



The Six Directions of Space

Alastair Reynolds

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An original novella by the modern master of space opera, limited to only 1000 signed hardcover copies.

What if Genghis Khan got his wish, and brought the entire planet under the control of the Mongols? Where would he have gone next?

A thousand years after Khan's death, Yellow Dog is the codename of a female spy working for a vast Mongol-dominated galactic empire. When she learns of anomalous events happening on the edge of civilised space -- phantom ships appearing in the faster-than-light transit system which binds the empire together -- Yellow Dog puts herself forward for the most hazardous assignment of her career. In deep cover, she must penetrate the autonomous zone where the anomalies are most frequent, and determine whether the empire is really under attack, and if so by who or what. Yellow Dog's problems, however, are only just beginning. For the autonomous zone is under the heel of Qilian, a thuggish local tyrant with no love for central government and a reputation for extreme brutality. Qilian already knows more about the anomalies than Yellow Dog does. If she is going to learn more, she will have to earn his confidence -- even if that means working for him, rather than against him.

So begins a deadly game of subterfuge and double-cross -- while the anomalies increase...

The Six Directions of Space Details

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Author : Alastair Reynolds

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From Reader Review The Six Directions of Space for online ebook

Josh says

The hardback version of this book seems pretty hard to come by; they are going for very high prices used on Amazon,

I didn't actually get the hard copy; I fortunately found the story in the "Best Science Fiction and Fantasy of the Year 2008" anthology, where it is featured.

This is a darker and more brutal tale than some of his others, although it does fall in the same vein as many of his short stories. There is almost a horror aspect to the universes he creates, usually with some kind of chilling revelation that twists the story and doesn't always bode well for the main character.

This one is chilling and weird, from the perspective of a galactic Mongolian empire... Definitely chops for originality on that one!

Septima Severa says

I came to appreciating the short stories - they can be easily read and they can be read even among all those other things that demand to be done on time. That's probably the main reason I've finished reading two graphic novels and this book in last two days.

I've waited so long for Alastair Reynolds stories. I've got his Revelation Space on Kindle since February, but regrettably, there have been other things I've attended to (although it doesn't seem like that when you look at my reading list - yet the majority of titles posted there were as short as this one, that's the dirty little secret of my book challenge).

After finishing the Six Directions I feel like I need to read other titles from him. Since Reynolds is actually a scientist (yet astrophysics and biology don't have much in common), I feel like... it's indescribable. It may well be a professional degradation on my part, too.

The thought of great Mongolian Expansion is excellent. And that there are parallel worlds existing at the same time and place, that's also something I like. It can be found in many works across the sci-fi universe, yet I haven't heard of something dealing with multiple parallels at the same time. And although it's named "The Six Directions of Space", there are many more than six empires conquering the vast universe. It seems better than "we're not alone here", actually.

I liked it.

A lot.

And so I recommend it to read to everyone.

It's not a soft sci-fi; however, neither it's a hard one. A comprehensive plot. Although you may struggle with some terms (because not everyone is an expert on Mongol), it makes sense in the end. Better than jigsaw :)

Arminzerella says

Yellow Dog is an undercover agent for the Mongol Empire in the far distant future, where Genghis Khan's hordes have successfully dominated human culture for the last thousand years. She's investigating the presence of "phantoms" in the Infrastructure (the faster-than-light-system that allows ships to travel between distant stars). Just as she discovers the phantoms are real, that they're other, alien vessels, Yellow Dog is taken into custody by Qilian (another government agent) who tortures her into revealing her true identity, then hires her on as an expert to lead their team's investigation of the same phenomena. They strike pay dirt when they recover a ship inhabited with what appear to be lemurs. The lemurs have taken another human (human-appearing, at least) captive and Yellow Dog's team is able to wake him from stasis and question (torture) him. He (Muhannad) reveals that there are many realities and continuums accessible through the Infrastructure – and many races/species/forms of intelligent life. Qilian, outfits Muhannad with a ship (he's a pilot) and coerces him into taking them into one of the portals that lead to the other realities. Their navigational equipment is less than adequate, however, and the ship becomes lost in the continuum. Several encounters with hostile beings leave the ship a little worse for wear, and Muhannad pulls off a scheme to get Qilian to abandon ship. Muhannad and Yellow Dog then make their own escape, hopeful they will find a hospitable reality in which to crash land.

This science-fiction novella is short and tantalizing, giving one just enough tech, torture, and travel to spark the quintessential "What if...the Mongols ruled the world? And became space travelers?" I'm certainly thinking about it now. Providing a curious mix of cultures and technologies, and a plethora of aggressive beings, as well as tough, resourceful characters, this fast read will jump start readers' imaginations.

Terence says

ADDENDUM (7/20) - I realized last night, after writing this review, that I probably should have mentioned that there are two scenes of animal and human abuse (aka "torture") that might disturb/distress some readers. Happily, Reynolds doesn't dwell on either scene. The human torture scene isn't gratuitous and makes sense in the context of the story; I'm not so sure about the animal torture scene. Seems Reynolds might have been gilding the lily in establishing the "bad guy's" bona fides.

In keeping with my East Asian-themed reading schedule lately, I was pleasantly surprised to find this novella on my library's New Books shelf (doubly surprised considering the financial...ummm...difficulties California is suffering at the moment of writing this but I guess it's "already budgeted" funds).

At any rate, the story begins in an alternate universe where the Mongol Empire never fell, conquering the entire planet and eventually creating a star-spanning empire using technology from a long-extinct alien race that appears to give access to wormholes (Reynolds doesn't develop the background much but considering this is an 85-page story that's not surprising and doesn't distract from the reader's immediate enjoyment). The main character, Yellow Dog, is an agent sent by the Great Khan to investigate strange phenomena that've been occurring on the fringes of the Mongol Expansion - disappearing ships, alien ships seen the wormhole pathways - the usual "stuff" in stories of this type. Eventually she discovers that "the Infrastructure" is breaking down, allowing alternate realities to enter hers (including one where an Islamic Caliphate conquers the world, one where lemurs became the dominant intelligent life, another where million-year-old xenophobic aliens known as the Smiling Ones rule, and our own world).

Reflecting on the story, there are aspects that bothered me. For example, I can't quite buy the oversimplification of history. For anyone with a passing knowledge of the subject, it's inconceivable that a Mongol Empire could have survived as a single entity from the 13th century (much less an Islamic Caliphate). Nor did I buy the conceit that Mongol science managed to equal our own without the concept of "zero." Reynolds makes much of this, I suppose to further differentiate our world from Yellow Dog's, but it's another idea that doesn't hold up well.

But I think I'm overanalyzing...For the hour or so I spent in Yellow Dog's universe(s), I enjoyed myself.

Drew says

This was quite a story to fit within 80 or so pages. While it was a good tale, I felt as though pieces were missing. I would have liked to see some more depth to certain scenes and topics. If this had been more around the 160/200 page length it would have been perfect.

3 stars for me is "I liked it". Not sure I'd read it again as it doesn't have much of a value a 2nd time around, but it is an enjoyable and very engaging read. I just wish it had been a slightly longer.

Christopher says

Mongols in space and branching timelines. What isn't to love?

Kate Sherrod says

Revising my earlier opinion of this one. It should have SIX STARS.

A prized possession of mine is a limited signed edition of The Six Directions of Space in hardcover, and not just because it is a limited signed edition, my only signed Alastair Reynolds (to date; hope springs eternal while there is life, etc.), but because it is one of the coolest stories ever, and I do not engage in empty hyperbole there.

Three words. MONGOLS. IN. SPACE.

Yes, that's right, oh my blogettes, this story concerns the future that sprang from an alternate past in which the Mongol Empire did not fall apart after the death of Temujin, better known to history as Genghis Khan, but went on to conquer the entire world, which became known simply as Greater Mongolia. Sure, there are still pesky pockets of, e.g., Buddhists and Nestorian Christians and the odd Muslim here and there, but basically the Mongol culture, horses and all, dominated everything right up to and including humanity's journey to the stars.

A funny old thing, though, Mongols in space. The culture transmits to a space-born empire pretty well, if one can imagine people taking their steppe ponies with them on their spaceships (and hey, Reynolds has depicted a people who plan to take elephants into space with them, so why not ponies?) and still functioning without the Zero, which these Space Mongols still insist is a fruity Arab affectation they'll have no truck with, even

though it makes their science and engineering a bit clunky and cumbersome. These are people who get drunk on fermented mare's milk and found a way to sing more than one note at a time, folks. They do stuff their own way. Even in space.

I'm ever astounded at how Reynolds managed to convey the scope and sweep, not only of a galactic Mongol Empire, but of what is essentially a multiverse, in just 85 tight pages.* And it's not just this empire he's describing, but its unique settlement of inhospitable worlds, like in this passage:

"There were no fixed communities on the moon. Instead, immense spiderlike platforms, mounted on six or eight intricate jointed legs, picked their way across the ever-shifting terrain in awesome slow motion."**

And oh, there's a tight and nifty little plot that still manages to convey a sense of grand scale, too. It involves a secret government agent, a woman named Yellow Dog (one of a series of Reynolds' ass-kicking female characters who would not pass a Bechdel test so much as beat the crap out of you -- literally or metaphorically -- for suggesting it to her) whose mission is to investigate a series of phantom intrusions into the empire's (found and scavenged, a la the Gateways in Frederick Pohls' Heechee books***) interstellar transport network, and who runs afoul of a petty official who turns out to be anything but -- and discovers some mind-blowing secrets about the way things really work out there.

Truly a marvel, this one.

*Anyone who accuses him of bloat obviously hasn't had a look at this story (or any of his short fiction for that matter).

**Shades again of Volyova's Spider Room on the Nostalgia for Infinity in Reynolds' Revelation Space universe.

***Thus perhaps a bit too neatly solving the problem of how a zero-less science and society would someday achieve faster-than-light travel, but I don't care. It's awesome. Did I mention it's Mongols in Space? It's Mongols in Space, people. Drop everything and take the time to listen to Dan Carlin's awesome multipart podcast on the Wrath of the Khans and imagine all of that in space, minus the diminishing/loss of empire bits. Would I want to live in that universe? Hell no. I wouldn't have been allowed to grow up, most likely. But I can admire them from afar, especially their women (Borte!). And cheer them on. And stuff.

Todd Campbell says

Reynolds is just an outstanding story-teller. He is a master at the long epic but can also write a brilliant tale in the short form. This novella is an outstanding example. For fans of sci-fi and good ideas...

Claudia says

It's really astounding how Al Reynolds managed to create a multiverse in just 80 odd pages. Not that his other novellas are less amazing; he is one of few who can write thousands of pages of space opera and short stories with equal mastery.

In this one, not only creates a Mongolian Empire but also touches the sensitive issue of hatred and wars between people of different religions:

” People are people. If the Infrastructure is truly breaking down, allowing all these timelines to bleed into one another, then we are all going to have to get along with each other sooner or later, no matter what we all did to each other in our various histories. We’re all going to have to put the past behind us.” “

It also reminded me of Cixin’s *The Dark Forest* – the universe out there is not at all a friendly place:

” I recalled what our pilot had said about there being no such thing as a harmless interstellar culture. [...] We had survived our first encounter with another galactic empire. More were to follow. ‘

Wonderful story; a must for sci-fi fans.

Note: it may be found also in Gardner Dozois anthology from 2008, *Galactic Empires*

Simon Mcleish says

I enjoyed this, so far as it goes. But it reads more like the first 3-4 chapters of a longer novel than a stand alone shorter narrative. I want the rest of it!

Travis Mueller says

An interesting novella that I encountered on the hold shelf at the library. It seemed intriguing on its own, but the fact that I recently read *The Mongols: A Very Short Introduction* cinched it for me. Though it actually turned out that being somewhat familiar with Mongol history made me question aspects of this book more than I would have. Some details of the culture in the book-- like the continued use of horses in an otherwise advanced space-faring society; the presence of eunuch guards and limits on lone female travelers; the byzantine concern about poisoning and the implied state of feuding high-ranked families-- seem to be there just so emphasize that this is "Mongols in Space!" rather than because it makes any sense in a social context. Also equating a Mongol-dominated branch of history with branches dominated by different religious organization doesn't really make sense since the Mongols had diverse religious beliefs and in later periods adopted the religions of the peoples they conquered (Islam in particular). Also, the made use of bureaucrats from other cultures, so it would be unlikely for writing systems like Arabic to have been lost. It does suggest an interesting possibility that the 'Phags-pa script, which was invented as a sort of multi-cultural auxiliary, caught on in this timeline. And I really don't think you could make it into space using a system of math that doesn't acknowledge zero, though again the Mongols utilized people from cultures that used zero, so why would that have persisted?

The writing threw me for a bit since I kept thinking it would be going in different directions, like how Yellow Dog seems to imply that she has everything under control even while being detained and interrogated, but instead just joined up with local forces. But it was a short book and decently interesting, so it is easier to forgive some of the oddities.

Rasheed says

Anthologized in The Year's Best SF 26

"Reynolds is a master of fitting large-scale space opera into just a few pages, and this novella is no exception... short but intriguing universe-spanning mystery." - Publishers Weekly

"Impressive... Set in a solidly built universe, full of excellent espionage and adventure... a surprisingly small package to contain such a lot of entertainment." - Booklist

rick. says

Typically a short story focuses on a single concept, and while The Six Directions of Space essentially follows that template, it feels far more expansive than its 88 pages. This is accomplished through efficient storytelling and a couple clever methods. (Warning – the following may crossover into spoiler-ish territory for some readers, although aligned with my expectations).

We are introduced to our protagonist, Yellow Dog, as she is traveling from outside a Mongolian vanguard into its political center. This allows us to learn class, culture, units of measure, social and political structures along the way; simultaneously revealing the personality and ethics of our point of view. We learn that this narrative takes place in a future derived from an alternate history where the Mongols conquered the entire world, then continued their expansion into a galactic empire. By starting this future from an alternate history we immediately are presented with a parallel universe mindset as we compare a future from our reality set against the future from the Mongol origin. As Yellow Dog's investigation reveals additional seed species and cultures we can rapidly contemplate and overlay these parallel realities with minimal narration. This allows Alastair Reynolds to focus on plot and leave the bulk of the world building to the reader. Liberated from the heavy exposition, we traverse great expanses and see our character change, re-aligning allegiances, in pursuit of answers to these phantom anomalies at the edge of her kingdom.

The Six Directions of Space is a well-written, engaging piece which while managing not to end in a cliffhanger certainly leaves the story open for additional chapters. It walks the thin line between wanting more and needing more, but for me left me satisfied.

Scott Lowe says

I've read almost everything Alastair Reynolds has written, starting with the mesmerizing trilogy of Absolution Gap, Revelation Space, and Chasm City. A first rate writer with an unbounded imagination. I know I'm always in good hands when I start a book by Reynolds. Six Directions may not be as great as his very best, but even his not quite best is better than almost anyone else out there.

odedo1 says

Darn, a few more pages would have earned you an extra star.

Kris says

The Six Directions of Space is a book that continued to impress me. Alastair Reynolds was able to tell the story of a badass female spy and create an entire immersive universe (and multiverse) that was constantly intriguing, despite only writing 85 pages. One of my only complaints is that I wished there was more. Excellent work of sci fi.

Stephen Case says

Alastair Reynolds has been a contemporary science fiction author on my list of writers to check out for a while. It was near the end of Christmas break that I visited my local public library and grabbed a small pile of novels that included Swanwick, Moorcock, and Benford, and a very thin volume by Reynolds. *The Six Directions of Space*, like *The Very Best of Michael Swanwick*, was published by Subterranean Press (one of a signed run of 1000), but unlike the Swanwick, it was a disappointment. From everything I hear, Reynolds has done impressive contemporary science fiction, but *The Six Directions of Space*, though a quick and easy read (actually a novella in hardcover), is not among this.

I kept trying to figure out what was bothering me about the work as I was reading. It was a compelling idea: a reality in which the Mongols had conquered the known world, become a space-faring civilization, and then—after stumbling across alien technology—a galaxy-spanning one. An agent of the Khan is sent to the periphery of this empire to investigate rumors of phantom ships appearing in the sub-space corridors (the Infrastructure) that allow FTL travel. Doing so, the protagonist stumbles across evidence that these conduits linking space actually link together much more.

I don't like writing bad reviews. But I do like analyzing stories to help improve my own. So I'm going to do that for this one, with the understanding that Reynolds is a very successful writer and that this particular review says nothing about his overall work, from which I just appear to have selected a poor sample.

Finishing this work though (within a day, as it is really quite short) I realized it was a good example of how great ideas can be executed in a way that leaves a story feeling limp and passive, which is how this one felt. I was motivated to keep turning pages to see when the twist was going to come, not because I was gripped or because I had fallen in love with the characters or because the vistas were sharp and compelling. I just read to keep reading. If it was a full-length novel I would have put it down after a couple chapters.

Why? I came up with three reasons, and each of them is something that I continually struggle with in my own writing. Each of them is something that I think often keeps Stephen Case-level writing from becoming, say, Michael Swanwick-level writing.

Here they are:

1. *Narrative passivity*: Yellow Dog, the main character, doesn't really *do* anything in this story. She's sent on

a mission and takes some small initiative near the beginning to get some information, but she's captured early on. From that point the plot is just stuff happening to her. She doesn't seem an agent; she doesn't have to make any hard decisions; she doesn't develop as a character. She's carried along by the stream of events, so it's hard to care about her or what happens to her. Her horse dies. She meets a guy. She solves a puzzle. But none of this seems to matter to the ultimate outcome of the story.

2. *Telling but not showing*: From the beginning of the story I felt like I was reading not a story but a report. Yellow Dog was telling what happened, maybe typing it up to send to her superiors back on Earth. At first I thought this was narrative method, but even when it was clear this would never become a report it didn't stop. And because of the tone, there was no tension. To take just one example, when their ship was caught in Infrastructure turbulence and the stabilizing whiskers were ripped off and we weren't sure if our heroes were going to make it, we didn't get a description. We didn't get anything about what this looked like or sounded like or how it made the characters feel. We just got a report, like maybe we were interested in designing a ship with replacement stabilizing whiskers. The writing style made it feel like everything was already predetermined, and it was kept up throughout.

3. And finally, *triteness*, and here's a *major spoiler*

spoiler space

It turns out that the Infrastructure is bleeding into other realities, and our heroes get lost among them. But the realities disappointingly turn out to be little more than caricatures: a Christian (or at least Western) civilization, a galactic Caliphate, one where monkeys evolved, and one with intelligent lizards. This might have worked in the 1960s, maybe, but now we need more subtly, more piercing realities than these, especially when the final take-away is that even people from such radically different backgrounds can learn to work together.

I have heard lots of good things about Reynolds, so please feel free to offer some alternative suggested reading in the comments, but if you're looking to get into his work don't start here.

William says

Terrific, but ends suddenly ! Too short!

Too bad, because I loved Yellow Dog - confident, competent, clever. The other universes hold so much promise, fascinating tidbits and hints, abandoned :(

I would love to see a continuation of this book.

Bookbrow says

3.5 stars

Rusty says

According to Goodreads, Three-stars means 'I liked it.' Funny how I feel guilty about saying I like something. It's like my kid, he graduated from high school this spring and after the graduation several of us wanted to go out and eat with him. So we made arrangements, showed up, and when he found out where it was. He got pissed.

He complained about where we ate, he complained that we didn't do something during the graduation ceremony (I can't remember what it was now) and he complained about not hearing from someone that he thought he was going to hear from.

In all, he complained. A lot.

When it was all over I pulled him aside and told him about the value of being a bit gracious sometimes, even if all his dreams didn't come true exactly the way he wanted them to. He still is well loved, had a great meal at a great restaurant, and has his whole life ahead of him to do great things. He then looked at me in shock, like I was speaking a foreign language.

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"Well, you've been complaining about pretty much everything that we've said or done all evening. You're clearly not happy."

"Don't know what you're talking about. This has been great."

Yep, that's my boy. Also, this is me. I'm telling you I liked this story. Three stars should be a good rating, usually it means people are not altogether happy with the story their rating if it ends up with only three stars.

Well, here's the thing. While I liked it, Alastair Reynolds is a modern legend, and I love his novels and shorter works both. I've read most of them (actually, all of them that are available in collections here in the states, I think) and I believe that this is a good story, just not one of my favorites.

I have no complaints about it, per se, just the thought that it was a disposable tale, pretty well told. I have Slow Bullets sitting right here beside me. I'll be digging into it a bit later this summer. Can't wait to get started on that one.

But for now, with this story. Read if you're a fan already, and if you're not, pick something else from Reynolds to be your introduction to his work.
