

### Review of *Light from Uncommon Stars*

Yen Ooi



Aoki, Ryka. *Light from Uncommon Stars*. Tor, 2021. Hardcover. 384 pg.  
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The winner of the 2021 Otherwise Award (previously known as the Tiptree Award) that “celebrates science fiction, fantasy, and other forms of speculative narrative that expand and explore our understanding of gender,” and a nominee for the 2022 Hugo Award for Best Novel, *Light from Uncommon Stars* was published at the end of September 2021. The breathtaking cover design, with an elegant koi fish swimming in space, sets the reader up for an unexpected science fictional journey.



In the beginning, we meet Katrina Nguyen, a young trans woman running away from trauma and abuse. Then quickly, in a parallel story, we meet Shizuka Satomi. We know little about her other than the fact that in comparison with Katrina, she is privileged and lives in a comfortable neighbourhood in Monterey Park, Los Angeles with Astrid who looks after her. This little introduction of both characters frames chapter one, and already, we are treated to perspectives of Asian-American communities—the big white Asian bus system, convergence of Asian languages, pentatonic folk songs, and more—that are very rarely seen in science fiction. But is *Light from Uncommon Stars* science fiction?

Soon after we meet the two main characters, we learn that Shizuka needs to find a seventh prodigy to be trained and have their soul delivered to the devil—she has already delivered six!—to escape damnation. On a drive, she gets lost in her own thoughts and finds herself needing the restroom, having missed several exits on the highway in San Gabriel Valley. She pulls off the next ramp, but comes to a residential area with only a big donut peeking over the trees. It is at Starrgate Donut that Shizuka meets Lan Tran, a retired alien starship captain, interstellar refugee, and mother of four. And it is afterwards, by a pond that is within walking distance from the donut shop that Shizuka meets Katrina, shares half a donut with her, and hears her play the violin for the first time.

In a Barnes & Noble interview with Miwa Messer, Ryka Aoki explains that these three women characters, she feels, would not normally have met, but when she throws them together on the page, they find companionship, unexpected family, and love, even though they might not feel they deserve it. The chance encounters are what propels the story forward, and each character questions

not only their goals, but also their limitations: how they have limited their dreams in what they wanted to do. As they learn this of themselves and each other, it drives them to be more.

*Light from Uncommon Stars* is a story of relationships and of relationalism, as introduced by *zoetology*—the philosophy derived from ancient East Asian teaching that is grounded in the knowledge that association is a fact (Ames 87). These women—all heroes—are not portrayed as binary heroes. They are full characters who are aware that there is no end to the end, where the story doesn't stop once they have reached their goals. Aoki describes this as a trait of the women she admires who have a realism with them. Ambition becomes much more nuanced because they realise that it is always balanced by repercussions, or damage one might do to the world, or even just remembering that even if they climb Everest, after they come down, they will still need to wash dishes (Messer).

This associativeness explored through the characters' journeys that are full of love, kindness, hardship, and difficulties, flows deeper yet into the core of the story itself as it balances genre-defying juxtapositions with the devil and a curse, aliens, interstellar travel, classical music, and American fast food as prominent features. Readers used to mainstream science fiction that provides clear binary storytelling, might question whether the book best belongs to *fantastika*, encompassing science fiction, fantasy, fantastic horror and their various subgenres. Or it might even be perceived to be kitsch. However, the onslaught of concepts is there to show us that there is a world (and indeed, our world is one of them) that can be a loving home to such diversity. It is crucial for creating the space to make the story work. Borrowing Seo-Young Chu's informal definition of science fiction as "a representational technology powered by a combination of lyric and narrative forces that enable SF to generate mimetic accounts of cognitively estranging referents," *Light from Uncommon Stars*'s cognitively estranging referents create such a distracting scene that it forces us to accept the Asian characters, transgender narrative, even the classical music theme, as the realism needed to ground the mimetic accounts (73). This goes beyond its representation of minority communities: it normalises the reality of these communities' lives.

In *A Stranger's Journey: Race, Identity, and Narrative Craft in Writing*, David Mura points out that "for most Asian Americans, American culture provides two unsatisfactory identities": 1) one that is "perpetually foreign"; 2) a second described as the "model minority", and a third that allows Asian Americans to understand that their "experiences are far more complicated than white Americans understand, and, indeed, than even [they themselves] may understand" (11).

Aoki sees writing as a public act; as an introvert—she is usually a very private person—it is a way for her to take part in society (Messer). With this skill, she deftly spins these complicated experiences into the story that is *Light from Uncommon Stars* because of, and for, her own experiences as an Asian American trans woman growing up in San Gabriel Valley.

I am a British East and Southeast Asian woman, a classically-trained musician, a migrant, a teacher, a writer, a geek, and more. When I finished reading the book, I cried. I felt acknowledged, loved, and seen, not realising that these were things that I have been craving. *Light from*

*Uncommon Stars* is a wonderfully entertaining, heartfelt, and wholesome novel, and if you give it more time and space, you will find yourself learning from it. Learning, as Aoki tells us, involves facing parts of the world that we are not able to change, and we might not be able to experience things the way we wish them to be (Messer):

‘When you’re trans, you’re always looking and listening,’ Katrina explained later. ‘It’s following, but it’s more than that. You need to see what might be coming, hear the next danger ahead.’

Shizuka nodded. So it wasn’t merely follow – it was follow and predict. Perhaps even follow and perceive.

This was an entirely different level of skill. (Aoki 130)

## Works Cited

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