

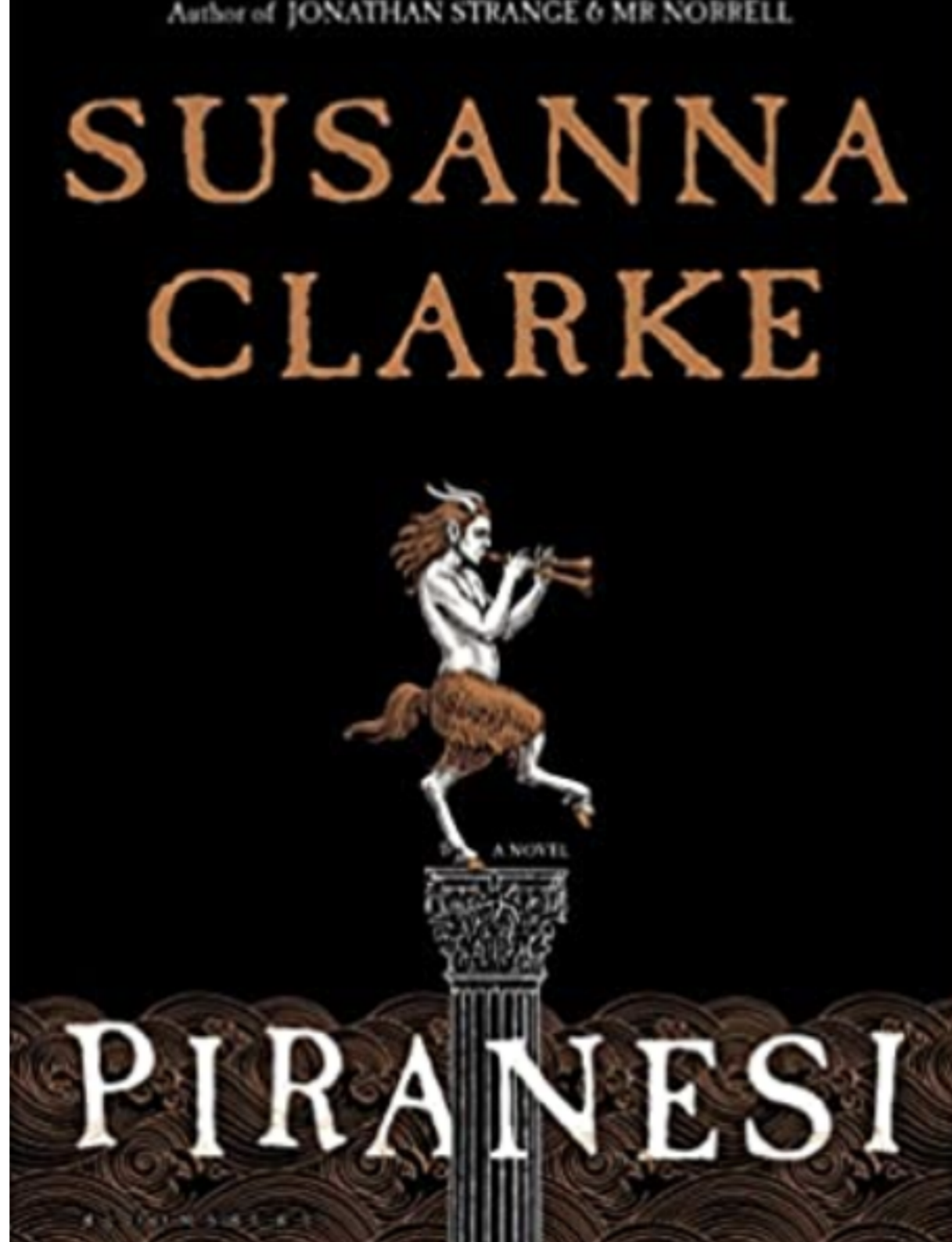
## Fantasylands

New novels from Susanna Clarke, Naomi Novik, and Kim Stanley Robinson

November 2, 2020 Michael Giltz

Here are three of the most anticipated fantasy and sci-fi novels of the fall. Author Susanna Clarke finally delivers a follow-up to her remarkable debut Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell. Unfortunately, it's a still-born effort that delights in evocative detail but forgets the drama. Naomi Novik's work appears at first glance to be a regression to her fan fiction roots. At last glance, it's DEFINITELY a regression to her fan fiction roots, but in all the best brain-clearing, goofily grinning ways imaginable. Finally, science fiction master Kim Stanley Robinson is at the top of his game with a near future look at the climate crisis packed with his usual attention to the latest science and its head-spinning possibilities. It's harrowing, harsh and in the end inspiringly hopeful.

### 'Piranesi' loses the magic



Let's work our way up. Susanna Clarke disappeared from view after the massive success of her first novel in 2003 and a hurried, almost apologetic follow-up of short stories two years later. Like best-selling author Laura Hillenbrand, Clarke lives with chronic fatigue syndrome, which you might as well call the vapors or hysteria as far as the derision it provoked for years in the medical community. Now it's recognized by fancier names like ME/CFS and taken more seriously. But it's poorly understood and the debilitating effects remain.

Clarke felt a genuine continuation of her period fantasy sitting midway between Charles Dickens and Jane Austen with a healthy dollop of magick tossed in simply needed too much research, too much writing, too much...effort.

Instead we have the simple, slim, artfully imagined tale Piranesi. It begins with our hero trapped or living or imprisoned in a fantastical setting. That would be a many-roomed building so massive that tides flood the bottom floors and clouds fill the upper floors. The many floors in between are mostly devoid of people but contain statuary and other artwork. I pictured it as the Metropolitan Museum Of Art times a hundred.

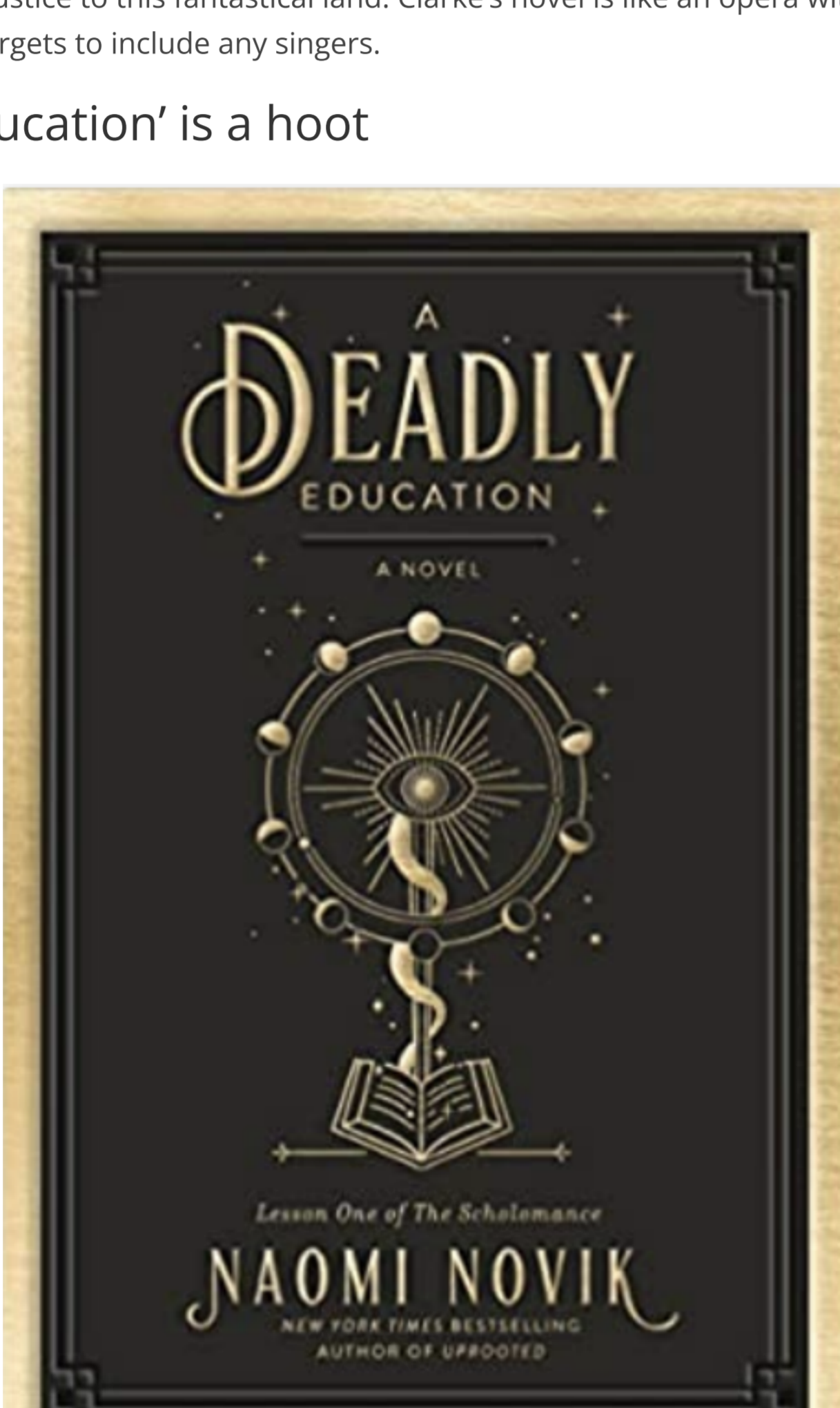
Roaming it all is our hero, who narrates the tale and dates each entry in his journal with significant events in their lonely existence. For example, Piranesi heads one section: Entry For The Tenth Day Of The Fifth Month in The Year The Albatross Came To The South-Western Halls. Either you're down for something like this or you run in the opposite direction and I am most definitely down.

It's akin to Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino and perhaps the most apt precursor here, Stephen Millhauser. That Pulitzer Prize winner spins out detail with a sharp and beautiful style that turns the enumeration of the rooms in a department store into a beguiling story. For a brief while, Clarke does the same. And then Clarke does nothing, absolutely nothing with it.

We soon get the lay of the land. Piranesi is a human trapped in this vast, lonely expanse and doesn't quite know why or how. Their one contact is a two-bit villain Piranesi admires but we know means no good. And it's all inspired by academia, just like Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell. That novel revolved around two scholars who butted heads over their thoroughly incompatible beliefs in how magic works. This book is about a professor turned guru seducing his students into wild and dangerous experiments to open a door to alternate realities. Needless to say, the man was on to something.

All well and good, but the novel is far too static to satisfy. We figure out Piranesi's dilemma long before our hero, which is a frustrating place to be. It's ok to be a little ahead of your protagonist but you shouldn't be tapping your feet with impatience. The little drama that Clarke introduces all takes place off stage, like that charismatic professor and an interesting but under-sketched police officer who risks her career to bring justice to this fantastical land. Clarke's novel is like an opera with a gorgeously elaborate set that forgets to include any singers.

### 'A Deadly Education' is a hoot



Naomi Novik's new novel A Deadly Education is much easier to describe—just picture Hogwarts, but a hell of a lot more dangerous. It's a hoot.

Novik began with fan fiction, worked in the gaming industry for a day job and then jolted the fantasy world with three novels published in quick succession launching her Temeraire series. It's like Horatio Hornblower with dragons, very persnickety dragons who have minds of their own and a growing awareness of their rights...or rather the lack thereof. Nine novels strong, it's a clever conceit Novik explores in satisfying fashion.

Then came two stand-alone novels, Uprooted and Spinning Silver. Bestsellers and hugely acclaimed, both are a major leap forward for Novik and so bold in concept they even reimagine what it means to triumph over evil.

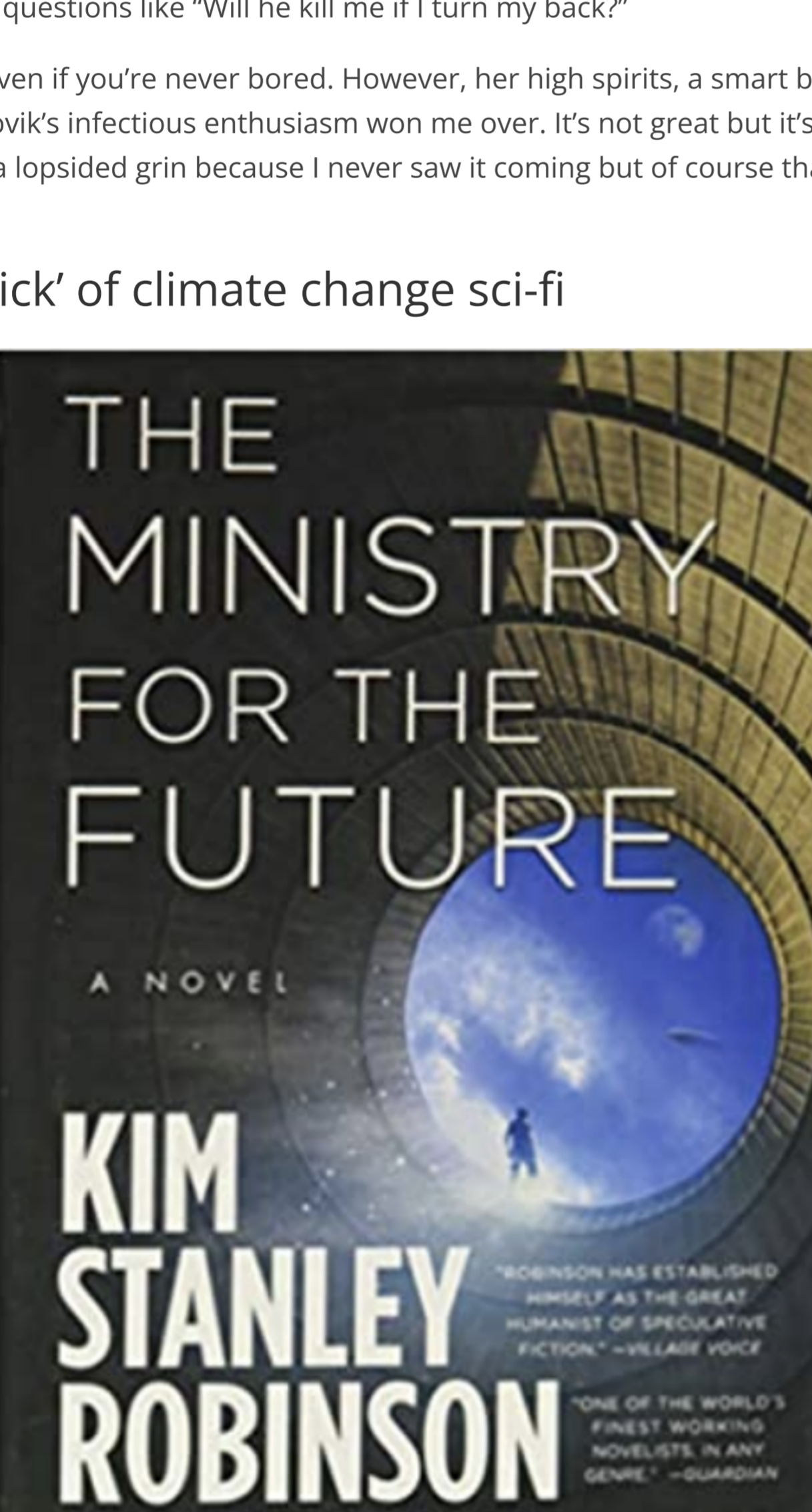
Meticulous and beautifully done, they're so good you can imagine Novik collapsing onto a couch, exhausted, thinking about what to do next and wishing she could just have some fun, damnit. And so A Deadly Education.

In the grand tradition of fan fiction, you just know her idea began with a question. What if you went to Hogwarts (or any school of magic, since Novik's inspiration predates JK Rowling by many years) and choosing your friends really was a matter of life and death? What if instead of being the Chosen One you were the Big Bad? Instead of being Harry Potter, what if you were Tom Riddle and really didn't want to be Tom Riddle?

And Novik is off, imagining her heroine as a misfit who pushes everyone away. Every element of school is deadly dangerous and the school cuts you off from the rest of the world until you "graduate," which means entering a death maze of destruction in which most students die violently. The inventiveness piles on with Novik layering her deconstruction of the usual school dramas such as "Does he like me?" with more pertinent questions like "Will he kill me if I turn my back?"

Novik is just riffing even if you're never bored. However, her high spirits, a smart but understated focus on inequality and Novik's infectious enthusiasm won me over. It's not great but it's a blast and yes, the ending left me with a lopsided grin because I never saw it coming but of course that's what would happen!

### The 'Moby-Dick' of climate change sci-fi



Then there's Kim Stanley Robinson. You should never call a singer-songwriter "the new Dylan" and you should never compare a novel to Moby-Dick. And yet, when reading "The Ministry For The Future," Herman Melville's wild and wooly work kept springing to mind.

That masterpiece is mind-blowing in its disparate nature, jumping from straight-forward novel about an obsessive captain hunting a white whale to lengthy asides about the migrating patterns of whales to some homo-erotic side trips followed by lengthy, accurate and absorbing descriptions of exactly how one harvests the blubber and then back to that maniacal captain and then on to some travel writing, some politics, a sermon and so on in a style that to my mind makes it seem like you're surfing the web jumping from idea to idea in a free associated thrill ride.

And here's Robinson's novel, which begins in the too-near future when a devastating heat wave in India slaughters some 20 million people. That provides the impetus for a little known clause in the Paris Agreement to trigger the formation of a sub-sub committee intended to give voice to the generations yet born, the people and creatures which deserve a future but have no one to speak for them. It has no real power, but its nickname—The Ministry For The Future—is catchy and after all someone has to do something. And we're off.

Robinson is a prodigious researcher, so this emotional launch pad jumps immediately to a flurry of ideas about exactly how to tackle the climate crisis, from drilling holes in glaciers to pump up the melting waters beneath them to slow down their movement to staining the Arctic oceans with yellow dye and a thousand million other ideas, all offered in succinct, fascinating style with casual ease.

Mary Murphy is the sensible head of the Ministry For The Future, but it's not long before a dark ops assistant abets her, giving her plausible deniability. Then a man, scarred by that genocidal heatwave and determined to hold someone, anyone accountable, kidnaps her.

Rarely will you read so many ideas so neatly brought to life by characters like the people who simply love the Arctic and will latch onto any project however stupid just so they can keep going back to a man who flies a dirigible around the earth for eco-tourists after eco-terrorists end regular plane travel.

The novel moves at a breathtakingly relentless pace. It's a harshly hopeful work that envisions the absolute worst in human nature, our inevitable stumbles and mistakes and the desperately believable possibility that we might actually get to the other side of this looming disaster.

Robinson telescopes in and out with elan, showing refugees seemingly trapped in a frightening non-existence in Zurich, to a promising illustration of wildlife corridors and how they can reclaim the earth for animals and make the planet more habitable for humans at the same time, to the endless negotiations with the real power brokers of today, the bankers. Some brief chapters are pithy, hilarious monologues giving voice to the blockchain or elements like carbon. Others turn a recitation of names like the nonprofits working to reclaim the earth into a Walt Whitmanesque tone poem that's all the more inspiring when you go online and realize they're all here, right now, doing the work.

It's not just a novel of ideas. Mary Murphy and a handful of other vivid characters give us some purchase. But Robinson doesn't just say, we'll pay people in small towns to relocate so we can reclaim those mostly empty lands in the Midwest back to nature for the "Half Earth project" suggested by E.O. Wilson. Instead, in a few short pages, Robinson movingly captures one such meeting where the few hundred folk left in a dying town hear the pitch of the government. They cry, talk, share and decide whether they should all move en masse to a neighborhood in this city or that town and maintain a sense of community.

Robinson does this deftly, but he moves on before you've had a chance to process. He can skewer neo-liberal capitalism as quickly as he can frighten you with the simple idea that eco-terrorists will start assassinating the worst offenders when it comes to pollution.

If you step back and take stock, it's clear Robinson sees the climate crisis as the driving reality of his marvelous career, which includes the Red Mars trilogy and my personal favorite The Years Of Rice and Salt, a stand-alone work invigorated by Buddhist ideas of reincarnation. The reality that Earth is worn out by humanity's presence drives the terraforming of Mars in the Mars trilogy. He directly wrote another trilogy, the Science In The Capitol series, about the climate crisis. And stand-alone books like New York 2140 and Antarctica revolve around climate change as well.

So the clear and present danger of the climate crisis is Robinson's white whale. With The Ministry For The Future and its riveting, unnerving and compelling possibilities for hope, he might well have landed it.

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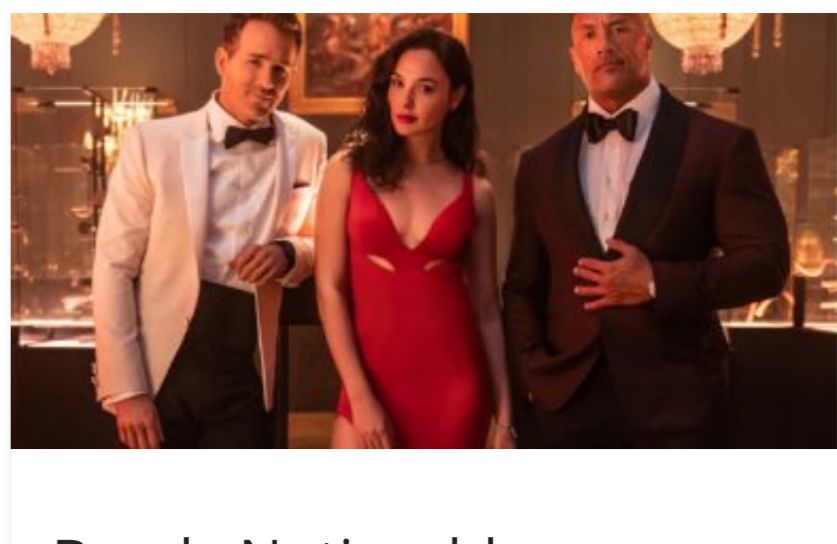
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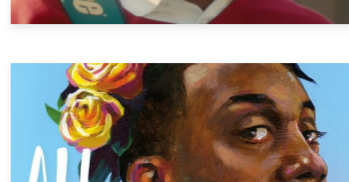
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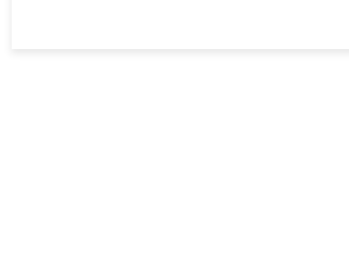
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