



# Too Like the Lightning

*Ada Palmer*

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## **Too Like the Lightning** Ada Palmer

Mycroft Canner is a convict. For his crimes he is required, as is the custom of the 25th century, to wander the world being as useful as he can to all he meets. Carlyle Foster is a sensayer – a spiritual counselor in a world that has outlawed the public practice of religion, but which also knows that the inner lives of humans cannot be wished away.

The world into which Mycroft and Carlyle have been born is as strange to our 21st-century eyes as ours would be to a native of the 1500s. It is a hard-won utopia built on technologically-generated abundance, and also on complex and mandatory systems of labelling all public writing and speech. What seem to us normal gender distinctions are now distinctly taboo in most social situations. And most of the world's population is affiliated with globe-girdling clans of the like-minded, whose endless economic and cultural competition is carefully managed by central planners of inestimable subtlety. To us it seems like a mad combination of heaven and hell. To them, it seems like normal life.

And in this world, Mycroft and Carlyle have stumbled on the wild card that may destabilize the system: the boy Bridger, who can effortlessly make his wishes come true. Who can, it would seem, bring inanimate objects to life...

## **Too Like the Lightning Details**

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Author : Ada Palmer

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# From Reader Review Too Like the Lightning for online ebook

XX Sarah XX (former Nefarious Breeder of Murderous Crustaceans) says

? DNFinng this one preemptively.

Because reasons Jilly. Don't blame me, blame her! She mentioned the author **Breaking the Fourth Wall of Doom and Disaster and Utter Destruction of All Life on the Planet** (BtFWoDaDaUDaALonP™) AND writing **never-ending descriptions**, which caused this quite **unexpected (if a little allergic) reaction**:

? A very private message for Jilly: thank thee kindly for saving my ~~lovely derriere~~ exoskeleton and stuff.

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## Philip says

4.25ish stars

I won't even attempt a brief summary. The briefest summary I could manage would still be TL;DR. I'll say this: It's ambitious, it's complex, it's confusing, it's got a lot to say.

There are still a lot of things I'm unsure about:

- 1) Can't quite tell if it's a mess or it's brilliant, probably somewhere in between. I just know that I'm pretty sure I liked it.
- 2) I say pretty sure because I don't really know if I understood it enough to like it. I'm not very well versed in the philosophical ideas of the Greats (Voltaire, De Sade, Rousseau, Diderot) of whom frequent mention is made throughout the novel (nor do I have much desire to be, sorry not sorry). I just know that I have a pleasant feeling in my body that I typically associate with finishing a book I like.
- 3) I'm not quite sure yet if Ada Palmer is just so geeky about 18th century Enlightenment history that she pretentiously thought it would be a fun fan-fiction project to invent a far-future society deeply rooted in the distant past and, hey why not, write a novel about it or if it was a legitimately inspired, justified decision.

Will these questions ever be answered? Unknown. This is great as thinking person's sci-fi. Just be prepared to go slow and feel stupid.

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## Scott says

If you know anyone who doubts the inventiveness of Science Fiction as a genre, who questions the form's ability to encompass work of literary value, lend them a copy of *Too Like the Lightning*. This is a novel of massive ambition, fusing 18th century philosophy and ideas with a very well-built and awesomely convincing science fiction scenario that makes me excited for the future of my favorite genre.

Palmer's novel sets up a complex future unlike any other I've encountered. This is a future earth that is effectively post-nation state, where every global citizen chooses to join one of several 'Hives' when they reach majority, rather than focus their loyalty on a geographic area. Earth is now crisscrossed with a global network of computer and enhanced human controlled supersonic transit cars, that can cross the globe in a few hours and make travel easy and a person's national origin nearly irrelevant.

Birthplace still has some pull, but the Hives are the most powerful political groupings. Each grouping has its own laws and home territories, although 'Graylaws' – hiveless public servants, and 'Blacklaws' – hiveless people who have renounced the hives and the protections of their laws- exist outside the structure. From this interesting concept Palmer spins a story of political intrigue, murder, weaponised suppressed sexuality and a child who appears to be able to perform miracles.

The narrator, Mycroft Canner, is a servicer - a convicted criminal whose lifelong parole is to work for others in his society in exchange for meals. He cannot own property or money, but is highly skilled and is for most purposes akin to an educated and valued slave in ancient Rome, passed around various prominent people to assist on important projects. Canner, whose past crimes are unmentioned, works closely with the Saneer-Weeksbooths, controllers of the world's transit system, and the protectors of a young boy who appears to be able to bring inanimate objects to life with his touch. While trying to hide the boy a crime is committed that is linked to the Saneer-Weeksbooths, something that threatens to expose the boy, Mycroft's past, and the political machinations that are tenuously maintaining world peace.

If this sounds fairly dense, I assure you- I've barely touched on the ideas Palmer explores in her book. Occasionally I found the dialogues and discussions of weighty issues a little heavy, and found myself reading ten pages or so at a time before taking a break and coming back a little later. This isn't to say that Palmer's book isn't a page turner- at times there is great tension and mystery- but the pages in question can sometimes be rather weighty. This isn't an SF novel that will suit everyone- if you're looking for 'splosions and high drama in the interstellar void I recommend you look elsewhere.

If, however, you like unique and thoughtful SF with plenty of surprises you're in the right place. Every time I thought that I had my head around the strangeness of Palmer's world she threw another curveball at me and fired up my weirdness meter. I would feel I had a grip on a character, and then Palmer would throw me completely off balance.

As you can no doubt guess from my praise, this a great read. Don't expect much plot resolution though. I wasn't aware this was the first of two novels but I started sensing the inevitability of a sequel around a hundred pages from the end. Palmer sets up a hell of a lot in *Too Like the Lightning*, far too much to be resolved in one book. Most of the major plot elements have been left hanging at the story's end and I'm looking forward to the follow up to see where everything goes. If it's as good *Too Like the Lightning*, and delivers the payoff this setup deserves, we may just have new milestone work of Science Fiction on our hands.

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## Jo Walton says

Updated to add my Tor.com review: <http://www.tor.com/2016/05/10/a-futur...>

But the short version -- they're science fiction that has a solid and fascinating world, great characters, and also that make you think about all kinds of things. Since I read these, hardly a day has gone by when something hasn't made me think of them. It's easy to find books that blow your head off making you think about things in new ways when you're fifteen, it's a lot harder when you're fifty. These books show a future, a world, possibilities, that are different from ours -- and they do that while being up close and warm. There aren't many books that are so full of ideas while having so much heart.

Put them on your "to read" pile now. You'll thank me for it.

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## Basia says

[Ok, DEEEEEEP BREATH, Basia. You can do this!!!]

Hmmm. I have been a VORACIOUS reader since I can remember, first in Poland, and then in the US. I've mentioned previously that I credit my love of reading with becoming fluent in this language in only six months. Some of you may also know I have edited since I learned the language; it came to me naturally, as I had no preconceived ideas about what the words might look like until I met them; I learned to read, write, and speak these simultaneously, and according to all the rules--and the countless exceptions to these--that govern the English language.

I say this to make it crystal clear that I have read my fair share of novels, in English and in Polish, and sampled from many genres. And yet NEVER, never ever, in my entire reading life, have I worked harder to comprehend a book that made me feel like any IQ points I thought I had were no more than wishful thinking on my part.

As I began my journey through this book, I shared with a number of friends that I think I may not be intelligent enough for this book. And yet, even as I shared these comments, I could not set it aside. I chose instead to bombard poor Brad with inquiry after inquiry, because if ANYONE had the answers (aside from the author, of course), it would be he. [A special thanks to Brad for not unfriending me for the lunatic I had become during this period. ;) ]

Then somewhere around 27, or perhaps 35% into the book, the fog began to clear! I came to understand the sheer complexity, the delicious intricacies involved in this story! Such complexity DEMANDS exactly the kind of introduction provided to us by Ms Palmer. And the payoff I received for refusing to stop reading the book despite not feeling at all certain about whether I was even following it correctly is a TREASURE TROVE! A Prince's ransom, I believe is the fitting cliché for what I mean to describe here.

I LOVED the style chosen to tell the story: through the words of a narrator who witnessed most of the events described in the story. It was almost eerie, how often he'd say, Admit it, Reader. You laugh at this.

And there I'd be, driving in my car, and giggling to myself. Prescient, almost! Just ONE example among so, so many, of the countless kick ass facets to this intense, most elaborate and well-organized story.

In short (HA!), my GOODNESS, friends. This book is sheer madness in its scope, depth, design, the ideas it introduces, others which it reincarnates .... Gorgeous, stunning madness.

If I could move into some version of the world Ada Palmer created here--which provides enough detail to allow someone to follow her book like a blueprint with which to build a different kind of society altogether, I'd LOVE to .... Or I DID, until Brad pointed out that the next book's title may cause me to reconsider. :)

As a side note, I couldn't resist looking up Ada Palmer as I got closer and closer to the book's end. People, the woman is 35 years YOUNG, and has just EXPLODED with this series. Her background must have exposed her to so much, in order to create what I was fortunate enough to pick up and consume. I am BEYOND impressed.

So yes, I absolutely recommend this book. However, I suggest you get it in print, or print AND audio. I did audio only, and wish I'd chosen a combined media option instead.

A word about the narrator, Jefferson Mays:

He was so well chosen for this project! Wow. The accents were PERFECT, even as they were many! It was so pleasant, listening to him telling me this tale. Even when I had to rewind REPEATEDLY to try to ensure I was following, albeit feebly, his voice never became offensive nor uncomfortable. He was an excellent choice for this book.

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Happy reading! Onto the painful wait for the sequel(s) now ....

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## **Olivia says**

This is a fascinating and demanding read. One so complex that I don't find it easy to recommend it without adding a 'but.' It's a very ambitious book with an epic scope and intriguing world building. To like this book, you (probably) must either enjoy Voltaire, the 18th century, philosophy, or all of the above. It feels, at times, like the prose and the way Ada Palmer chose to write this book is more important than the plot itself, and not everyone is willing to put in that kind of work.

It plays in a futuristic utopia, maybe dystopia, and is told from the perspective of Mycroft Canner, an unreliable and to a certain extent unlikable narrator. We find ourselves in the 25th century, but Mycroft insists on writing like he time travelled straight from the Age of Enlightenment. Ada Palmer describes this futuristic society in astonishing detail and the characters are fascinating and well developed.

This one is definitely for the ambitious science fiction fan, and I'm pretty certain it will benefit from a re-read.

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## **Jilly says**

Stages of me reading this:

### Before reading.

You all might notice that my TBR list is always tiny. I get too much anxiety when it's huge, so I'm very picky over putting anything on it. But, when I saw a funky sci-fi that is set in the future:

### First few pages

Hum, the author is breaking the fourth wall by talking to us as readers. That's a little annoying, but I can handle it. Oh, I also notice that there will be words like "thee" and "thou" in a book set way in the future.

### First chapter

What the hell is going on? Nothing makes sense. And, the endless descriptions of everything isn't helping to clarify anything.

*(she) donned her boots too, tall, taut Humanist boots patterned with a flowing brush-pen landscape, the kind with winding banks and misty mountains that the eye gets lost in.*

### Next chapters until I DNFed

This is sheer torture. If we force the terrorists to read this, we will win. We never need to waterboard anyone ever again. Just force them to read this out loud. I think Satan wrote this book. With the tears of boredom that people shed while being tortured in hell while he was writing it - out loud. They begged to get thrown back into the flames.

In other words - Book, here is what I think about you:

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## **Bradley says**

Update 1/5/17:

Re-read complete! And one thing I can definitely say without hesitation? : Definitely better the second time around.

It's still mightily dense with ideas and worldbuilding and truly fascinating characters that always manage to surprise, surprise again, tease me to death with hints and portents, and then managing to slam me up against the wall in a very civilized fashion before disemboweling me. It's just that kind of novel.

I'm loving the Marquis De Sade commentary as much this time as before, the extra commentaries on how to rule effectively, right down to the philosophical underpinnings of morals and Apollo's aphorisms, and yet this novel still manages to be both firmly 18th century and 25th century to the hilt. :)

What was slow in the beginning becomes absolutely necessary for the later blowout special effects of Ada Palmer's writing later in the novel. I firmly believe that now. It was just a glimmer before, but now on the

second read, I'm a firm believer that this novel is just about perfect as it is.

I'm going to be recommending it for this year's Hugo nominations. It's wilding entertaining and strange and very intelligent, and beyond that, it shakes me nearly to the core.

I will also admit that it isn't an easy novel to read or enjoy superficially. It requires plenty of effort at all times and it's even more rewarding if you get all the classical and rather specialized Enlightenment references, but if you're on the same page, it's well beyond most novels out there. I'm talking about intellectual scope and the sheer depth and breadth of worldbuilding and ideas.

But I would be extremely remiss not to mention that Mycroft has got to be one of the most fascinating characters that I've ever read. And most surprising.

This mild-mannered squib did WHAT???? Oh my lordy... :) And the reasons for it? Oh my god... :)

I'm quickly wanting to ramp this one up to one of my all time favorite novels. Fantastic!

And now that I've got the sequel in my hands, I'm gonna enjoy the living hell out of a crumbling social system. :) Seven Surrenders, indeed. :) Seven-Ten list, anyone? lol And just who are they surrendering to? :)

Update 1/4/17:

This deserves a nice long re-read in preparation for the SEQUEL. :) Of which I just got and will be reviewing soon after. :) :) :)

Original Review:

Beautiful, Beautiful, Beautiful, Beautiful.

First impressions are very deceiving, with this one, and assumptions can get you into a huge mess of problems, but fortunately for us, this writer has some serious chops, can lead us into a world that never quite changes, from the first page to the last, but instead invites and sometimes pushes us over the edge and CHANGES US.

What is this world, where are we headed? Is this truly a futuristic high-tech utopia that stylizes itself off the Enlightenment period including Voltaire, Sade, and Rousseau? Ha! You'd like to think so as you begin your read.

Is the tale revolving around a handful of seemingly mild mysteries, that while interesting in themselves, seem more like a vehicle for unfolding one of the most gorgeous societal world-building tableaux I've ever had the privilege to read? Ha! ... Again, I was fooled, lulled into complacency even as I was overwhelmed with sheer walls of world-data, only to be saved, regularly, by the sure hand of a truly wonderful and insightful narrator who would steer us through the dense currents and land us safely upon solid ground. Could I have wished for a more perfect or more gentlemanly Victorian Guide in a strange land? Nope!

And then there were the conversations. This novel has a lot to say about gender roles, and it is tackled delightfully, maybe even better than Ancillary Justice for sheer oddity. Social and societal quirks surrounding religion, was a big part of the novel, too, but it was the Conversation that made this novel



become something Really Special.

And I really mean the Conversation; the ongoing discussion within whole fields of study and art and literature, or in this case, philosophy and science fiction. Ada Palmer deserves to be right up there with some of the best I've read, having so much to say about the Enlightenment period, made into a deep part of the story, aspects of the world-building, discussions both light and powerful between characters and even within our narrator's mind.

Some of the most awesome aspects of this novel are direct-line continuations of philosophy made into Art.

But do not let that dissuade you from this Oh So Excellent and Fascinating read, for even as I was fooled in the beginning, and as new and otherwise unforgivable glossed facts are slowly revealed to us, we are caught in a web much more complicated, dangerous, harrowing, bloody, and frankly more awe-inducing than I would have guessed in the first 150 pages.

It's a book worth reading several times over if only to pick up on all the clues that I had registered in passing, but not understood until much later.

And I will, because here's the real beauty... it's only part one of a two book cycle that belongs to one another. You know the symptoms. This is a fantastic larger tale that, by requirements out of the author's control, needed to be split unnaturally into two. It's only something truly miraculous and fantastic that the author still managed to make this single book feel complete and satisfying, even as it points to the second half of it's soul.

I feel truly blessed to be reading this. Ada Palmer has just earned herself a lifelong fanboy after a single wonderful read. This is what true Idea SF is all about, and it deserves to be up there with the very best. Remember Anathem? Sit yourself down for some real brilliance and some truly great set-sets.

I'm sure I won't be the only one who thinks the premise of the political setup is one I'd love to have now, even with its mature problems. I think this novel is going to be prompting an absolute TON of discussion among its soon-to-be legion fans. :) If there's any justice in the world, mind you. :)

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## **Maryam says**

Finally finished it... a long read for not a long book.

Did I very much enjoyed parts of it? sure

Did I very much find some parts of it disgusting? again sure

Is this book brilliant?it definitely is

So how I'm going to review this excellent and at same time weird SF book?The story is told by Mycroft Canner the ex mass murderer and convict who now serves society and mostly high powers as a servicer which is now a lighthearted pacifist. This is a new high tech world which countries aren't powers anymore but there are 7 Hives which control everything and fight an unseen battle for power among themselves.

This is a political science fiction but at the same time is full of philosophical references, weird encounters, strange dialog and a vast different character sets.Sometimes I felt it's too unlike my taste in books (believe me that rarely happens for me in SF genre) and then I couldn't put it down for two hours...

This is an odd book but highly recommended. Just fight the temptation to drop it, take a break from reading, continue later.

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### **Scott Hitchcock says**

*You will criticize me, reader, for writing in a style six hundred years removed from the events I describe, but you came to me for explanation of those days of transformation which left your world the world it is, and since it was the philosophy of the Eighteenth Century, heavy with optimism and ambition, whose abrupt revival birthed the recent revolution, so it is only in the language of the Enlightenment, rich with opinion and sentiment, that those days can be described. You must forgive me my 'thee's and 'thou's and 'he's and 'she's, my lack of modern words and modern objectivity. It will be hard at first, but whether you are my contemporary still awed by the new order, or an historian gazing back at my Twenty-Fifth Century as remotely as I gaze back on the Eighteenth, you will find yourself more fluent in the language of the past than you imagined; we all are.*

DNF 25%.

I think you need to read that opening paragraph and take the author at their word. They are writing a 25th century book and are obsessed with the 18th century. And for the record that isn't an author's note I posted, that's the first chapter aptly titled "A Prayer to the Reader". The author continues to ask the reader questions and I think some might like it but it came off to me as arrogance.

Palmer is clearly brilliant but because I'm not up on my 18th century writers and to a lesser degree that's century's history I felt like I was time and again missing the clear meaning. The author isn't spoon feeding the reader anything. You are immersed in this world and it's sink or swim. Speaking as a Malazan Book of the Fallen fan I actually liked this part of it but I was still confused enough at 25% to not be enjoying it enough to continue.

I think this is a brilliant work, just not for me. If you like challenging reads, sci-fi and have a good working knowledge of 18th century writers, philosophers and history I think you'll love this.

I have to 1\* it because it's my personal DNF rule but really the book is better than that.

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### **Stevie Kincade says**

(Re-read, original review below)

I loved every minute of re-reading this book. It was completely different reading Ada Palmer's prose from my initial experience listening to the brilliantly performed audiobook. The first time through it seemed like the audiobook required every neuron of my brain to focus on the story to follow it. I was constantly rewinding and writing notes while thoroughly absorbed. This time I could just enjoy the experience and revel in Palmer's (insert superlative) ~~orgasmic~~ writing.

On the first read this book seemed massive. The size of the world and the cast of characters and new things to learn was daunting. On the re-read the pages flew by and every paragraph was perfect and intensely, laser

beam focused. There was not a word out of place, every sentence was completely perfect, I don't think I've ever felt this way about a book before! With every sentence so perfectly sculpted there were several times where I found typos and would just read the sentence over and over again trying to make sense of it before finally realising - "this sentence contains a typo".

I find that in general my retention of details from audiobooks can be a bit low but I think it is testament to Palmer's writing that I feel like I remembered every important detail as I re-read.

Finally i would like to mention the 2nd last Chapter between Saladin and Bridger was one of the tensest, white-knuckle Chapters I have ever read and I knew exactly what was going to happen. I loved the constant appeals to the reader and in this Chapter Mycroft asks the reader to imagine we are providence itself and how would we step in and solve this situation. There were so many great moments in this book.

The afterword where Ada Palmer talks about how her desire to write this story burned within her like a physical thing is touching and beautiful and the passion for her masterpiece shines through every page. I am an unabashed Ada Palmer fanboy and state openly my love for this writer. I have had a few ideas for Terra Ignota T-shirts but I definitely want one that says "JEHOVAH MASON" and another that says:

Masons &  
Humanists &  
Mitsubishi &  
Europeans &  
Cousins &  
Brillists &  
Utopians

Bring on Seven Surrenders!

(Original Review - Audiobook) Ada Palmer is gangster as f\*ck. This might seem like an odd thing to say about an assistant professor of history and first time author - but only gangster rappers have the level of swagger and audacity it takes to pull off a miracle like "Too like the Lightning"

"Too like the Lightning" is a book that knows how clever it is, it constantly reminds us how clever it is being - and instead of being irritated by this, I was completely won over by its charms.

This is a very meta book, but the 18th century enlightenment era Palmer draws so heavily from practically invented *meta* with the "worship of the reader" and the "Dear reader" device.

A running gag is the series of arguments our narrator Mycroft Canner has with his imagined reader. Mycroft imagines he is angering his reader at various points in the story so pauses to argue it out with the "voice of the reader" he hears in his head.

The world building in this book is simply phenomenal. I was completely carried away into Palmer's world. As the waitress asked Bill Hicks "*whatchu reading for*" I would answer "Escapism mainly - but I wouldn't mind something that makes me think a bit". *Too Like the Lightning* delivers in spades. Perhaps to create a truly authentic future history you need an excellent knowledge of the past. Palmer draws not just from the 18th century but from classic Roman and Greek. She educates us about the enlightenment era as we are drawn into her vision of the future.

I was nearly out on this book before I began. The opening scene features a "miracle" I found ridiculous. I want Science Fiction dammit not miracles. Then the sheer volume of characters and intrigue is more than a little overwhelming. At 28 hours it is not a small book. Thankfully the originality in the writing and novelty

of the form got me through the opening and by the time I was 1/5th of the way through I was completely taken in - hook, line and sinker.

The “miracle” exists I believe, to draw the reader into a philosophical discussion. This book goes for the jugular on the weightiest of themes, gender, politics, religion, life and death. Do our vocations or our avocations make us who we are? It is a credit to Palmer that I am not entirely sure where she stands on these issues, but she sure does want us to think about them.

This is a beautifully written book. The Ada Palmer drinking game is to take a shot every time she drops an original or compelling metaphor. You will be drunk in no time. "As nervous as a new cat" "As quickly as god appears at the invocation of his name". It is also a very funny book, the humour works because the world seems so vivid and the stakes are so high.

Palmer pulls off a neat trick where I don't believe any of the characters are 3 dimensional but they are all so cloaked in intrigue and mysterious desires my imagination fills in the gaps in their personalities. In a similar way that a good horror film doesn't show us too much of the creature, Palmer doesn't show us too much of the players competing for power.

The less said about the plot the better, as it is full of twists and surprises. I don't even want to compare it to anything else for fear of spoiling where it goes. (view spoiler).

Let's just say that it contains elements of Fantasy, court intrigue and philosophy to create a “historical fiction” of the future.

A book this complex shouldn't work in audiobook form. It is a credit to narrator Jefferson Mays that I was able to follow it at all, albeit with frequent use of the rewind button.

When I was loading this onto my phone I had a brief listen and thought “hrm this guy is a bit of an odd duck” I have never heard anyone narrate in this sort of tone before. Once I understood that the book is written in and performed in the 18th century style it made perfect sense.

The degree of difficulty here is off the chart. We need a narrator that can convincingly recite Latin, French and Spanish while voicing a multitude of characters. Mays resisted the urge to make the French really, really French for example and modulated with only subtle shifts in accent. The best voice of all was the one he assigns to the outraged “reader” arguing with our narrator Mycroft. His comic timing combined with Palmer's words made me laugh again and again.

Checking May's IMDB page he is a Tony award winning actor and has appeared in "The Knick" and "Inherent Vice" so he obviously has the chops to give a brilliant audiobook performance.

In closing I cannot recommend this book highly enough. I enjoyed the “intrigue in space” of the Imperial Radche trilogy but next to the weight and ambition of Terra Ignota it seems like Young adult silliness. This is the first audiobook where I have bought the hardcover for a re-read and am pre ordering the 2nd book “Seven Surrenders” months in advance. December 6th! Cannot wait!

I would be shocked if I read a better book this year. An immersive and mind-blowing experience I am putting straight onto the “All-time favourites” shelf.

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## Bookwraiths says

Originally reviewed at Bookwraiths.

Ambitious. Complex. Thought-provoking. Ada Palmer's debut novel, *Too Like the Lightning*, is all those things and more. The book truly an intellectual piece of science fiction literature, not only in its themes (political, societal, philosophical, and religious) but also in the ornate, elegant, and nuanced writing style. Demanding your full attention, this novel's complete depth cannot be appreciated without devoting time and effort to first consuming it before slowly sorting and digesting all its potent ingredients.

Taking place in the 25th century, the narrative is largely the first-hand accounts of Mycroft Canner (though, as a government edited recount, its complete accuracy is somewhat in question) supplemented by information garnered by use of electronic trackers that allow Mycroft to see and hear events involving other individuals. And while it might seem that Mycroft is the protagonist here, he constantly emphasizes that he isn't, but, rather, that a gifted thirteen-year-old named Bridger is. This youth able to bring inanimate objects to life with a touch.

Bridger's ability might sound more "fantastical" than "science fiction" to some, but have no worries: This is a sci-fi story all the way. This world four hundred years in the future filled with an evolved society where independent nations do not exist but rather small hive groups, digital clothing is the norm, genetic tracking is routine, robotic cars race about, and a new form of criminal slavery even exists inside the law. Humanity still recognizable, but politics, science, entertainment, moral values, and the meaning of life itself evolved tremendously from our current time. All of these things combining to create a lush, detailed tapestry for this social sci-fi epic to play out.

What sets Ada Palmer's work apart from other social science fiction works is the deeply intellectual aspect of this book. The author having used her extensive knowledge of European history (She is employed in the History Department at the University of Chicago.) to create an Enlightenment-era subculture, which permeates the narrative as a whole. The worldbuilding itself an opportunity to play out the author's fascination with the way ideas and technology create historical change within societies and shapes not only the society itself but its view of the past. This seamless coupling of futuristic Earth with such ancient thinkers as Voltaire and Bacon making the social upheavals a devilish brew indeed.

When picking up this novel, please do understand it is not a quick, space opera romp or even a hard science fiction spectacular. Rather, *Too Like the Lightning* is a complicated, nuanced volume; its independent yet interconnected plot threads involving philosophy, social upheaval and brutal politics which require determination and fortitude to brave to the end. The mysteries and secrets not fully resolved, but set up to be unveiled in the sequel, *Seven Surrenders*.

In short, *Too Like the Lightning* is a breathtaking work of speculative literature, worthy of inclusion with other social science fiction classics. The immense thought and brilliant presentation by Ada Palmer worthy of any awards she might garner for it. However, make no mistake, this is a serious and weighty story, whose scope and complexity will frighten many readers away and leave others underwhelmed — especially those who wish their reading to allow them an escape from the struggles of societal change already going on in our world rather than immerse themselves in its disturbing depths further.

I received this novel from the publisher in exchange for a fair and honest review. I'd like to thank them for allowing me to receive this review copy and inform everyone that the review you have read is my opinion

alone.

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## **Trish says**

I can't believe I made it! Do you know the kind of dream in which you try to run away or push something open but your limbs are just too gooey, too slow? As if you were under water? Getting through this book was like that.

The story is about the far future. The author deliberately made it "weird" to the reader by creating a world in which gender is not indicated when talking to or about a person, where religion may not be talked about in a group of 3 or more unless an overseer (a sensayer) is present because religion has been outlawed (though the lawmakers know faith can never be). Add to that some technological advancement like almost-instant travel around the globe and space lifts.

In this society some criminals are not kept in prison or killed but used as "Servicers"; dependent creatures, there to do the jobs nobody else wants to do.

The narrator is such a Servicer (on the surface). He is the protector of a very special young boy and pretty soon one political intrigue (a theft, actually) jeopardizes the entire world economy and social structure.

To say more would take too long because the subject matter is too complex. Ada Palmer sure likes her 18th-century-philosophy which is plain from all the references to Voltaire, De Sade, Rousseau and Diderot. However, all the philosophizing also made the reading tedious.

The idea of religion (as in organisations) being outlawed was intriguing at first. As was the genderless speech because it was supposed to exterminate discrimination. The society presented, with people not belonging to the nation they were born in but rather being organized in Hives (members chose where to belong) depending on their interests (each with its own traditions and laws), was supposed to be a Utopia.

All in all, the story certainly is ambitious and after googling the author before writing this review and finding out that she is a professor of history, much has become clearer to me. But just like with Justin Cronin and his vampire/apocalypse trilogy, an ambitious idea and grand themes paired with an intelligent author does not necessarily result in a great reading experience.

To me, this was a mess. A lot of potential, but it veered in the wrong direction. It was ambitious, but that might be the exact thing that crippled it.

I happen to know a bit about the Enlightenment period so I did get the references and what was confusing at first (like the gender issue) did become fairly "normal" soon, but the opulent writing was still annoying while none of the characters or the supposedly big reveals / shocking moments could actually get a reaction from me (I still rounded up from 2.5 stars though). Too bad, really, because I was looking forward to liking this.

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## **Althea Ann says**

This is a hard one to review.

It's a very ambitious, very complex, very intelligent novel.

However, it also tries too hard. It's a bit too impressed with itself for being intelligent, ambitious and

complex.

More than once, I just felt like sighing and saying, "Relax! Drop all the meta- stuff and just let the inherent qualities of the story shine through without pointing them out to me." However, the book does have many good qualities, and I felt that some people would definitely appreciate its twisty, fourth-wall-breaking style more than I did.

In the world of 'Too Like the Lightning' criminal justice has settled on sentencing lawbreakers to service, rather than prison. Criminals are required to work at whatever tasks they are asked to do. Mycroft Canner is one of these criminals. But his situation is a bit unusual in that he works for one of the most influential families in this society. And in this society, influence is everything... Due to enhanced communications and travel technology, among other advances adding up to a post-scarcity economy, geographic nationalism is obsolete. People form families (or maybe they're closer to communes and/or corporations) and alliances based solely on common interests and specializations. Nearly any kind of social arrangement is accepted, but in this tolerant, peaceful society, the strongest taboo is against talking about religion or any kind of 'supernatural' beliefs to anyone except a professional 'sensayer' (a kind of priest/spiritual counselor.)

The aspect of the book having to do with social dynamics reminded me quite a lot of some of William Gibson's more recent works (and that's a good thing!) Maybe a little bit of Iain Banks. Add in an obsession with 18th-century Europe, and hero-worship of Voltaire... it's interesting!

Their social media publishes a list of movers and shakers, and placement on the list is a weighty matter. So, when it's suspected that someone has stolen the unpublished list, or that it wasn't authored by the person who's given credit for it, the scandal could be world-shaking.

But what could be even more world-shaking is a secret held by one family, the criminal Mycroft, and the sensayer Carlyle: a young boy has been born who has the power to make anything he imagines real. Can this ability be used for good? Or is it too dangerous to reveal? Should Mycroft, who holds secrets of his own, be trusted with this knowledge, as he has been?

And then, there're quite a few more sub-plots... some of them quite literally plots.

The reader's perception of things is colored - perhaps warped - by Mycroft's narration, in which he speaks directly to his audience quite frequently, is clearly holding information back, and may be rather unreliable.

Secrets abound, and this society is so deeply strange to us that's it's hard to tell what is 'normal' for our characters and what's not...

This book is the first half of a planned duology, which means that some of the more significant elements in the story aren't tied up at the end at all, leaving it hard to predict how well it will all come together when complete.

Many thanks to Tor and NetGalley for the opportunity to read. As always, my opinions are solely my own.

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**Mogsy (MMOGC) says**

3.5 of 5 stars at The BiblioSanctum <https://bibliosanctum.com/2016/05/10/...>

Has a book ever made you feel completely uncertain of how you'll rate it? Like, what if you're blown away by its ideas, but at the same time they make you feel utterly out of your depth? Or maybe, a book that you didn't think would fit your tastes actually ends up surprising the hell out of you. Truth be told, it's not often that I experience such conflict with a novel, but I'm also not surprised to find myself feeling like this about *Too Like the Lightning*. After all, it only makes sense that a complex book will require a complex review.

Technically, Ada Palma's debut novel can be described as political science fiction, but that's also a gross oversimplification, for here you will also find plenty of historical allusions, social commentary, and philosophical discourse—all coupled with more traditional elements of the genre. In addition, the "story" here isn't really that but a whole lot more, but I'll go further into that later. First, we're introduced to our narrator, Mycroft Canner, writing this account in the year 2454. The world has transformed into a utopia where fast, expedient travel to and from any point in the world has effectively made ideas like borders and nation states obsolete. Instead, almost everyone belongs in one of the handful of mega-factions made up of millions or billions of people. The nuclear family unit has also been replaced by a more dynamic form called a "bash", which can vary in size and composition of related or unrelated individuals. And war? War is another topic that one only reads about in the history books.

Mycroft is known as a "Servicer", a convict serving out his sentence by being as useful as he can to society. Over time, he has grown close to the Saneer-Weeksbooth bash', whose members are the custodians of this world's transportation system, a position which gives them considerable renown and power. However, for years the bash' has also managed to hide a big secret from everyone, sheltering a young boy with the power to work miracles. With little to no effort at all, thirteen-year-old Bridger has the power to bring inanimate objects to life whenever he pleases. Because of his status as an honorary member of the bash', Mycroft is included in the small group of those who are aware of Bridger's existence, but that circle is about to be widened with the sudden arrival of an appointed spiritual advisor, or sensayer, named Carlyle Foster.

This description is also merely half of it though, because while all this is happening, all kinds of political machinations are taking place in the upper echelons of the power structure. The book is laced with a thread of mystery here, involving a much elaborate theft of something called a Seven-Ten list, which is a who's who of the world's movers and shakers. Naturally, the Saneer-Weeksbooth bash' is caught in the middle of it, and in their investigations to find out more, Mycroft and others in this narrative find themselves engaging in various political and philosophical dialogues.

To be sure, *Too Like the Lightning* is actually quite light on plot, but heavy in its social and literary themes. As I said, it's not so much a story but a Conversation-with-a-capital-C. Here you will find cultural and scientific debates, existentialist questions, explorations into multiple fields of art and history. The book also has lots to say about a variety of subjects, from gender roles to religion. It's amazing, really. Phenomenal, even. Palmer's vision is ambitious and unique, drawing from the philosophical movement and spheres of ideas that changed the face of Europe in the 18th century to create this fully-fleshed setting, a world which appears to have gone through its own Age of Enlightenment. The dramatically altered world through Mycroft's eyes is nothing like our own. Strange, beautiful, and full of wonder, life in this book might not be perfect, but the possibilities are limitless.

That said, this is an odd novel. There's no other word for it. And I confess, had I been more impatient while reading this, I might have been tempted to set this one aside for later—not because it is a bad book, but because it is so far from what I would normally read for entertainment that it might as well be from another universe. Ultimately, I'm glad that I read it to its completion because it was an incredible experience, but I admit there were times where it felt almost too difficult or daunting to continue, especially when I first started. This was also a slow read, because there's no rushing a book like this; it's a work of art meant to be



savored, consumed, and digested thoroughly.

If I could do it all over again, I probably wouldn't have read *Too Like the Lightning* over a period of several days. Instead, I would have taken my time, whether it took weeks or months, in order to give myself plenty of time to chew on the many issues and ideas presented in this novel. A longer timeline might also serve to alleviate a lot of the confusion, breaking down the staggering amount of information you need to know to understand the story into more manageable pieces. A book like this practically screams for a glossary, as there are so many new words and terms to learn, so many new concepts and customs to familiarize yourself with, and of course, almost all the characters seem to have more than one name, and it was an exhausting mental exercise just to keep track of them all.

Still, it does get easier. The narratives surrounding Mycroft's mission to protect Bridger, the boy who seemingly works miracles, was many times more interesting to me than the mystery involving the theft of the Seven-Ten list—at least at first. Once those two threads started coming together, I became more fascinated and invested. Then came the surprises, like the truth behind mild-mannered Mycroft's crime and how he ended up a Servicer, or the massive revelations dropped on us at the end of the book.

Fair warning though, as this was intended to be the first half of a duology, there will be no resolutions to be found here, since all that will be planned for part two, *Seven Surrenders*. Having finished *Too Like the Lightning*, I feel that I know a lot more now to better prepare myself for the sequel. This book is guaranteed to make you think, and will no doubt be a delight for those who enjoy philosophy. It's a very rich, thought-provoking experience, even if it is perhaps a bit impenetrable at times. If you're feeling up for a challenging read—because impressive or not, this can be a very demanding novel—then you might want to give this one a look.

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