

# [The Three-Body Problem by Liu Cixin](#)

written by edward j rathke | January 19, 2015



*The Three-Body Problem* by Liu Cixin

Translated by Ken Liu

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400 pages – [Barnes & Noble](#) / [Amazon](#)

–Yes, the entire history of humankind has been fortunate. From the Stone Age till now, no real crises has occurred. We’ve been very lucky. But if it’s all luck, then it has to end one day. Let me tell you: It’s ended. Prepare for the worst.–

Liu Cixin’s *The Three-Body Problem* is one of the most surprising novels I’ve read in recent memory. Not because it’s full of twists and turns (though it is), but because it’s so different from what I’ve come to expect in modern science fiction, in terms of narrative and storytelling techniques. Perhaps most surprising to me is that a novel structured and told in this manner is one of the bestselling novels I’ve ever heard of. Over 500,000 units sold in China alone and written by one of the most acclaimed and beloved Chinese science fiction writers and it’s recently been translated into English by Ken Liu, who’s won many awards for his own fiction, with his debut novel and short story collection set to come out later this year, along with the second novel in the *Three Body Problem* trilogy.

So while the pedigree for this is phenomenal, the content seems to defy what it means to be a bestseller. It’s genre fiction, which, for many in the west, means lots of action, lots of explosions. It’s apocalyptic, but not in the high octane way we’ve come to understand it.

*The Three Body Problem* is not that kind of science fiction. While there’s certainly plenty of plot movement, this is almost an aggressive text in the way it refuses to invite you in. At the same time, it’s extremely readable, digestible, and riveting. It’s very hard sci-fi, which is to say that it’s deeply rooted in actual science, or at least theoretical possibilities. Even the title comes from a rather classic physics problem, which applies directly to the plot and structure of the novel. While this novel is full of big ideas, it’s not afraid to let you ruminate on them. In fact, the novel is full of long explanations dealing with specific aspects of theoretical physics.

I imagine most readers aren’t deeply invested into problems in physics, especially when reading something they may expect to be an adventure yarn. And if that sounds unpleasant, than this probably isn’t something for you, though missing out on this would be unfortunate, I think. But that’s what makes its bestselling status so shocking to me.

How could a book that's half novel, half popular science book make such a huge impact? Especially when things that make this kind of impact in the west (I'm looking at you, *Da Vinci Code*) tend to have very little if any relation to how the world actually works, and absolutely nothing to do with hard science. I mean, the *Da Vinci Code* is straight up papal conspiracy theory. But maybe it's unfair to compare these two very different novels and try to draw a cultural meaning out of it.

But still, hard science fiction tends to be a niche topic in nerdism, appreciated by few, and almost universally derided.

But let's talk about what the novel actually is, rather than the context of what it should or should not be.

The novel begins in the Cultural Revolution, firmly planting this novel in the real world. And not simply the world we currently live in, but it draws a direct line from the present we know to the past we're often so quick to forget, especially in a cultural climate that demanded forgetting. One of our main characters watches her father, a theoretical physics, publicly murdered because his research is seen as politically non-revolutionary.

–But burning was their fate; they were the generation meant to be consumed by fire.–

This is a complex moment that requires at least a basic understanding of what was happening in China at the time. And while I could say a lot, I think it's better for you to learn from those who had to deal with it. If you can, find the time to watch Zhang Yimou's *To Live* or Chen Kaige's *Farewell, My Concubine*. They both cover the ramifications of the Cultural Revolution in ways a thousand times more powerful and clearer than I could ever.

From there we follow the woman, Ye Wenje, who has lost everything but her will to live on, which is a beautiful story and could well be the topic of a glorious novel in its own right.

But we don't stop there. We jump forward to the present, to Wang Miao, a nanomaterials researcher and amateur photographer, as a strange phenomenon threatens to ruin his life. See, he begins seeing a countdown in every photograph he takes. This countdown doesn't appear when his wife or son take photographs.

This small incident leads him to quite a few surprising places, including a virtual reality game designed around the three body problem, where players must learn to solve an existential puzzle. In this game, the civilisation is destroyed over and over again by the seemingly chaotic and irrational cycles of the suns. Sometimes the sun is so close it melts civilisation away. Other times the sun disappears for extended periods, causing civilisation to freeze to nothing. Infrequently, there are stable periods, where civilisation is allowed to thrive.

Along with the game, Wang Miao becomes the accidental protagonist in a

political thriller, where he encounters revolutionaries, cults, and a plot to destroy humanity.

To say more is to give away the fun, but it's a very fun, thrilling, and interesting ride.

*The Three-Body Problem* is a novel of ideas, much like Asimov's novels. There are characters, and I enjoyed them, but many of them are more shells and shades than fully developed people. Wang Miao, for example, has a family, but they only interact for a handful of pages, and only to prove that something remarkable is happening to him. I mean, he disappears for days at a time, and there's no mention of his wife or his son, or how they feel about living with a nanomaterials researcher who seems to have little regard for them. Many of the character interactions actually happen in virtual reality, which is pretty interesting, but these interactions are fuelled by a very peculiar and complex theoretical problem in physics. This makes all of these conversations highly philosophical and theoretical in nature, which doesn't make for light reading.

That being said, some of my favourite moments are when he simply puts people together with nothing to solve and little to do. They're like moments of breath, where the characters just need some down time, a moment to catch their breath before they dive back into the chaos of their world. But these interactions are so pure and human and fantastic. It shows that Liu Cixin is a real master, but it can be frustrating to see that he focuses all of his energy and talent on ideas rather than characters.

This is a very different literary tradition than the one we're used to, with very different goals and expectations. It's a fascinating read, if only to see how different a story can be from a culture pretty separate from our western ideals. I'm extremely impressed and intend to devote at least a chunk of my year's reading to Chinese science fiction, and will be reading Part II of the trilogy when it comes out later this year.

This is a powerful, sometimes quite funny, sometimes surprisingly emotionally resonant, novel full of enormous ideas and ambition that also seems indifferent to your expectations. It also deals with an idea very near and dear to my heart and brain: human extinction. Liu Cixin takes one of the most interesting looks at this possibility (or inevitability), which makes some of the novel feel incredibly dark and pessimistic, but these moments are balanced by extreme optimism, even when hopelessness and fatalism seems the only rational conclusion.

This is a novel you won't want to miss, and Ken Liu's translation is great. He includes footnotes to scaffold western audience's understanding of certain cultural references. The prose is clean and straightforward. It's not the kind of prose meant to impress, but to transmit complex and powerful ideas to the reader. It's a novel that challenges you to think. Or rather, it demands you think. It demands your attention, and it will reward you for it.

-Is it possible that the relationship between humanity and evil is

similar to the relationship between the ocean and an iceberg floating on its surface? Both the ocean and the iceberg are made of the same material. That the iceberg seems separate is only because it is in a different form. In reality, it is but a part of the vast ocean...-

-Even if God were here, it wouldn't do any good. The entire human race has reached the point where no one is listening to their prayers.-