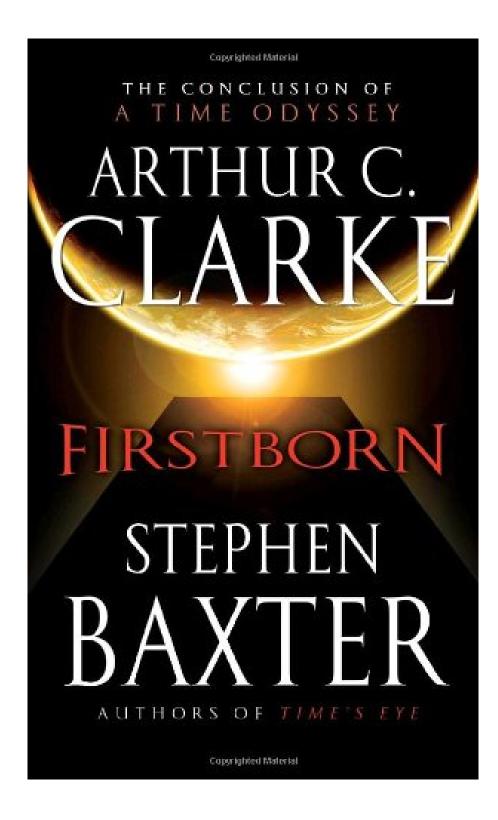


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The Firstborn-the mysterious race of aliens who first became known to science fiction fans as the builders of the iconic black monolith in 2001: A Space Odyssey-have inhabited legendary master of science fiction Sir Arthur C. Clarke's writing for decades. With Time's Eye and Sunstorm, the first two books in their acclaimed Time Odyssey series, Clarke and his brilliant co-author Stephen Baxter imagined a near-future in which the Firstborn seek to stop the advance of human civilization by employing a technology indistinguishable from magic.

Their first act was the Discontinuity, in which Earth was carved into sections from different eras of history, restitched into a patchwork world, and renamed Mir. Mir's inhabitants included such notables as Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, and United Nations peacekeeper Bisesa Dutt. For reasons unknown to her, Bisesa entered into communication with an alien artifact of inscrutable purpose and godlike power–a power that eventually returned her to Earth. There, she played an instrumental role in humanity's race against time to stop a doomsday event: a massive solar storm triggered by the alien Firstborn designed to eradicate all life from the planet. That fate was averted at an inconceivable price. Now, twenty-seven years later, the Firstborn are back.

This time, they are pulling no punches: They have sent a "quantum bomb." Speeding toward Earth, it is a device that human scientists can barely comprehend, that cannot be stopped or destroyed–and one that will obliterate Earth.

Bisesa's desperate quest for answers sends her first to Mars and then to Mir, which is itself threatened with extinction. The end seems inevitable. But as shocking new insights emerge into the nature of the Firstborn and their chilling plans for mankind, an unexpected ally appears from light-years away.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Firstborn is the concluding volume in Sir Arthur C. Clarke and Stephen Baxter's Time Odyssey trilogy. The preceding two books in this science-fiction series are Time's Eye (2003) and Sunstorm (2005). Each prior novel was vivid, innovative, and compelling. I cannot say the same thing about Firstborn. The final installment is a disappointing capstone.

Without spoiling the story, Firstborn leaves us with as many questions as it answers. It lacks finality. Readers are left wanting more. Yet there is nothing more for Clarke and Baxter to give, after they seem to write themselves into a corner.

The concluding chapters of the book are increasingly ambiguous. Clarke and Baxter seem distracted by their own storyline. It becomes ever more complex as Firstborn unravels. As the end nears, Firstborn becomes tenuous and unconvincing.

This is in contrast to most of Clarke's writing over the past 60 years. I credit Clarke and author Robert Heinlein (1907-1988) as being the best at weaving science, engineering, physics, and futurism into their works of science fiction. Unfortunately, in Firstborn, the concepts Baxter and Clarke select - particularly the theoretical physics they invoke - are simply unrealistic. To the extent that any of it is credible, the writers fail to properly explain core principals. Unlike Clarke and Baxter's former works, the technology in Firstborn does not buttress the narrative. It detracts from it.

I concede that there is lengthy discussion in the book of space elevators and anti-matter rocket motors. As to the first, it is a rehash of a concept Clarke wrote about 25 years ago in The Fountains of Paradise (1979). As to the second - anti-matter rockets - the discussion of this technology is pedestrian and under-developed. Clarke and Baxter seem to know as much/little about it as some sophisticated readers know. It makes the technological application and discussion in Firstborn seem far-fetched and contrived.

Character development in Firstborn is also disappointing. There are several strong female characters. We met some of them before in Sunstorm and Time's Eye. In Firstborn, however, they are not easy to warm up to. Their demeanors, amid massive catastrophes and suffering, are measured and stiff. Certain male protagonists exhibit the opposite problem: they are caricatures and impossible to identify with. Many lesser characters are unmemorable. This is despite excellent creative opportunities which could have been leveraged in the "Mir" universe.

The writing in Firstborn simply does not compare with Clarke's past work. In other books he easily and vividly communicated joy, pain, courage, and suffering. He was at his best, for example, in Songs of Distant

Earth (1986) and Childhood's End (1953), which better explore love, friendship, family and a range of human emotions in the context of a space-faring society. Firstborn falls far short of his own standards.

Please do not let this review dissuade you from reading other Arthur C. Clarke novels. He is one of my favorite writers of all time. It is in fact difficult for me to write this less-than-favorable review of Firstborn. Clarke ties Heinlein in my mind for being the best science fiction writer in history. Significantly, Clarke's vision, including early work on geostationary satellites, transcends science fiction. He is legitimately celebrated for contributions to "science fact."

It is therefore not my opinion that Firstborn is a poorly-written book; it is only lacking when compared to Clarke (and Baxter's) prior works.

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