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Futuristic Coming-of-Age Stories

James Turner

The Merchanter universe has been enriched yet again by C.J. Cherryh.

Finity's End is a classic coming-of-age story, set against the dying embers of the four-sided war between Earth, Union, the stations, and the Merchanter ships. Fletcher Neihart has lived his young life on Pell Station, studying the indigenous intelligent life on Downbelow, and being persecuted for his heritage as a Merchanter child (the traders who travel between the stations) left behind due to war.

When his dead mother's ship, the Finity's End, comes to pick him up and return him to the insular life of a Merchanter Family, he rebels against everything and everyone in sight. As the Finity's End travels a dangerous but critical mission to forge a new political reality, Fletcher comes to trust and finally become a part of the family he had once resented.

Even though the Merchanter universe is well defined by Cherryh's body of work, the reader can drop right into the story. This latest edition serves both to move the narrative of the Merchanter war toward a conclusion and to allow a more detailed view of shipboard life.

Like "Finity's End," Destiny's Road by Larry Niven is also a coming-of-age story. Jemmy Bloocher is two years away from taking possession of his family farm when he kills one of the mysterious merchants who travel back and forth across the colony planet of Destiny.

Fleeing for his life, he embarks on a trip down the Road. This long strip of fused land was created by the landing jets of the Cavorite, one of the two landing shuttles used to bring people to the planet before it mysteriously disappeared. No one knows what lies at the end of the Road, and Jemmy is driven to discover the final fate of that spacecraft.

At his best, Niven tells travelogues. The gradual growth of Jemmy from a naive young man/boy to a worldly and somewhat cynically pragmatic adult is believable, as are the other characters in this richly textured novel. As with many Niven works, sexuality plays an important role, although always handled tastefully.

* James Turner is technical administrator for the Monitor's Web site.

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