



Children of the Stars

Neil V. Young

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Reviewed by Terri Stepek for Reader Views (12/2024)

Flight Officer Dayton Murdoch is used to the hazardous and unexpected. He's flown survey flights in so many solar systems it's no wonder he's set to become the youngest Recon pilot ever. He is not one to shy away from danger or the unknown. But he never saw this one coming.

After being hurtled through Earth's atmosphere in an unanticipated early landing aboard *Venture*, the spaceship he's spent his entire life on, he crash lands in a California shopping mall. Hanging perilously suspended by the glass ceiling he just fell through, he is aided by the one teenage girl who's not too busy taking video to help out. She turns out to be a lifesaver. Literally.

Before he can even recover from his rough landing, his father fills him in on his current situation. With the ship tattered and out of commission, Dayton and the other kids from *Venture* are being dumped into the local schools. At sixteen years old, Dayton has gone from being a confident, slightly cocky but highly proficient and well-respected pilot to an unknown high-schooler who is disdained, mocked, unwanted, and misunderstood. What. A. Nightmare.

Author Neil V. Young shows his prowess in his debut novel "Children of the Stars" as he creates the tension, fury, and pure indignity a sixteen-year-old Dayton would feel in this situation. The angst was so real I couldn't help but have high school flashbacks myself. But don't sweat that angst. As much as

Dayton displays his frustration that his life has suddenly spun out of control, he is not one to dwell on the negative. Before I would even begin crawling out of my depression if I were in his shoes, Dayton is making new plans, taking control of the other “star children” as the Earthers refer to them, and generally displaying what makes him such a unique and charismatic young man.

As a character, Dayton is credible, engaging, brilliant, and level-headed in a crisis. Usually. He does, however, remind us regularly that he’s a teenager who’s watching his plans crumble and his career path implode. He loses his temper at times, responding in a testosterone-filled hot-headed manner when poked a few times too many. He yells at his father, tells his aunt who he just met what he thinks of her granola-crust, vegan, save-the-whales lifestyle, and sends kids scrambling in the halls a few times as they try to establish the pecking order. Geez, I felt truly bad for him.

Dayton is not the only great character here—just the most outstanding. He’s surviving his first earthbound venture with his Flight Engineer and partner Zara, who finds herself unable to overcome all the change as easily as Dayton has. He’s also got Trenton, a young man his same age who shows the build of his birth on a heavy-grav planet. He’s built kind of like a fire hydrant. But as tough as he looks, he’s a pretty gentle and admirable personality. As for Dayton’s “lifesaver” from his crash landing... well, Allyson goes to his school as well. He thinks she’s beautiful. She thinks he looks like a crazy kid who grew up in space, never combed his hair, or cared what he wore. No thanks. But Allyson’s more than just a girl who sees the outside of the package. She might be big on first impressions, but she’s no fool.

The world-building Mr. Young has done here is just phenomenal. One wouldn’t think there would be much world-building to be done since a large portion of the storyline takes place on Earth. But much has changed since our day. So, some fairly big adjustments were in order.

One thing hasn’t changed much since our current time frame: high school. Ugh. There’s one thing every kid learns early on when they’re tossed into the halls of their local school: you only survive if you have a tribe. You remember, right? We have the jocks, geeks, musicians, goths, tweakers, whatever. Well, Chuck Yeager High School isn’t much different. Here’s how Trenton described the school after Dayton approached him in the cafeteria and asked, *“What’s the data dump on the life forms around here?”*

‘Textbook,’ Trenton said, though Dayton was sure if there was a textbook written on teenage herds, he would have found it by now. ‘Over at those benches, you got the “Skaters.” Their whole lives are based on hoverboarding. Eating at the tables by the trash cans are the “Neuros.” They’re self-absorbed and think the whole world hates them. The jocks and the popular students, or “Pops,” are at those tables over there. They think they’re better than the rest of us. Those guys in the black are the “Griefers;” they exist to suffer in this world and talk about how much they hate everything.’

Are you squirming yet? Can you just feel the “groundlings” in the other Earther groups staring at the “space cases?” There are a few other tribes at CYHS as well. But I don’t want to spoil all the fun.

With all this high school anguish in play, readers can expect themes of friendship and loyalty. But that’s only part of the story. Resilience plays a bit part here as does the concept of supporting others whether they’re part of your group or not. Dayton and Allyson are both good at finding common causes where none seem to exist and helping others be accountable for their actions. Good for them.

That might sound like this storyline is going to be heavy-handed with life lessons, and maybe it would be if someone else had written this tale. But Neil V. Young shows a nimble mind and an empathetic style as he throws his characters into one setback (read: crisis) after another.

Amazingly, he does all of this with a gravimetric ton of humor. While written as a teen/YA novel, I guarantee adults will find just as much to love and appreciate here. The language is appropriate for the target audience, yet still manages to throw in unique phrases that showcase the author's vivid imagination while showing us that we don't have to stick to what Earth considers foul language to get our point across with vitriol and/or humor.

This novel is fast-paced, whip-smart, and pure fun from beginning to end. In fact, I was so completely into this story that when I turned the page and realized I had reached the end, I was genuinely sorry. I'm not ready to say goodbye to these Earth-bound spacers and their new groundling friends. I want more, and I'm hoping Neil V. Young won't leave his young spacers stranded on Earth but will be delivering much more following "Children of the Stars."