

ALL THE STARS ARE CLOSER: ESTRANGEMENT, RECOGNITION, AND N. K. JEMISIN'S *THE STONE SKY*

Review by Marita Arvaniti

Jemisin, N. K. *The Stone Sky*. Orbit, 2017. Novel.

The Stone Sky is the final installment in N. K. Jemisin's critically acclaimed *Broken Earth* trilogy (2015-2017) and has recently earned her the unprecedented honor of winning the Hugo Award for Best Novel in three consecutive years. Albeit unprecedented, the victory was far from unexpected, or, indeed, undeserved. *The Stone Sky* is a masterfully executed conclusion to an already phenomenal series, and its impact is as strong as that of the first book, *The Fifth Season* (2015), that won N. K. Jemisin her first Hugo and pushed her to finally being recognized as one of the great current writers of the Fantastika genres. The following review will contain spoilers for both *The Fifth Season* and *The Obelisk Gate* (2016), as well as for the evolution of some central themes throughout the trilogy as a whole.

The Fifth Season was a book of estrangement, defamiliarizing a landscape that should have been familiar to the readers of Fantasy Fiction: combining elements of the science fictional, the post-apocalyptic, and the fantastical alike to create the land of the Stillness. The readers were also estranged from the protagonist, created by N. K. Jemisin as a test to trick her audience into liking a middle-aged, unlikeable black woman and accepting her as the story's hero. Essun is introduced three times: First as the innocent precocious child Damaya, then as the young and rash Syenite, and finally as the tired and broken Essun, who is just looking for Nassun, her daughter, taken from her at the beginning of the narrative. The fact that all women are Essun is revealed in the novel's climax, as her previous lives come to an end, a journey that mirrors the way that the world of Stillness itself ends with each fifth season, trapped in a loop of destruction and adaptation, caught in the endless struggle to survive.¹ In sharp contrast to this, *The Obelisk Gate* was a quiet novel that baffled critics expecting a more energetic successor to *The Fifth Season*. It was, however, the "calm before the storm" as Tor.com reviewer Niall Alexander noted in his 2017 review of the novel, a necessary choice by Jemisin that served to showcase relationships between the characters and their world, a world that by the time the events of *The Stone Sky* rolled around would have to either change drastically or end, forever.

Just as *The Fifth Season* was a novel of estrangement so, too, *The Stone Sky* is a novel of recognition, a descriptor that makes it sound much more peaceful and less violent than it actually proves to be. The mysteries of the world that Jemisin so carefully set up are answered, and the reader is finally given the background information necessary for understanding the longer games being

played by the different forces throughout the trilogy. And while explaining away a story's mysteries has been proven to be a challenge for many writers – I'm thinking, for example, of Frederik Pohl's disappointing sequels to *Gateway* (1977) – Jemisin maintains a steady balance between exposition and storytelling, achieved through the perspective of the stone eater Hoa.

Starting as the unnamed narrator of Essun's chapters, Hoa has been present in the trilogy from the very beginning, although his true identity and importance are only revealed in *The Stone Sky*. Hoa, like the rest of the oldest Stone Eaters, is in fact, a genetic experiment that was used and abused almost to breaking point, and whose revolution against the empire of Syl Analgist makes for one third of the book. It is through those chapters, told in Hoa's first person omniscient point of view, that the reader learns how the Stillness became what it is in the trilogy's present; a moonless, post-apocalyptic world doomed to suffer the hatred of Father Earth. By presenting the reader with the empire of Syl Analgist and the destructive effects of Hoa's revolution, Jemisin brings the cycle of abuse between those in power and their slaves—whether they are orogenes, Stone Eaters, or indeed, the planet itself—back to the foreground of her novel.

In the present-day Stillness of *The Fifth Season* and *The Obelisk Gate*, the treatment of the earth-bending orogenes like Essun had been consistently explained away by the cruel nature of the world, and its desperate people that always fell prey to their own bigotry and fear. But the people of Syl Analgist do not have that excuse; their world created Hoa and the rest of his kind only a means to an end in the empire's struggle for more power. The Stone Eaters like him are treated as possessions, genetically engineered by the Syl Analgist humans to run their new power source, the Plutonic Engine. And eventually, naturally, they rebel.

Hoa's story takes place many thousands of years before that of Essun and Nassun, proving what has so far been a constant theme in the text: History is never just background. Instead it is always relevant, offering necessary context and, in the case of orogenes, acting as the tool that has been used to excuse their systematic oppression and abuse. By allowing Hoa his own set of chapters Jemisin avoids turning history and experience into "thin words on thinner paper" (*The Stone Sky* 14) and presents a first-person account of slavery that cannot be explained away as a thing of the past. It takes place in Syl Analgist, a setting that evokes images of the shining cityscapes of Science Fiction, a futuristic utopia that is still, in Hoa's own words, "built on a fault line of pain, held up by nightmares" (*The Stone Sky* 14).

Hoa's journey to understanding his own personhood and unjust treatment is, of course, only one third of the novel. Nassun and Essun are both reaching the end of their respective journeys and that offers an end to a different kind of estrangement as mother and daughter meet each other once more. Jemisin delivers more than I could have expected from that long-awaited family reunion for the novel's dramatic, action packed, and above all emotional climax. It is an abrupt and almost brutal ending, as unforgiving in its totality as Jemisin has been promising from *The Fifth Season*: it is nothing less than the way the world ends, for the last time. The future of the Stillness remains uncertain: Jemisin offers little in the way of closure for her story. However, all is not lost. "Different

choices have always been possible" (*The Stone Sky* 366), as Hoa points out to Nassun, no matter how much the powers that be like to pretend otherwise. That statement—true for the Stillness and our world alike—remains, perhaps, Jemisin's most hopeful, and most revolutionary message, and the perfect ending for the trilogy as a whole.

When reaching the end of the novel, one might feel the need to turn back to the start and revisit one of the pages most readers tend to skip: the novel's dedication. The Broken Earth trilogy dedications are not aimed at any one specific person in Jemisin's life but to a vague editorial "to those who" and taken together they showcase the trilogy's most important themes. From the righteous anger of *The Fifth Season* –dedicated to those "who have to fight for the respect that everyone else is given without question" – and the halting helplessness of *The Obelisk Gate* – "to those who have no choice but to prepare their children for the battlefield" – Jemisin finally dedicates *The Stone Sky* "to those who have survived: and addresses them directly, as Hoa does Essun in what is now Broken Earth's characteristic second person narrative: "Breathe. That's it. Once more. Good. You're good. Even if you're not, you're alive. That is a victory." That reminder will be important by the end of *The Stone Sky*, a devastating tour de force that explores family, humanity, rebellion, and above all the constant struggle against all those who will try to break you, and the celebration of survival in the face of adversity.

NOTES

1. In the Stillness the term 'fifth season' is used to refer to the apocalyptic disasters that Father Earth unleashes upon the remaining human population, from acid rains to catastrophic earthquakes and volcanic eruptions.

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