

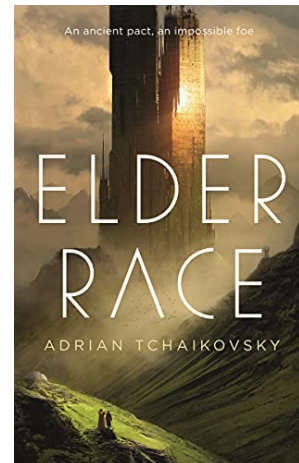
### Review of *Elder Race*, by Adrian Tchaikovsky

Lucy Nield



Tchaikovsky, Adrian. *Elder Race*. TorDotCom, 2021.

Adrian Tchaikovsky's 2021 novella, *Elder Race*, is a beautifully constructed cocktail of fantasy and speculative fiction. Much like Tchaikovsky's previous works, including the Arthur C. Clarke award-winning *Children of Time* (2016) and the BSFA-winning *Shards of Earth* (2021), *Elder Race* considers the future of humanity away from planet Earth. The story begins on Sophos 4, a planet colonized by humanity around 1,500 years ago. Over time, the modified humans who call Sophos 4 home have forgotten their ancestors' science and all tales of Earth, or "the otherworld," have slowly ceased to exist (111). In the space left void of science and Earth knowledge, a new culture and language emerges in the surviving communities. It is a seemingly primitive culture, with a strong belief in magic and "ancient creators who had, the stories said, placed people on the world and taught them how to live" (35). Those who live on Sophos 4 believe that there is one of the ancient sorcerers left on the planet, the last of the Elder Race, who has lived in a local tower for centuries and can only be called upon when there is a threat from old magic, which only he can understand.



The novella's narrative is split in two, starting with Lynesse, the fourth daughter of the Queen of Lannesite, one of the domains on Sophos 4. Lynesse leads a life she believes is purposeless. As the fourth daughter, she is far from being next in line for the throne, and her unshakable belief that she is a disappointment to her mother seems to influence her every move. She vehemently believes the old stories of her ancestor, Astresse Regent, who awoke the last of the ancients, Nyrgoth Elder. The stories say that Astresse summoned Nyrgoth Elder from his tower and together they fought the evil Magic that was awoken by the warlord Ulmoth. The ancient sorcerer banished the mechanical monster that Ulmoth controlled, and together Astresse and Nyrgoth Elder were victorious. Now that a "new power has arisen in the Ordwood that men say is a demon who steals minds," Lynesse climbs to the Elder Tower to seek the sorcerer's help as her ancestor did a century earlier (37).

The other half of the narrative is from the perspective of Nyr Illiam Tevitch. An "anthropologist second class of Earth's Explorer Corps," he is centuries old and light years from home (25). Nyr came to Sophos 4 over three centuries ago as part of a team of anthropologists; expected to observe and study the descendants of the original colonists, they were "sent to

watch and not act” (147). Nyr has been alone in what remains of his team’s outpost for centuries; with “no word for two hundred and ninety-one years,” Nyr has spent most of the time sleeping, depending on the outpost’s suspension facilities to keep him alive (26). After a couple of centuries sleeping in the suspension pods in the outpost, Astresse Regent comes to him, asking for help, and against his better judgement he agrees. He falls in love with Astresse and considers staying with her. Instead, he ultimately chooses to return to his suspension pod, promising Astresse that should her family be in peril again, they can come to him. It is hard to know if he regrets his decision to leave Astresse; he thinks of her as “a woman of primitive culture who could never have understood what I am, and yet magnificent, radiant. And I had been alone for so long by then” (31). Perhaps trying to denounce the affection he once felt, he diagnoses it instead as a symptom of his loneliness.

As soon as Nyr (Nyrgoth Elder) and Lyn (Lynesse Fourth Daughter) meet, there is a jarring and undeniable language barrier and cultural differences. These lead to miscommunication and trouble understanding one another emotionally, with the differences in linguistic nuance and common vernacular (on both sides) being constantly misunderstood or overlooked. The split narrative provides insights for the reader to comprehend the intention of each character, as does much of the dialogue, but the language barrier remains intact throughout. The “linguistic chasm,” as John Folk-Williams calls it, between Lyn and Nyr is a side effect of the passing of time, but it also highlights the stark differences in belief constructs and local social norms. Many examples litter Nyr’s and Lyn’s interactions, but there are a few of note.

Nyr tries and fails to explain to Lyn and her companion, Esha Free Mark, that he is in fact not a sorcerer. There are simply no appropriate terms in Lyn’s language for what Nyr understands as “scientist,” or “scholar,” so when he states these signifiers, “in their language, these are both cognates for wizard” (85). Nyr’s hypothesis is that, should he attempt to dispel Lyn and Esha of their belief that he is an ancient wizard, he might end up saying “I’m not a wizard; I’m a wizard, or at best a wizard,” an imagined interaction that he finds less than amusing (85). Whilst this is a valid obstruction in their communication, which prevents Nyr from explaining that he is an anthropologist and not a wizard, Tchaikovsky appears to forget that the term and “scholar” and its appropriate definition do not exist for Lyn, which was a slight surprise. Throughout Tchaikovsky’s work, he shows a skill for consistency within the lore of his novels, never forgetting or making errors. However, in this novella he states that the term “scholar” referring to a specialist in a particular branch of research, does not exist for Lyn or the other inhabitants of Sophos 4, but Lyn does use the term slightly later in the text within the same context that Nyr would use it to define himself. This small, perhaps overlooked, slip was something I never thought I would notice in any of Tchaikovsky’s work and hope never to notice again (109). Regardless of this, the difficulty Nyr encounters in his attempt to explain his position continues, and he struggles on to try to explain who he is to Lyn and Esha. He decides to break the rules of anthropology, to tell the ‘true story,’

hoping that they will be able to understand (110). Unfortunately, the language barrier holds fast, and whilst he tries to explain that humans travelled to Sophos 4 from Earth, they hear something else entirely.

Nyr tells stories of humans arriving from Earth, then adapting to their new planet, engineering body modifications for humans and the native livestock, as well as the machinery used in the colonisation process, but all Esha and Lyn hear is that the Elders used “magic” to travel from the “otherworld” (111) and began “teaching the beasts and plants their place, naming them and giving them their roles,” and about the “monsters” that did the will of men (112). Nyr tries his best to remove magic from the conversation, but once he is finished, Lyn simply states, “yes, that is how we tell it,” unable to grasp the concepts he has tried so delicately and desperately to explain (115).

The juxtaposition of Nyr and Lyn is remarkably insightful. In emphasising the generational differences and language barriers, Tchaikovsky successfully dramatizes the ideas surrounding witchcraft being an early version of medical science, or the well-known Arthur C. Clarke phrase that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. In this novella, Tchaikovsky uses this concept to highlight the difficulties confronted when attempting to cross technological, cultural and language barriers, as well as dramatically different belief systems. In doing so, Tchaikovsky also illuminates the distinctions between Fantasy and SF narratives, and by blending the two genres into one novella he makes it extremely difficult to speculate on the story’s outcome. When approaching a text of either genre, one holds certain expectations or assumptions, which are immediately useless when reading a novella that combines the two.

Unlike some of Tchaikovsky’s other texts, there are fewer allusions than one might expect. Whilst there are some of the usual tropes such as suspension pods, the use of technology to regrow or augment body parts, and someone being very far from home, one might not notice the key text that influences *Elder Race* unless they take a look at the dedication in the front of the book. In the dedication, Tchaikovsky nods to the late Gene Wolfe and his story “Trip, Trap,” which was the novella’s major inspiration. Constructed as two intercutting narratives, much like *Elder Race*, the story follows Garth the son of Garth in a fantasy-medieval setting (which is not dissimilar to Lynesse Fourth Daughter) and Dr. Morton Finch, a field xenoarchaeologist investigating possible ancient spacefaring technology. Whilst the narratives are quite different, their structures, focuses on magic, generic combinations, and constructed barriers are similar. The significance of this intertextual connection reveals much about Tchaikovsky and his skills as a writer, as well as the impact of manipulating genre. In his other works, he often utilises puns or alludes to other works in a clever and whimsical way for apparently humorous reasons. However, in using “Trip, Trap” in such an opaque manner, he reveals that his skills move beyond amusing allusions, whilst also illuminating the impact one can have when they blend genres, particularly disrupting expectations and dramatizing the apparent and somewhat noticeable correlation between what can be understood as science and what is viewed as magic.

*Elder Race* is an emotional novella, and through the narrative Tchaikovsky does what he does best, exploring the future humans might have away from Earth. With this text, Tchaikovsky reminds us that although he has crafted inspiring and award-winning SF novels, he is also an imaginative fantasy writer. Using the inspiration of Wolf's intercutting narratives as a starting point for his own work, Tchaikovsky creates a story with feeling, magic, and science. Whilst one might find this text frustrating due to its characters' failure to communicate, the novel confirms what we already know: Tchaikovsky is a commanding, imaginative writer, who can master and manipulate genre in any way he sees fit.

## Works Cited

Clarke, Arthur C. *Profiles of the Future: An Inquiry into the Limits of the Possible*. Indigo, 2000.

Folk-Williams, John. "Elder Race by Adrian Tchaikovsky – A Review." *Scifi Mind*, [www.scifimind.com/elder-race-by-adrian-tchaikovsky/](http://www.scifimind.com/elder-race-by-adrian-tchaikovsky/). Accessed 28 December 2022.

Wolf, Gene. *Storeys from the Old Hotel*. Ord Books, 1995.

**Lucy Nield** is a PhD student and GTA in the Department of English Literature at the University of Liverpool. Her research interests include dog-culture, posthumanism and the Anthropocene within contemporary speculative fiction. She has been an organizer for the Current Research in Speculative Fiction conference at the University of Liverpool since 2019 (@CRSFteam) and is a regular contributor to *The Fantasy Hive* (@TheFantasyHive). Lucy is an active member of the Olaf Staple Centre (UoL), has been published in *Foundation* (2021 & 2022) and *SFRA* (2019 & 2022), with a pending chapter for *Bloomsbury's 'Future Werewolf'* (2023), a pending article for *Comparative American Studies: An International Journal* (2023), as well as a special collection with *Extrapolation* (2023).