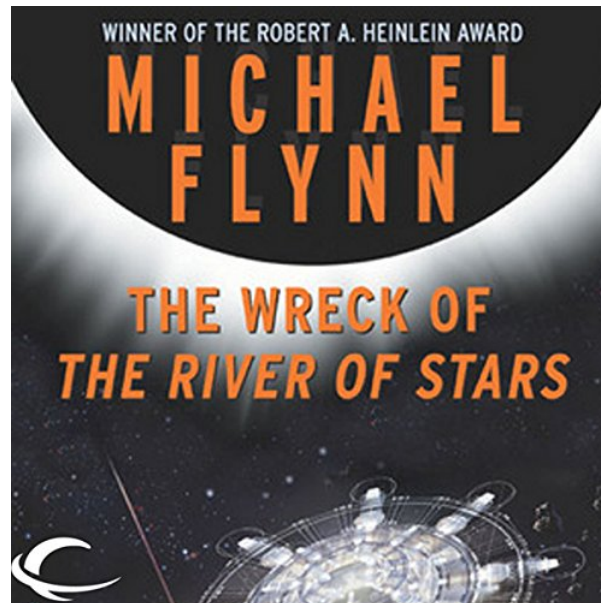
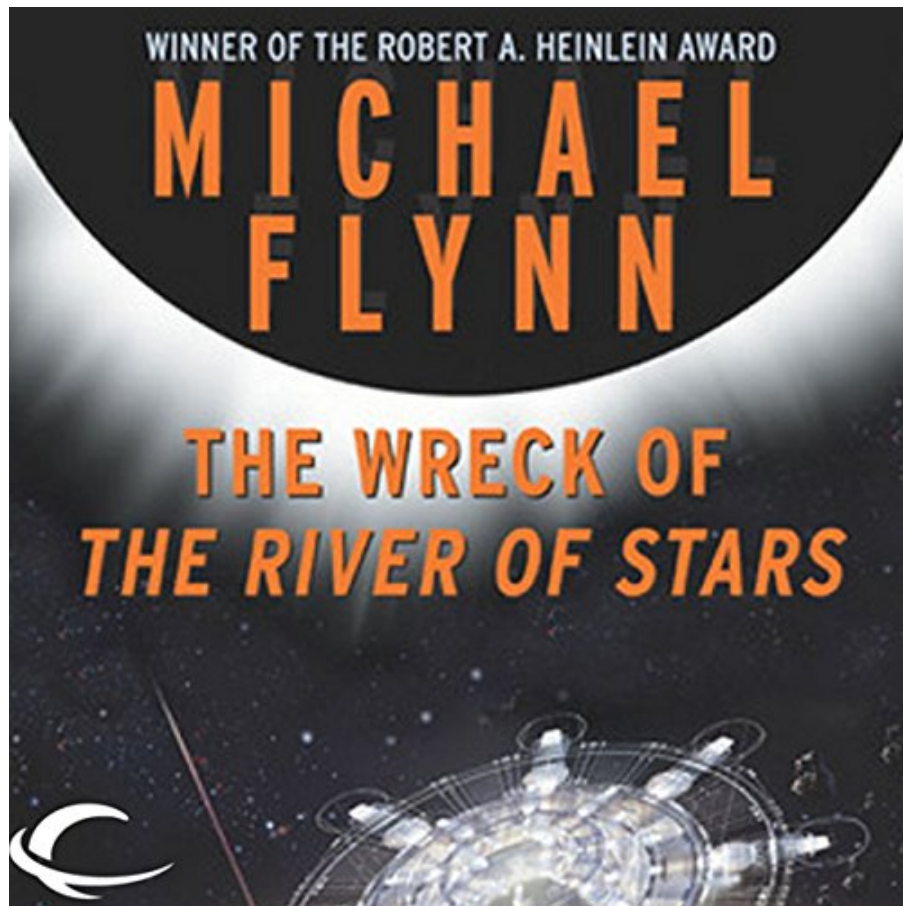


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Michael Flynn has written the best SF in the tradition of Robert A. Heinlein of the last decade. His major work was the Firestar sequence, a four-book future history. "As Robert A. Heinlein did and all too few have done since, Michael Flynn writes about the near future as if he'd been there and was bringing back reports of what he'd seen," said Harry Turtledove. Now, in this sweeping standalone epic of the spaceways, Flynn grows again in stature, with an SF novel worthy of the master himself. Indeed, if Heinlein's famous character, the space-faring poet Rhysling, had ever written a novel, this would be it.

This is a story of the glory that was. In the days of the great sailing ships in the mid-21st century, when magnetic sails drew cargo and passengers alike to every corner of the Solar System, sailors had the highest status of all spacemen, and the crew of the luxury liner The River of Stars, the highest among all sailors. But development of the Farnsworth fusion drive doomed the sailing ships and now The River of Stars is the last of its kind, retrofitted with engines, her mast vestigial, her sails unraised for years. An ungainly hybrid, she operates in the late years of the century as a mere tramp freighter among the outer planets, and her crew is a motley group of misfits. Stepan Gorgas is the escapist executive officer who becomes captain. Ramakrishnan Bhattejji is the chief engineer who disdains him. Eugenie Satterwaithe, once a captain herself, is third officer and, for form's sake, sailing master.

When an unlikely and catastrophic engine failure strikes The River, Bhattejji is confident he can effect repairs with heroic engineering, but Satterwaithe and the other sailors among the crew plot to save her with a glorious last gasp for the old ways, mesmerized by a vision of arriving at Jupiter proudly under sail. The story of their doom has the power, the poetry, and the inevitability of a Greek tragedy. This is a great science fiction novel, Flynn's best yet.

- Sales Rank: #87061 in Audible
- Published on: 2012-12-14
- Format: Unabridged
- Original language: English
- Running time: 1309 minutes

Most helpful customer reviews

29 of 30 people found the following review helpful.

The best hard-SF tragic novel of character yet written.

By Peter D. Tillman

The MSS "River of Stars", the grandest of the great magsail liners, was launched in 2051. But the new Farnsworth fusion thrusters rang the death-knell for the magsails, and the now-obsolete liner was converted to fusion power in 2084. Two decades later, she has become a tramp freighter, bound for Dinwoody Poke, Jupiter space, on what will be her final voyage....

The Middle System -- Mars, the Belt, Jupiter space -- has not developed tidily, and the crew is made up of casualties of the great 21st-century space boom. RIVER is their story.

RIVER is a tour de force of character development. We watch, riveted, as these motley misfits squabble, beef and try to cope, in the hermetic isolation of a ship becalmed in space -- two of the four Farnsworth engines have been ruined in a freak accident. The ship has 19 days to rebuild the engines, or she will pass the balk line, the point of no return, and drift endlessly away from settled space.

The repairs go slowly, but the ship's Engineer is a master of improvisation, and no one doubts he will fix the engines in time. No one, that is, but the oldest magsailors, who remember that the RIVER still has her old sails, unused for decades. They decide to fix them up, just in case. No one likes, or trusts, the acting captain, so they don't tell him (or the Engineer) their plan -- which has a large share of nostalgia for the lost Age of Sail. And there isn't enough superconducting hobartium on board to repair both engines and sails....

RIVER is a classical tragedy. Hubris, small mistakes, misunderstandings, mishaps and personal conflicts collide, echo and feed back in a downward spiral that will ultimately wreck the great ship. It wouldn't be fair to reveal the ending, but it's not a happy one. There are no real villains here, just flawed people trying to cope, at times heroically. But the Fates are not on their side.

Flynn tells his story in the third-person omniscient, with dry asides as he develops his characters. The omniscient narrator is the Greek chorus to the inevitable tragedy, which develops with an awful majesty. Flynn's writing is masterful. His pacing is grave, controlled, ironic. His characters will break your heart as they work, love, fight, grow, grieve and die. This is a wonderful book, easily Flynn's best. RIVER is set in the future of Flynn's popular near-future "Star" tetology (also recommended), but is a standalone novel. This is the best hard-SF tragic novel of character yet written (though this is an uncrowded niche). And the cover art, by Stephan Martiniere, is just flat gorgeous. Highly recommended.

Review copyright 2003 by Peter D. Tillman

28 of 30 people found the following review helpful.

Top-notch science fiction

By Cynthia S. Froning

I'm surprised that this book hasn't received more attention. It's an absolutely outstanding novel and is that rare case of genre fiction that transcends its genre and qualifies as literature. The story is simple --- the title says it all --- but compelling and the characterization, narration, and dialogue are sharp and intelligent. Best of all, the characters drive the story, rather than the other way around (a common failing in sf, where ideas are typically much more interesting than people). The entire novel takes place on The River of Stars, a Jovian merchant ship that has seen better days. Its crew and a single passenger are the only characters, and their backgrounds and interactions propel the story to its tragic conclusion. There are very few missteps in this book. I can think of two: that the characters of Corrigan and Gorgas seem fuzzily delineated (were they a single character in an earlier draft?) and that mysterious events in the pasts of the crew are somewhat abruptly and implausibly revealed at the end of the book. These are minor, however, given the overall success of the novel, which I highly recommend.

21 of 22 people found the following review helpful.

Requires HUGE Patience but Rewards

By Inchoatus.com

WHY YOU SHOULD READ:

Readers who delight working out puzzles involving people, this is an excellent book. As a study of group

dynamics and clashing personality types within a disaster setting there really is nothing else like it in the genre. A good segment of the reading public would be those people who enjoy reading mysteries not so much for the dénouement but rather for how the various parties think and act would adore River. Also, those readers steeped in religion will find the allegorical implications of people operating in the absence of God profoundly affected by the ending of this tale.

WHY YOU SHOULD PASS:

This book requires an incredible amount of patience. There will be times that even these most patient readers will be tempted to give up and move on. The detailed examination of each and every crewmember plus their motivations and desires is so exhaustive and so unrelenting that you've really got to be into this kind of thing to even venture into the River. The plot moves at about the same pace as the stars wheel in the sky. For those readers who have blazed through English Lit courses in college, River reads, for good or ill, very much like a Henry James novel--horribly trying but with immense rewards. If you are the sort of reader who looks for immediate payoff--and that, without being insulting, is certainly a large body of the speculative fiction reading public--then you should look for something else.

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