



The Witling

Vernor Vinge

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This second novel by multiple award-winner Vernor Vinge, from 1976, is a fast-paced adventure where galactic policies collide and different cultures clash as two scientists and their faith in technology are pitted against an elusive race of telekinetic beings.

Marooned on a distant world and slowly dying of food poisoning, two anthropologists are caught between warring alien factions engaged in a battle that will affect the future of the world's inhabitants and their deadly telekinetic powers. If the anthropologists can't help resolve the conflict between the feuding alien factions, no one will survive.

This edition features sixteen full-page illustrations by Doug Beekman.

The Witling Details

Date : Published November 28th 2006 by St. Martins Press-3pl (first published 1976)

ISBN : 9780765308863

Author : Vernor Vinge

Format : Paperback 220 pages

Genre : Science Fiction, Fiction, Fantasy

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From Reader Review The Witling for online ebook

Martijn Heemels says

Quite a short story, but entertaining. In typical Vinge style, the aliens' world is believable, although in this early book still a bit simplistic. Still, some entertaining ideas on how a race would develop when given extraordinary powers.

His really excellent later books do a much better job of imagining an alien civilisation that is utterly different from ours, but still make you feel part of it.

Thomson Kneeland says

Vernor Vinge has written some great novels, but *The Witling* definitely does not live up to his other works. Premises were interesting enough, but the story is not too captivating, and in its short length, really offers nothing substantial. The ending involves a gratuitous 20 pages where everything is suddenly "resolved" without really having any kind of climactic plot. Vinge is a great writer, but look elsewhere!

Rob Markley says

Early Vinge novel before he really know how to put a story together. Has some early spark but not up with the later brilliance

Jonathan Palfrey says

This book has a nice clear story with an unusual heroine, and a well-conceived and original scenario unlike any other I can think of. It makes use of teleportation and telekinesis; but the teleportation is not quite the same as Alfred Bester's jaunting, and the difference has interesting effects on the resulting society.

It's the story of two relatively normal humans marooned on an abnormal planet, so I'm reminded vaguely of *Mission of Gravity* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

As with *Mission of Gravity*, the situation is of more interest than the characters, but Vinge's characterization is at least more interesting than Hal Clement's.

It seems that some readers are disappointed because they read Vinge's later books first, and came to this one expecting something similar. I think that's an inappropriate comparison: this is a book from 1976, inspired by the sf of the 1950s and 1960s, which Vinge would have grown up reading. If you compare it with the sort of books that were around at that time, it's a well-made and original novel and I value it.

The one thing I don't like about it is the ending. The last chapter winds everything up in rather a hurry, and some of the details seem implausible. Furthermore, he claims it as a happy ending, but there's an element of

tragedy that I wish he could have avoided somehow. I'm a softie: I like an unambiguously happy ending.

Kiri says

So, it turns out that Vernor Vinge once wrote pulp sci-fi! I saw this book with his name on it in a used bookstore and picked it up for \$1. I can only imagine that this was how he was learning his craft. The central idea is mildly interesting: a planet where the population (and indigenous creatures) are able to teleport (with varying strength) and only those without this skill ("witlings") resort to things like "science" and "technology." The expected confusion ensues when more advanced but non-telepathic humans (from our own future, possibly) encounter this planet. Since the book is titled "The Witling" (singular), I assume it refers to the indigenous prince who unfortunately cannot teleport, but since he's only a peripheral character around the two advanced humans (also witlings, plural), this is confusing. The characters are flimsy and predictable. Okay for pulp, but nowhere near what Vinge later achieved in terms of well-grounded technology dazzle and awesome characterization (A Fire Upon the Deep, A Deepness in the Sky).

K. Blaha says

As far as I can tell, "The Witling" is Vernor Vinge's second novel, and to some extent, it shows. I enjoyed reading it, but it doesn't have the depths of Vinge's later works like "A Fire Upon the Deep" or less-known but also good "The Peace War". The book is only about 175 pages long; I'm not the fastest reader and I finished in two pretty short sessions, also unlike Vinge's other novels.

The story opens with two humans who have become marooned on an alien world with human-like inhabitants. Only after being captured do the humans realize that the natives have what we would call supernatural abilities: transporting themselves or objects by will of the mind. The magnitude of this ability varies from person to person; those with the least ability are called witlings. The two humans, with no ability, fall into this category. The prince of the realm also happens to be a witling, which is a great source of shame for him. He is intrigued by the humans, especially the woman. The humans must get off the surface, as all the alien foods naturally contain heavy metals, and continued exposure will be fatal.

Although he provides no supporting science for the abilities of the aliens, Vinge does what I like best in sci-fi—he takes a simple premise and runs far with it. With these abilities, how would you imprison someone? How would you travel the world? Would you even need doors? How would you conduct warfare? These issues come up again and again through the book, and each time they are a delight.

Another interesting point touched upon is body image. The book starts with the human male describing the woman, Yoninne, as ugly and unpleasant, too stocky and temperamental. The aliens, who it's hinted have a slightly stronger gravity, are stockier, and to them, Yoninne is close enough in build, but different enough to be exotic and tantalizing. I haven't read much sci-fi of this era that deals with such issues of perception; unfortunately, this thread is not continued throughout the book.

The primary reason I rate "The Witling" as a 3/5 and not higher is because I found the ending unsatisfying. I won't go into specifics in this review. The action was quite good and fun, but it conceptually bothered me.

With that caveat, I would recommend this book, especially to those who have read a lot of other works by

Vernor Vinge. It's interesting to see the form of his early, less perfect work, plus it's a super quick read.

Sam says

Space travelers (from a human space colony) come to a new planet of humans with unusual mental powers.

The best thing about the book is the scientific discussions of the mental teleportation powers of the inhabitants of the planet. This includes even great speculations about the physics of teleportation. (Such as conservation of momentum and angular momentum. Of course this cannot work mathematically, but it still makes for fun speculation.)

The weak thing about the book is the plot which, although involved, is un compelling.

Helen Marsh says

Two people, apparently descendants of earth, get stranded on a planet where the inhabitants have an unusual talent that has caused their society to develop in an unusual way.

I felt Vinge was altogether taken with exploring how this unusual talent would work so that much of the book required an understanding of maths and physics to appreciate it.

There was some human interest, but it felt rather shallow.

The writing style did not draw me in.

Stef says

REALLY BIG SPOILER ALERT.

I quite liked this book up until the last few pages. The last few pages utterly spoiled for me a big part of why I liked it.

There are two things I liked about this book.

1. In general I like the way Vinge takes an idea and thinks through a lot of the ramifications of that idea and builds a world and a plot on them. (He does a really good job of this in *A Fire Upon the Deep* which has a species in which a single entity is made up of a pack of telepathic bodies.)

In this book, the idea he explores is that the humanoids (and some other higher order animals) living on a particular planet can use telekinesis to teleport themselves and other things to certain locations. This creates a society where, for example, the "wings" of a palace can be spread apart over hundreds of miles, because the people inhabiting the palace can teleport easily from one wing to another. Because of this ability, these people never developed a lot of the technology that was primarily developed on Earth for getting people and things from one place to another.

2. One of the main characters is a human woman, a scientist who has come to study this planet. She is portrayed through the eyes of her partner (another scientist) -- and to some extent through her own eyes -- as very intelligent, physically unattractive (short, stout, and awkward), and having a brusque personality. None of this is a big deal. At the same time, the people native to this planet are even shorter and stouter, and so they see her as tall, willowy, and elf-like. She has some conflicted reactions to this. I don't see a lot of well-done explorations of body image in science fiction and especially in books written by men so I thought this was pretty cool.

Toward the end of the story, she becomes brain-damaged. At the very end of the story, she's back with humans who have the medical facilities to treat some of the damage, but she probably won't get her mind and intelligence back again. But that's OK, she's perfectly happy because someone is in love with her and that's all that matters.

Somehow I guess we are supposed to think this is a perfectly suitable ending for the character. But I think it's like crumpling the character up and throwing her in the wastebasket. Feh.

Leila P says

A short first contact novel from the 70's, when PSI powers were "in". Here's a colony planet with people who have no need of high technology because they can teleport, kill with their thought etc. Except for a few unfortunates, who are called witlings. Then they get two visitors from neighbour colony planet who are regarded, naturally, as witlings. Very entertaining story, albeit a little weird (they have no doors between rooms because they teleport all the time??) and very male (the population seemed to consist solely of men because the only woman in the story was one of the visitors).

Althea Ann says

I started out giving this book 3 stars, as a perfectly serviceable sci-fi adventure; although certainly not up to the standards of Vernor Vinge's later work (I absolutely love Fire Upon the Deep).

It's a First Contact story, and the premise is a little familiar, but not bad: anthropologists from Earth arrive at a seemingly non-advanced alien planet and gradually figure out that the native people have highly-developed mental abilities (teleportation). Those who lack these abilities are generally seen as useless slaves – Witlings – but in a twist, the crown prince is also a Witling. Naturally, he's delighted to hear about a society where no one has the powers he lacks.

So – all that is fine. However, the ending of the book bothered me, and kept bothering me until I deducted a star. (view spoiler) Does the author really have these opinions? I would like to think better of Vinge than that.

Oh, and the illustrations are juvenile and rather dreadfully inaccurate.

Annise says

The idea of teleportation has always appealed to me, so a world where this is an inherent natural ability is

interesting. Vinge thinks it through to a rich degree, describing novel uses for the ability, and limitations that stop it being all powerful, while still making sense within the narrative. In addition, there's a good plot, as the two human explorers try to contact home, and find a way off a planet whose abundance of heavy metals will, in due course, kill them.

There's some interesting work with the characters, who are well-enough drawn that the plot around them is believable. But it isn't amazing, with some awkward and occasionally problematic clichés. Overall the book feels like one of those science fiction novels where the plot and characters are only a vehicle for the idea. The ending was a touch abrupt, with a jarring note between the last two chapters that made the finale feel more like an epilogue, and it's not the kind of novel that's trying to move emotions over much. But it was a good read that didn't outstay its welcome, with a nice world and set of ideas to explore.

Nikita Yurovski says

A nice little story. Love how Vernor creates worlds and its creatures.

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Jenne says

There wasn't really a lot TO this book--it was entertaining enough, but it really suffers in comparison with his later books like *A Deepness in the Sky* and *a Fire Upon the Deep*, which I think are some of the most interesting alien books I've read.

I think someone mentioned this one on a mailing list I belong to, and it sounded kind of interesting: basically there's this planet where everyone has psychic powers, so they can teleport themselves and kill people at a distance and so on. People without the powers are called "witlings", hence the title. And the thing is that the crown prince guy is a witling! oh no!

But then these other people show up who are explorers from other worlds, or something like the Federation, I think, and of course they're witlings too, but they're not all embarrassed about it, and the crown prince is enthralled by the idea of a world where everyone is like him.

Oh, and then there's the 'charming' subplot where one of the explorers is this very surly woman, who is UGLY. but guess what, EVERYONE IS UGLY ON THE PSYCHIC PLANET. So the crown prince thinks she is BEAUTIFUL!! So they live happily ever after. The end.

(Of course, the many illustrations in the book don't show her as short and squarish, like she's supposed to be, even though the crown prince looks rather lumpish and featureless like HE is supposed to. Oh well.)

ONE MORE THING:

I just had to also mention that this book uses one of the absolutely lamest Lazy Plot Devices ever, (a favorite of Dan Brown) where you've been going along in a 3rd-person-omniscient-type narrative style, and then all of a sudden WE GO DEAF as the protagonist explains her brilliant plan to foil the bad guys, or discovers something that would ruin the plot if we knew about it.

E.g. "And then she said something SO SHOCKING that the archaeologists assembled there could HARDLY BELIEVE IT. Then she outlined the plan for the next three days of work, and they all nodded, greatly impressed. 'Let's get to it, boys!' she said, and picked up her sextant."
