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In the year 2018, Sergeant Sue Smith of the Edinburgh constabulary is called in on a special case. A daring bank robbery has taken place at Hayek Associates -- a dot-com start-up company that's just floated onto the London stock exchange. But this crime may be a bit beyond Smith's expertise.

The prime suspects are a band of marauding orcs with a dragon in tow for fire support. The bank is located within the virtual land of Avalon Four, and the robbery was supposed to be impossible. When word gets out, Hayek Associates and all its virtual "economies" are going to crash hard.

For Smith, the investigation seems pointless. But the deeper she digs, the bigger the case gets. There are powerful players -- both real and pixilated -- who are watching her every move. Because there is far more at stake than just some game-head's fantasy financial security . . .

Halting State Details

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From Reader Review Halting State for online ebook

Ruby Tombstone [With A Vengeance] says

This is a quote from Cory Doctorow's Little Brother about X-Net:
"The best part of this is how it made me feel: in control. My technology was working for me, serving me, protecting me. It wasn't spying on me. This is why I loved technology; if you used it right it could give you power and privacy."

This is a quote from Charles Stross' Halting State about BlackNet:
"At the protocol level, it's an anonymous peer-to-peer currency system. It asks you to do favors, it does you favors. Like, be in front of a building with a running motor at such a time with the back doors open, and drive to an address where someone'll be waiting for you with a wallet full of cash and another stolen car." At least, that's the innocent-sounding version, because, let's face it, burglary and criminal damage go together like love and marriage, or robbery and a get-away carriage - and most of the stuff blacknets get used for starts there and gets worse real fast. None of the perps know each other, because it's all done with zero-knowledge proofs and anonymous remixers running out of zombie servers on some poor victim's home entertainment system that's downloaded one piece of X-rated malware too many."

And THAT is the difference between Charles Stross and Cory Doctorow - Doctorow sees free anonymous internet access as freedom and power, and a civic right. Stross sees it as a network for criminals. Doctorow's assumption is that hackers and kids will always be smarter and more agile than Governments, and therefore will always be one step ahead with regard to using technology. Stross assumes that Governments are all-seeing, all powerful and always on top of the tech. And THIS is why I prefer Cory Doctorow.

Other reasons I didn't love this book..
(view spoiler)

There were some good ideas in here, but for me they were lost in messy writing and a lack of insight into how other people might think or view the world. I will still read another Stross book, because on paper, there should be plenty for me to like - technology, Lovecraftian horrors, zombies, D&D, science fiction..... I SHOULD love this guy. But I don't yet.

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j says

Charles Stross decided it would be a good idea to write Halting State entirely in second person. I briefly toyed with doing the same for my review, but then I remembered that I already did that, and it wasn't that amusing.

Then I thought maybe I would do the whole thing in code like a l33t haXor, which would have been appropriate since this book finds it the height of amusement to throw around with-it language like "n00b" and "pwned."

Then I realized that it is obnoxious to force readers to suffer an affected writing style or stylistic quirk unless you have a really good reason, and "because it's cute and mildly thematically relevant" is *not a good enough reason*, are you listening, *Charles Stross*?

I did not like this book, perhaps because it is about the online gaming community, by which I mean obsessives who spend way too much time playing World of Warcraft, and my idea of a video game binge still tends more toward playing through all of Super Mario World in one night. Maybe if you play Everquest enough to think it is funny to call it "Evercrack" (do people still play EverQuest?), then this book is a hilarious romp of in-jokes and references.

If you do not, though, it is a dull, unimaginative slice of near-future sci-fi that was quite possibly dated *before the manuscript was fully edited*.

Near-future stuff is tough because if you predict wrong, you just look silly (where are the intergalactic army brigades of 1997, Joe Haldeman?). Stross plays it safe by predicting almost nothing. In 202X, we'll all still be playing online games with fantasy-themed avatars and using the same tired netspeak. The only difference is we will use VR goggles (the future of 1994!) and the U.K. will have collapsed (also the U.S. economy, oh, *daring*). *Everyone* will be a gamer, to the point where a virtual crime committed inside of a game could have global economic effects to the tune of billions of Euros! Possibly. I admit I didn't quite follow all of it.

But basically, it goes like this: crime is committed inside a video game when a bunch of in-game objects (spells, swords, treasure) are stolen. Cops and insurance companies get involved and investigate. Larger conspiracies unfold. It almost sounds interesting.

But then the first 2/3 are all about setting up the gaming culture, describing avatars, going off on tangents about how you'll be able to check Yelp! reviews in the future using a virtual in-glasses display (no, really, there is a long bit about looking up a good restaurant online), and poorly developing a cast of four stock point-of-view characters via the aforementioned unwise decision to write entirely in second person (I guess because YOU are the character in this video game obsessed narrative). (And to clarify: that means that the "you" you are reading about is referencing *four* samey characters, which can make it hard to remember who you are at any given time, even though the chapter titles tell you which character is featured.)

Only in the last part are the real stakes revealed, if by "revealed" you mean "explained via a series of confusing expository conversations."

The worst are the "action sequences" set inside a game, which clearly have absolutely no real world impact and are thus about as interesting as watching your nerdy cousin play X-Box. Game over. No continues.

Kolya Matteo says

You didn't like this book as much as the other Stross you've read. Perhaps the second-person narration is the problem: you don't like being told how you feel, particularly when your motivations are as inane or stupid as these characters' seem to be. You're not sure whether Sergeant Sue Smith actually accomplished anything in

the whole book, and the other two characters who you get to be are told that they're important, but don't seem to justify it. The characters run around reacting to "thrilling" events, but never seem to act or even to think much about the plot, instead worrying about their shoes or something. In the end the plot is resolved by infodump.

The focus on virtual money, cryptography, and hijinks therewith sometimes got you thinking you were reading a book by Neal Stephenson - a curious sensation, like looking around and realizing you're not in the room you thought you were. It's not a comparison that does this book any favors.

Seth says

This book has several interesting (and unusual) attributes. Overall it's a fun read in the vein of Pat Cadigan's Synners, about hackers and suits working together to handle a threat to technology society has evolved to assume. Like <u>Synners</u> it throws you into the world head-first without explaining names, acronyms, slang, or the numerous in-jokes; unlike <u>Synners</u> it focuses on the espionage story and leaves the sociological theorizing out.

The plot revolves around a multi-million-dollar bank heist. We follow an insurance investigator, her hired computer consultant, and a local cop assigned to the case. The catch: the bank was inside an online game. Items in online games have real-world value, but how to track, charge, prosecute, and assess the insurance liability is entirely unclear.

Stross' 2018 society is a just-over-the-horizon extrapolation of our own. Familiar names (Google, Microsoft Office, AD&D) and parodies of familiar names (Web 3.14) abound. As usual, Cringeley's law applies: people tend to overestimate change in the short term but underestimate it in the long term. Stross has accelerated social acceptance of, reliance on, and affordable access to database mashups, smart cars, flexible work/life balance, telecommuting, pervasive computing, online gaming as intentional community, and other causes popular with the so-called-"Web 2.0" crowd. The book, set in a Scotland gone hyper-technical but still balanced between Presbeterian and Socialist heritage, also makes some interesting (and, again, too-quick) extrapolations about American-versus-EU infrastructure and pan-European cooperation. It's no wonder the first review I saw of this was Corey Doctorow's adoring recommendation on Boing Boing.

Stross makes the interesting the choice to write the book in the rare--and rarely successful--second person present. This is usually used by amateur hack writers doing action or porn to give a sense of being "in the action" (which it doesn't). In this case it works well: because the viewpoint character changes with each chapter it gives a sense of the reader becoming a different character, mirroring the character- and role-hopping going on in the game-playing and the identity-hopping that unfolds as the investigation proceeds.

The story starts as a detective story, and I was all settled in and looking forward to it. However, the scale keeps escalating, from the criminal stage to the corporate, the national, the international, and finally to global socioeconomic ramifications, turning the back half of the book into a spy story more than a detective one, with all of the feints, sudden murder attempts, suddenly-revealed secret backstories, and take-it-on-faith explanations as to why things matter that spy stories entail. I don't mind spy stories, but it is a bit of a bait-and-switch.

Possibly because it was a spy story and not a whodunnit, the end felt a little off to me. We catch the bad guy from the espionage but the actual robbery in the beginning is left mostly aside. None of the type of actual investigation we prepared for turns out necessary and the skills the characters thought they were bringing to

the table weren't those they used. I felt a little let down, but enjoyed it enough anyway. In particular we build up a lot of expectation around a secret one character is hiding and keeps almost-confessing; when it comes out it's a complete waste of tension.

I want Stross to remove the word "sniffs" from his spell-checker. Almost every page someone "sniffs" in response to something; it's a meaningless tag used to indicate "reacted" without telling us *how* and it was used so often it became intrusive.

Other than those peeves, it's a fun book. It's a great one to play spot-the-reference ("give me a cookie," "a maze of twisty mirrors, all alike," warchalk" a reference to the game Assassin and the lore surrounding it, etc... there are hundreds throughout the book).

Brownbetty says

Every once in a while I get the idea I'm not reading brainy enough SF, and that all the other SF readers will sneer at me for not reading enough Hugo winners. Halting State hasn't won a Hugo, but it says "Hugo Award-winning author of" on the front, so it probably count for half points.

Sue Smith is a tough, no-nonsense cop who takes occasional flack for being the only out lesbian in her department. And that was the last time the book gave me something I liked.

The entire book (well, let me be honest: right up until I stopped reading it, which was not far in at all) is written in the second person. This is the sort of show-off-y trick you had damn well better prove you're good enough to use. Sue (you) speak(s) with a brogue, and occasionally the narration from her (your) POV borrows it. The future we are in is signalled by heavy use of acronyms, abbreviations, and neologisms:

You shake your head and get out of the car, tapping your ear-piece to tell your phone to listen up: "Arriving on SOC, time-stamp now. Start evidence log." It's logging anyway--everything you do on duty goes into the black box--but the voice marker is searchable. It saves the event from getting lost in your lifelog.

Gives you the general gist. We are in the future! Surveillance is pervasive and inescapable! We have fun new acronyms! And then the crazy, are you ready for it, no really, make sure you are sitting down because this will Blow. Your. Mind. crime? Someone has knocked over a bank in ~~Second Life~~ Avalon Four.

I couldn't keep reading, it was like listening to my parents try to use teenage slang. In Stross's defense, this was written in 2007, which is probably a decade in internet-years, but he has somehow posited a future were people have just discovered virtual economies, which ought to be just as much speculative fiction as stories where Hannibal crosses the Alps in zeppelins, and yet really isn't.

So, anyway. Presumably lots of fun stuff happens after page twelve, but you'll have to ask someone else about that.

Jacob says

As confusing as Nexus was without a real beginning, this one is even worse. Still no real beginning, just

jumping into the action, except it starts with more characters, some of who have similar names (I never did figure out the difference between Michaels and Marcus). The fact that it's told in the 2nd person doesn't hurt as much as you think it would, but at the beginning it sure doesn't help because it means that names don't get mentioned as often and you can't tell who is doing what. I think it was written in 2nd person to make it feel more to the reader like a game you are participating in, but 2nd person is not how I experience games so it just comes across as odd, if mostly useless. Kill your darlings, Stross.

There's a little too much focusing on how the protagonists have no idea what's going on, which is usually the sign of a thin plot or one the author doesn't know how to get off the ground. In this case I think it's the latter; the third quarter of the book gets really interesting and starts to make some sense, and then Stross wimps out with a bog-standard resolution (i.e. it was the butler, or the royal vizier, or whatever) and can't be bothered to tie up the loose ends he was developing that were actually interesting and unusual. And what we're left with is pieces of augmented reality and online games which are effectively "playing" real life. If those had been the focus of the plot and Stross had been brave enough to go there and make awesome sense of it, this could have been as good as Snow Crash. Instead he placed his bet on 2nd person storytelling, a quick letdown at the end, heavy references to role-playing games and massively multiplayer online gaming, and some barely comprehensible Scottish accents sprinkled liberally throughout.

I'm giving this officially three stars because it had some ideas that were pretty neat, but it was only borderline worth reading. I would give it 2.5 stars if I could.

Jenne says

I'd really like to give this three and a half stars. It was pretty cute, and the idea of the real-life spy game was neat.

As many others have noted, Stross has a fondness for enormous chunks of exposition, but I guess it doesn't bother me as much. I like learning about stuff, as long as it's interesting stuff.

I'm taking off points for:
--intermittent use of annoying Scottish dialect
--constantly referring to an accountant as a "librarian" because she's...nerdy? dunno.
--rather perfunctory character development in general, and specifically the romance part

Simeon says

+1 to the list of notable books written in second person, which is only slightly longer than the list of notable books written solely to criticize them.

Halting State has a cool premise. I mean, aside from the fact that it was dated by the time it came out (goggles, really? That's your immersion technology. I mean, we've gotten to the point where we can read your mind. But hey, if you wanna strap a small TV to your face instead, whatever.)

Let's ignore specifics about Halting State for a minute, because like most people I was delighted to see nerdy nomenclature littering its pages. And kudos to Charles Stross who, despite the certainty that he's never gone

beyond noob-level on any game whatsoever, writes a decent characterization of someone who has.

Let's look instead at how thoroughly idiotic it is to write in second person. Some of you probably tried to ignore this fact as a function of your open-mindedness.

The funniest side-effect of second person narrative is that the reader will continuously forget the protagonist's name. What could have been a name or a pronoun or "the stranger" or "the warrior" becomes a banal "you."

Version 1: The shadows shifted and a figure stepped out. "What the -" began the guard as an arrow struck him in the face.

Version 2: You step out of the shadows. "What the - " begins the guard as your arrow strikes him in the face.

The second version doesn't sound too bad, right? Now imagine being stuck in that point of view for an entire book. You cannot zoom, or pan, or examine a scene or character from another angle. It's as though a movie like Inception were shot entirely from Leonardo DiCaprio's perspective, a camera literally strapped to his forehead for every scene without so much as a fancy lens. Now you're getting the limiting factor of second person. Inception would still have been a good movie, don't get me wrong; but it would have been nothing compared to the effect of panning the view at just the right moment, the right angle to to let you see something that perhaps the main character cannot, or to show you someone else, etc.

Scenes like this would be impossible:

Only first person perspective would be allowed. You'd never know what the main character looked like, or what other people were seeing or feeling or smelling. You wouldn't even know what's going on outside your immediate POV. It makes for a very dull story.

Derek says

There's pretentiousness, and then there's Second Person Narration pretentiousness. And then there's Second Person Narration, Different POV Character For Each Chapter. I couldn't get past that.

Game industry and emergent virtual economies and assorted hacker caper/heist stuff is interesting in real life, but fictionalized versions are not, especially when it all hangs on handwaving and near-future extrapolations that didn't quite feel right.

I can sort of see the narration choice as a callback to old-style interactive fiction games--*Zork*, etc.--and the multiplayer MUD/MUSH versions. But it was a gimmick that hampered me from getting to a part that I might have liked.

Whitaker says

My Review in 50 Words or Less

Written in 2007, what you'll get if you read this is a smart, savvy novel unsettlingly prescient about where we may be going. Plus there's a decently plotted story to boot. Just get over that second-person narrative hump.

The More than 50-Words Version

The Second Person Narrative—Is There Something to It?

> Mary's been nagging you about your heart ever since that stupid DNA check you both took last year (*'so the wee wun kens his maws ur both gawn tae be aboot for a whiule'*), and the way she goes on, you'd think refined sugar was laced with prussic acid.

If that writing is like nails on a chalk board for you—both the second-person POV and the Scottish dialect—then you definitely want to stay away from this work. Myself, I stopped noticing it after 30 pages or so.

The narrative—always in the second-person—cycles between the perspectives of three different characters (Sue, Elaine, and Jack) in a rigid unvarying sequence. For me, the second-person narrative achieved an interesting mid-point between the intimacy of the first-person and the objective, authorial omnipotence of the third-person. Take this extract for example (again, we're with Sue, the police officer investigating the case):

> Marcus Hackman's office is all done up in chrome and black like an eighties bachelor pad. Mary has a thing for design magazines, and you recognise the Eames chair and lounger, and you'll swear you've seen that desk somewhere famous. One wall is cluttered with photographs and certificates and the sort of shit the terminally insecure use to reassure themselves that they really matter; or maybe it's what aggressive office sociopaths use to browbeat the terminally insecure into thinking that they really matter. The shark bares his teeth at you in a not-too-cannibalistic manner. 'I can spare you five minutes.'

Let's take the sentence 'The shark bares his teeth at you in a not-too-cannibalistic manner'.

Written in the first-person, the POV becomes purely subjective:

> 'The share bares his teeth at me in a not-too-cannibalistic manner.'

Is it all just in Sue's imagination? The sentence becomes as much about Sue as it is about Marcus Hackman.

Written in the third person-person, it's less immediate, and also clunkier:

> 'The shark bares his teeth at Sue in a manner that she found not-too-cannibalistic.'

We also get a divorce between the objectivity of the impression of 'shark' given by the third-party POV and the subjectivity of describing Sue's reaction.

The second-person POV situates the reader nicely (and, in my view, elegantly) in between the personal subjectivity of the intimate and the arms-length distancing of the objective.

The Near Future Just Five Minutes Away

This mid-distance achieved by the second-person POV is a neat reflection of the near-future oddness of the novel: just close enough to the present to be familiar, and just far away enough to be alien. Take the very first quotation that opened this review and the oh-so-casual reference to a lesbian couple with a child. While it might be less unusual now in 2012, when written in 2007, it would have been just unusual enough as an idea to be exotic.

Here's Sue again using her internet goggles. By beaming visuals directly onto her retina, she gets an overlay on the scene in front of her with information from the police database:

> CopSpace sheds some light on matters, of course. Blink and it descends in its full glory. Here's the spiralling red diamond of a couple of ASBO cases on the footpath…There's the green tree of signs sprouting over the doorway of number thirty-nine, each tag naming the legal tenants of a different flat. Get your dispatcher to drop you a ticket, and the signs open up to give you their full police and social services case files, where applicable…This is the twenty-first century, and all the tetrabytes of CopSpace have exploded out of the dusty manila files and into the real world, sprayed across it in a Technicolour mass of officious labelling and crime notices.

The connectedness and ubiquity of access to the internet was just about beginning in 2007 when Charles Stross wrote this. Internet glasses are currently being developed by Google. But the interesting, and just about too scarily plausible next step, is the labelling and retrieval of information on people based on face-recognition technology and cross-referencing a range of databases in real time for instant reference. It's the whole soci0-economic and cultural effect of such steps in where we currently are to where we might well be in the next decade that makes the future of this novel so intriguingly compelling.

The Crime Thriller that Morphs into Something Else

The story starts with a crime committed in a MMORPG, one of hundreds administered by Hayek Associates in a world where people willingly pay cash to buy in-game products. This, by the way, has already started, but imagine what happens when the in-game economy gets much larger than it is now. How would real world economics then play into in-game economics, and how might in-game theft then translate into real world cash? This isn't even really the future anymore, what with the North Korean government using gamers to hack online games to farm gold to sell for cold hard cash, and with gold farming becoming a veritable industry in developing countries.

So, the story starts with a crime that our three hapless heros get involved in investigating, but it rapidly spins into something bigger. In this near future, everything is hooked up to the internet, everything is connected. It's not just your phone or your PC. It's your oven, your car, the traffic system, the electrical grid, government servers… The virtual world bleeds into the real world, and to keep the virtual economy safe, Hayek Associates essentially provides a service as a virtual Federal Reserve bank, keeping the in-game economy stable. That kind of service requires high level encryption, and the entire economic backbone of the hundreds of in-game systems are run off the encryption keys that are used across the European Union for its internet systems. So imagine what happens if that key is sold or stolen.

We're not far off from that future. In fact, it's just around the corner—there's a nifty riff in this pre-2008 novel about greed and the use of certain derivatives that results in real world chaos. And in the world of

geopolitics, we've recently had the infection of Iran's nuclear fission centrifuges by the Stuxnet virus thought to have been created by the Israelis. And when in 2008, when Russia attacked Georgia, in order to degrade the effectiveness of Georgia's national response, the Russians included a cyberattack that disabled dozens of important Georgian websites, including those of the country's president and defense minister, as well as the National Bank of Georgia and major news outlets.

The book has the fun crazy energy of sitting around shooting the breeze with a bunch of friends, getting drunk and uproarious, and just speculating about what tomorrow might be like. It also just sober enough a look at a tomorrow that looks just enough like today to be interesting and very worrying.

Janet says

Okay plot, although Stross thinks he's being more innovative than he really is. The idea of people thinking they're playing war games, only to find out it's real, has been done many times. (*Ender's Game* for one, and lots of movies from the 1980's). The main characters appealing, but undeveloped. Also, I know I'm fighting a losing battle here, but the word "librarian" describes a profession. It does not mean nerdy, intellectual, sexually repressed, insecure, spinsters! I hate to smash your daydreams, guys, but some librarians are soccer moms. Some librarians already have boyfriends. Some librarians are men.

I did like Stross' ideas about what a highly electronically connected world will look like, and how handicapped everyone will when they have to turn it all off. That, and a forlorn hope that I would eventually grasp all of the plot, kept me going to the end of the book.

Sandi says

"Halting State" by Charles Stross was the last book on my 2008 Hugo Nominees List. While I still think "Brasyl" by Ian McDonald should have won instead of "The Yiddish Policemen's Union" by Michael Chabon, I do think this comes in a very, very close second.

I was pleasantly surprised by "Halting State". I read "Accelerando" by the same author last year and absolutely loathed it. "Halting State" really grabbed me and I read huge chunks at a time. I was amazed at how Stoss managed to maintain a second person present tense narration throughout the book. It was a bit jarring at first because it is so unusual, but it didn't take long to get used to it. Once characters started interacting and there was some dialogue going on, the unusual syntax was barely noticeable.

"Halting State" was confusing at times as the real world and the virtual world merged and collided. However, it never once stopped being fascinating. It was an action thriller set ten years in the future in a world that is very, very different from what it is today. As different as it is, it's plausible based on today's technology. While I never warmed to the character of police officer Sue, I did like Jack and Elaine a lot.

I'm still not sure if I really know what happened in this story, but that's okay. It was an exciting ride.

Brent says

This was a bit of a challenging read due to its multiple second person narrators (which "you" am I now?) and varying amounts of Scottish idiom (when did "ned" become an adjective?). Then of course there is the matter of crimes being committed inside a MMOG and the in depth look from both the player and the developer points of view along with their accompanying exposition learning curves.

The difficulty is most pronounced in the beginning of the book, but things do get clearer after a while.

And then you start to see the fascinating mashup of ideas: economic warfare, crowdsourced espionage, digital dependence, and augmented reality as a serious business tool.

By the end you don't notice the odd structure any more, you're just eager to find out how they are going to save the day.

Ben Babcock says

There is a new buzzword making the rounds these days: *gamification*. It refers to the trend of turning quotidian tasks into games. Usually the end goal of the game maker is profit, of course, but often gamification has benefits for the players—it turns an otherwise boring or dull task into something fun. CBC's *Spark* has explored gamification. They've also interviewed Jane McGonigal, who has some interesting ideas about how gaming is changing our society. (She also has a book I intend to read but had forgotten to add to my list until now! She was on *The Colbert Report* recently.)

But I digress. I bring up gaming and gamification because it seems like an appropriate way to examine *Halting State*. In the 2018 of this book, Scotland has gained independence, and gamification has saturated Scottish society. Mashups and crowdsourced reviews have become the go-to source for information and recommendations. Augmented reality is also in full bloom, with police using googles to look up information and communicate via an AR layer called "CopSpace". (Do not view this as far-fetched: Brazil is rolling out facial recognition glasses for the World Cup—although it remains to be seen whether they work as well as advertised.) *World of Warcraft*-style MMORPGs are popular and profitable, with entire companies existing solely to manage their economies. Hayek Associates is one such company, until an in-game bank robbery that should have been impossible.

Halting State is a slippery chimera of a novel. It begins as a straightforward mystery, or as straightforward as a mystery can be when the perpetrators are orcs in the world of Avalon 4. Sue Smith is the Edinburgh cop on the case, but she quickly finds herself in over her head. This proves to be a recurring motif throughout the book, which quickly morphs from mystery to thriller as Elaine and Jack enter the story. Elaine is an auditor—the exact relationship of her firm with Hayek eludes me now, nearly a week after reading the book, but she goes in to investigate in the wake of this robbery on behalf of her clients (who are, I believe, insurers). Jack is the programming whizkid she hires to be her "native guide" through the system. Eventually this unlikely trio uncovers the truth behind the Hayek heist—and it is neither pretty nor simple. That's when *Halting State* undergoes its final metamorphosis into a story of espionage and intrigue.

Whether one is willing to follow the book as it undergoes these transitions will ultimately determine the extent of one's enjoyment. I quite enjoyed *Halting State*'s opening, its milieu and mood and sense of

mystery. Its final form of a spy thriller was less interesting for me. As with many such books, *Halting State* makes use of the conspiracy-implicit idea that the main characters, having seemingly been thrown together by chance, were actually manipulated into meeting and groomed to play their roles from the very beginning. It takes some of the excitement out of the novel for me—also, I feel this trope is rather overused. And while I'd like to say good things about Stross' characterization—I did *like* Sue and Elaine and Jack—it just seems all over the map. (For example, Jack has this weird but trivial criminal record that seems entirely irrelevant to the plot or even to him as a character.)

So in this way *Halting State* is quite similar to how I felt about the plot of *Singularity Sky* . The latter had the benefit of including very well-realized and cool ideas about AI, the Singularity, quantum communication, wormholes, and time travel. It was also wider in scope, which any issues with characterization less of an issue. *Halting State*'s focus on near-future gamification isn't nearly as interesting. Stross sets the scene well. The idea of someone stealing information in a game in order to make a profit in the real world is clever, and it underscores how we will have to remain flexible in our ideas of what *business* and *commerce* mean in the era of digital gaming. And sure, even when that turns out to be a red herring, the real threat to Europe's infrastructure is still a crypto-geek's nightmare. There is no question that Stross excels at demonstrating the implications our dependence on networked technology have for how our governments and societies function at their most basic levels. This skill is what keeps me reading even when the story itself is lacklustre.

Then there is the elephant in the room, the one glaring attribute of *Halting State* that I have yet to mention. This book is narrated entirely in second-person. Judging from other reviewers, your mileage may vary; I didn't really notice after the first few pages. I have encountered maybe one other book (not that I can name it) that uses this device, and I can see how it would aggravate some people or entice others. (I suspect my brain just decided to translate it all into third-person, which is why I did not have any trouble. Go my brain!)

I don't mean to damn *Halting State* with faint praise. As far as the story goes, it grabbed me and made me want to finish reading. That's an excellent quality for a story to have—but it's far from sufficient to make a story great. Although I found it enjoyable, I don't think I will find *Halting State* particularly memorable.

Guy says

Just when you think you've read everything worth reading and that there's nothing new under the sun, just when you are feeling really jaded, that's when books like this one (and Michael Flynn's "January Dancer", and Peter Watts' "Blindsight") come along and remind you why you love science fiction and fantasy.

Set in the near future, using technology that either exists already or is on the drawing board now, Stross creates a world that is at the same time almost alien and yet recognizably our tomorrow. This is, barring some sort of catastrophe, the way life is going to be within a decade or so. Unless you are planning to get off the bus one way or another, you should read this book.

And it's really well-written. The plot is full of surprises but they are all logical and consistent and appropriately foreshadowed... I know because as soon as I finished I went back to the beginning and read it again to make sure. Not often I do that....

One final comment: the choice of the second person narrative is perfect (or at least, it will seem that way to

anyone who ever played Adventure or Zork back in the Cambrian Age of computer games).

Kristin says

This was a delight to read. The story is set in independent Scotland in 2018. Everyone has direct and constant access to the web through their glasses and walk around in a constant twitch as they hammer away on virtual keyboards. Hayek Associates, a small start-up gaming company, has discovered their software has been infiltrated and the virtual bank they oversee has been robbed by a band of orcs and a dragon. Sergeant Sue Smith is first on this bewildering crime "scene". Next to come along is Elaine, a sword wielding forensic accountant. She realizes she needs some additional help and has her current employer hire Jack, an unemployed gaming programer, to train her in the nuances of game space.

The chapters alternate between the three characters POV in second person. This worked...and it didn't. You would be reading from Jack's POV, chapter changes, POV changes, but it would take a couple pages to shift into the new character mentally. Personally, I liked Jack's character, especially his constant reference to his "mummy lobe". This was his overdeveloped sub-conscious that would cause him to blurt out things, be ultra honest and "do the right thing".

Another aspect I really enjoyed was Sergeant Smith's CopSpace capability. The police force had a overlay feature that could be dropped down on reality and allow them to see crime as it is happening, assess how honest people are answering questions, and access all sorts of files while out on the beat. Super cool.

Stross does throw a lot of gaming and computer abbreviations at the reader, and sometimes that got to be a bit much (since I am neither a gamer or a "graphic information specialist"). The story is fast paced and does throw a lot at the reader, and for once, I did not guess the ending ahead of time. This was as good as or better than Glasshouse. Check it out!

Tricia says

Another from my list of books in second person. I found it extremely hard to get into this at first. The second person present perspective plus the head jumping into different characters felt very awkward, and I really wasn't at all sure where the story was going, so I was reluctant to dive in. About a third of the way through, I finally grokked where it was trying to go and I leapt in, reading the rest of the book at a faster pace and really enjoying the characters. It's rare in a book with multiple characters for me to feel akin to all of the main characters, but this managed to pull it off for me - I liked Elaine, Jack and Sue, and wanted to be in each of their heads. I think I only felt annoyed once that we were headhopping into another character.

The plot was complicated and I'm still not sure if I feel like all my questions are answered. In fact, I'm going to go google and see if I missed a minor subplot. Intrigue, adventure, gaming and a slightly futuristic society: Halting State will bring these and more in a second-person perspective which (maybe) brings you closer to the action. I don't know if this could have also worked in first-person as well or better, but I am glad I stuck through the tough beginning and got caught up in the various questions and suspense at last.

Megan Baxter says

It's hard to write what I want to about this book without giving away a lot about the plot and the tricks that Stross has up his sleeve. I'm going to go ahead and talk about it regardless, but if you're worried about broad spoilers (nothing too specific, I promise), this might not be the review for you.

Note: The rest of this review has been withheld due to the changes in Goodreads policy and enforcement. You can read why I came to this decision here.

In the meantime, you can read the entire review at Smorgasbook

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Chris says

Weird but good scifi novel about a crime (or not) that may (or not) have occurred inside a virtual reality game. It's told in second person (to give you the feel of playing a game, I think) from the alternating perspectives of three people who are trying to figure out what happened (or didn't). Definitely took me a bit to get used to the unusual storytelling mode.

Laura says

In the world-to-come, scary governments and scary nongovernments have figured out how to use live action role play and massively multiplayer online games to continue diplomacy by other means. Everything is monitored; everything monitoring system is infiltrated; every need in Maslow's hierarchy is a reward pellet to get the rats to run the maze and solve someone else's problem. Our enemies are pale ghosts in the machine; no need to rewire our soldiers' moral machinery before they are willing to shoot them.

It's fun. Definitely science fiction. I never played enough Zork or the old text based Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy to have nostalgia for it, but I liked (and miss) the people who I played those games with. This might have primed me to be more tolerant of the second person story telling than I was in Rule 34.

The book spends most of its time in Scotland, but our characters take some satisfying reconnaissance trips to cyberspace. One goes into the Mountains of Madness to retrieve really useful loot for saving the world. Shiny.

A great bus book.