



Minimum Safe Distance

X. Ho Yen

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The pseudonymous X. Ho Yen's impressively dense debut novel is a grand-scale science fiction thriller, seamlessly blending elements of diverse concepts from alien first contact to planetary collapse to post-humanism.

X. Ho Yen, a self-described autistic, instantly creates a memorable narrative by featuring a main character – Laurence Levesque, “a high-functioning autistic child” from Québec – who grows up to be a potential vanguard for the survival of the species, the planet, perhaps the solar system. After losing her beloved young mother to cancer, Laurence struggles with cruelty and callousness from neurotypicals, called Normals, who don't understand her neurodivergency or particularly care to. But when she enters college, she thrives in artificial intelligence and soon heads a Canadian Space Agency department developing an operating system for a new international space telescope.

Meanwhile, two alien lifeforms stationed on the Moon are monitoring the planet and humankind, aware that an impending “Catastrophic Cosmological Event” will at some point destroy a massive swath of the universe, including the solar system. Conflicted about how to save the planet's populace, the aliens begin battling each other, entangling much of humanity in unimaginable ways. Laurence is at the conflict's epicenter, saved from death by one of the aliens through a wondrous yet terrifying transformation that frees her from “biologically inherited drives, limitations, and distractions.”

There is a lot to like here. X. Ho Yen's deeply contemplated and meticulously described speculation – how the planet is being destroyed by humans, the hellscape of a post-apocalyptic Earth, the dark side of human natures, etc. – is undeniably immersive. But that hyperfocus can bog down the narrative momentum, as in this sequence: “When, if ever, will they discover that the idea of dimensional spacetime is an extrapolative distortion of the more fundamental structure of the universe that manifests and reveals itself in nonlocal effects, hinted at by what they know as quantum entanglement?”

Like Laurence's transformation, X. Ho Yen's thought-provoking first novel is a wildly unique, sometimes unwieldy look at how humankind can destroy itself while saving itself.

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