

☞ An Outcast Romance Facing the Apocalypse
All the Birds in the Sky, by Charlie Jane Anders, Tor Books,
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reviewed by S. Qiouyi Lu

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All the Birds in the Sky is many things: it's a love story, an apocalyptic tale, and a coming of age novel. But readers going in expecting a classic story of the destruction of the Earth will be disappointed; the novel isn't structured with the apocalypse at its core. Nor does it feel like the apocalypse is meant to be the main event. Instead, the relationship between Patricia Delfine and Laurence Armstead is the true center of the story.

Patricia and Laurence are childhood friends—or perhaps it's more accurate to say that they're childhood misfits who found company in each other. Considered outcasts by the other students at school, the two of them seem to understand each other, though they're reluctant at first to form a friendship. Even so, they keep spending time with each other, and their relationship deepens. They find their aptitudes: Laurence is fascinated by technology, whereas Patricia explores magic, which she discovered through a number of strange encounters. But, while mentors encourage Laurence's interest in science, and while Patricia is enthusiastic about helping Laurence with his supercomputer project, Patricia finds that her own powers only cause her isolation and misunderstanding: when she shows Laurence that she can talk to cats, Laurence panics and runs away from her.

After a period of separation and the end of their tumultuous childhoods, Patricia and Laurence find each other again as young adults in the “hipster mecca” of San Francisco. Patricia, a graduate of the Eltisle Maze school of magic, has developed her magical skills and become much more powerful. Laurence has become a technological whiz kid, part of a prestigious “ten percent group” that is working on a massive technological innovation. Science and magic are established in the narrative as opposites, and



Patricia and Laurence are embodiments of that conflict. Various forces conspire to pull Laurence and Patricia apart. Yet the two find themselves drawn to each other again and again, even forming a romantic relationship. At the end of the book, a cataclysmic event pushes them together once more as the world hurtles toward apocalypse. Together, they face the destruction of the Earth and struggle to find a solution.

Anders's writing is brilliant. There's such a strong voice through *All the Birds in the Sky*, and Anders does a masterful job of showing both the humor and the sadness inherent in growing up in difficult situations: “[Patricia's parents] locked Patricia in her room for a week, sliding food under her door. The bottom of the door tended to scrape off the top layer of whatever type of food it was. Like if it was a sandwich, the topmost piece of bread was taken away by the door. You don't really want to eat a sandwich after your door has had the first bite[.]” Even as the narrative darkens, Anders continues to inject moments of humor, which never feel misplaced. The youthful voices of Patricia and Laurence are distinct and three-dimensional. Even the most minor characters have their own personalities and quirks that make them feel like they're fully realized people.

Although the main focus of *All the Birds in the Sky* is character and relationship development, an undercurrent of commentary on gender runs throughout the story. Laurence, a boy, gets involved with technology, and Patricia, a girl whose core strength is empathy, gets involved with magic. Rather than

feeling stereotypical, though, these assignments become a backdrop to critique: we see Laurence coasting through life and being encouraged at every step to pursue his dreams, whereas Patricia's experiences are denied, and her natural talents suppressed again and again. Laurence is permitted the room to develop an ego, whereas Patricia is chastised for "Aggrandizement," magic users' term for mistakenly believing oneself to be more important than others. At the same time, we see Laurence's flaws and Patricia's strengths. Anders writes a complex narrative that reflects the contemporary suppression of feminine-coded traits in our culture and society while challenging it.

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scope. It's difficult to fully describe the narrative because Anders touches on so many topics, yet combines them seamlessly into an engaging story. Autonomy and service, love and friendship, nature and nurture, science and the natural, philosophy and humor all weave together into a beautiful story, its iterations as myriad as all the birds that fly throughout its pages.

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Cottonwood, Betsy James