says

A crash landing on a planet no one knows about...

A small group of entitled jerks and optimists, ready to make a go of it, build a home, make some babies...

An outlier in that group, a "realist" who'd rather just kill herself and advises the others to do the same...

A shocking turn of events occurring a little over halfway through the novel, upending all expectations...

A book that lives to explode the tropes and clichés of space opera...

An adventure that never began...

A narrative that becomes locked in the thoughts of that outlier, as she contemplates the frustrations of her past life...

A reader who became frustrated reading about all of those tedious frustrations...

A novel with little love for the human kind...

An author whose breezy, conversational style barely masks her deep pessimism...

An author with an admirable persistence of vision...

An author and a protagonist who are both completely true to themselves...

A protagonist who bored and annoyed me...

An author whose negativity challenged me, but not in a good way...

A story that left me cold...

Sessily says

What I appreciate the most about Joanna Russ, after reading this and *On Strike Against God*, is how rough around the edges she is. Not in terms of her writing quality or skill--in *We Who Are About To...* she uses an unreliable first-person narrator and an unexpected narrative structure masterfully--but in terms of her willingness to let the negatives of experience all hang out without apology. Of course, that makes her sound bleak, so perhaps it would be better to say that she seizes on all forms of energy--whether anger or fear or shame or euphoria or happiness--and let's them play out without trying to force them into conventional containers.

In *We Who Are About To...* this takes the form of a prickly, unnamed narrator who (to put it mildly) abrades and is abraded by her fellow (space)shipwrecked passengers as they face (or don't, as the case may be) the simple fact that they don't know where they are in the universe, aren't ever going to be found, and have limited supplies. From the first line ("About to die"), it's apparent that this is a novel about dying, or, more specifically, about how to live once you've realized that living is also dying. Our narrator sees their end as inevitable, while her fellow passengers quickly get to work talking about colonization and continuing civilization ("Civilization's doing fine," says our narrator, "We just don't happen to be where it is"). This conflict solidifies and deepens over the course of the first part of the novel, bringing up a variety of questions about their contrasting perspectives, what it means to live, and the relationship within a society between outsiders and the status quo. Most any answers the reader might think to have found in the first part of the book, as the conflict and the stakes intensify, are then undermined and shaken by the beautiful and uncomfortable second part of the book, when our narrator's carefully presented perspective cracks.

It's difficult to leave it there, without delving into those questions and answers and the specifics of how they play out with all their sharp edges and uncomfortable silences, the kind of questions and answers that hook into your mind and can't be shaken off, but to go more into it would be to potentially spoil that first experience of it.

(For better thought out observations, with spoilers aplenty, see L. Timmel Duchamp's essay on it.)

Kelly says

Womb Raider

Caution: minor spoilers ahead. Also, trigger warning for rape and violence.

The year's 2120 (roughly), and an unlucky group of space travelers find themselves stranded on an barren alien planet devoid of animal life. Hurlled there by a multi-dimensional explosion, they have little hope of being rescued, the nature of space travel being what it is: in essence, the folding of spacetime. Do it wrong and you can end up "God knows where, maybe entirely out of [y]our galaxy, which is that dust you see in the sky on clear nights when you're away from cities." (page1)

Though the planet is "tagged" – meaning that, at some time in the distant past, a team of scientists surveyed a square mile of the planet's surface and found nothing in the atmosphere that's immediately lethal to humans – it's far from hospitable; the narrator variously describes it as the Sahara, a tundra, the Mojave desert. They have few supplies – a water filter, enough dried food to last six months, a pharmacopeia of drugs stashed on the narrator's person, and the ship itself – none of which present a solution to their precarious situation, the book's futuristic sci-fi setting notwithstanding. With no way to call for rescue (assuming that rescuers could even reach them during their natural lives!) the survivors are left to their own devices. They are five women and three men.

Most of the group resolves not just to survive, but thrive: almost immediately, they set about colonizing the planet. Within days this new society devolves into an Upper Paleolithic patriarchy, the women of which are reduced to little more than baby makers, walking wombs. With the middle-aged Mrs. Graham luckily excused from service, and her daughter Lori a few years too young to bear children, that leaves three women: Nathalie, a young adult who was on her way to begin military training when the ship crashed; Cassie, a thirty-something ex-waitress; and the narrator, a 42-year-old musicologist with medical issues. Whereas Nathalie and Cassie somewhat reluctantly agree to "do their duty," the narrator (cynically but realistically) scoffs at their plans. In an especially amusing exchange, one of the men insists that it's their responsibility to rebuild civilization. "But civilization still exists," the narrator points out. "We just aren't a part of it anymore." (I paraphrase, but you get the gist.) Humans, always the center of their own little worlds!

Naturally, the narrator's fatalistic observations do not go over well.

Despite the obvious difficulties of starting over with nothing, the women are initially disallowed from doing manual labor (though this policy changes rather quickly), and just four days in the seemingly affable Alan savagely beats Nathalie for "disrespecting" him. (I guess he didn't get the memo that womb-bearers are to be protected.) When the narrator gets especially "uppity" and starts to talk of suicide, she's put on 24-hour watch so that her precious uterus is not compromised. Eventually the narrator – who's recording these events after the fact on a "pocket vocoder" – escapes on a "broomstick" (a small hovercraft), finding refuge in a cave several day's travel from the group's camp. Instead of letting this "troublemaker" go her own way, the group chases her down and attempts to drag her back "home," where she's to be tied to a tree, raped, forcibly impregnated, and made to carry and birth a child against her will. Barbaric, right?

And yet many reviewers seem to blame the narrator for her own predicament. She's nihilistic, narcissistic, a feminist harpy shrew. Indeed, by story's end the narrator comes to believe that she deliberately provoked her fellow survivors into a confrontation because she wanted an excuse to lash out at them physically. And perhaps this is true. *But they still took the bait*. Even after she removed herself from the situation, leaving them to do as they pleased, they hunted her down, with the intention of violating her in the most intimate and traumatic of ways. She (and the other women) was dehumanized and objectified; treated as little more than a means to an end. I fail to see how a little extra politeness on the narrator's part would have altered the men's plans.

Suicidal throughout the story – likely even before the crash – in the narrator I see not misanthropic feminazi, but rather a burned out and disillusioned activist (Communist, neo-Christian) who, when suddenly and unexpectedly confronted with death, is overcome with a sense of tired resignation. In life, she was unable to change history; and now, she will die outside of it. "I'm nobody, who are you? Are you a nobody, too?" (page 33; lower-case mine.)

We Who Are About To... is dark with a capital "D" – definitely not for everyone, as evidenced by the book's polarized ratings on Amazon. I found it compulsively readable – kind of like Margaret Atwood's dystopias (*The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake*, *The Year of the Flood*), but minus her tentative sense of hope. I'm a newcomer to Joanna Russ – I think I accidentally stumbled upon this book via a BookMooch recommendation, perhaps because Atwood, Octavia Butler, and Ursula Le Guine are heavily represented on my list – and have already added most of the rest of her oeuvre to my wishlist. A must for fans of feminist science fiction.

<http://www.easyvegan.info/2013/07/12/...>

Kristian Dobson says

So, me and my girlfriend decided to play a game for the first time: walk into a book store, pick a random book for each other based on the front cover alone, no reading of the blurbs, and only two chances to decline. If you decline twice, the third book has to be read.

This was the third book.

It's not something I'd pick myself but I suppose that's the point of the game: finding something out of your comfort zone; something new and (hopefully) good.

It was... okay. Good in parts, but for such a short book it felt very long. The central premise is one that's been done a million times before: a handful of people get stranded on an alien planet and have to survive. The difference here is the obvious feminist tone. The men want to colonise the planet. The other women agree except one (the nameless protagonist). She's not so much a fighter (or even a hero in any sense of the word), she just wants no part of it. In that sense she is relatable. Whilst the other characters have naive, optimistic expectations on their chances of survival and colonisation, our protagonist knows this is absurd and pointless. They're undertrained, unknowing of survival skills, and without any real medical equipment or food. While everyone else is wasteful of resources, our protagonist is rightfully scornful and takes every chance to tell them so.

The biggest issue I had is the protagonist and how unhelpful she is in any way. All she does is moan and

spew her own opinions on how things should be done without actually doing anything. I can relate to her behaviour but there are times to sit back and be a dick, and times to actually help. Maybe there is nothing anyone can do and they'll all die regardless. But it's like the second they arrive on the planet she has already chosen death.

As events unfold, she decides she'd rather die than be a part of their plans and that does not sit well with the group. Attempts to sneak out from the group to be alone are repeatedly prevented. Things get heated and... well that would be spoilers.

The story is told as a verbal diary from her vocoder. It's fragmented and occasionally annoying to read. I suppose that's the point (it's almost stream of conscious, like it would be if it was a real verbal diary), but I've never been a fan of that kind of thing so it is somewhat irksome.

For a feminist novel, it doesn't feel too 'I-hate-men' like I expected. The men are negative characters, but it makes sense in context of the story.

Overall, it's a decent read. It's mostly the writing style and the overly preachy nature of the lead character that irk me. The plot is unoriginal but there's some solid send ups of what you expect. Bleak is the word here. If you want something bleak, with plenty of philosophical musing, this is probably for you. If you want something that has an actual plot, details and explanations, stay away. It's essentially the (crazy?) mind of one character and her own fight for the right to live (and die) as she sees fit.

3/5
