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Nuclear Sunrise, by Jo Carthage. Reviewed by Amy Moore.

Amy Moore

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REVIEWS

Jo Carthage. *Nuclear Sunrise*. NineStar Press 2023. 359pp. \$17.99 paperback.
Reviewed by Amy Moore.

Nuclear Sunrise is a science fiction historical romance by debut author Jo Carthage. The novel takes place in 1951 and follows Captain Brian

Flynn on a new reassignment as security chief for the top secret Experimental Breeder Reactor in Idaho, where scientists are attempting to create plutonium from uranium in pursuit of clean nuclear energy. Though the transfer offers some exciting possibilities for Flynn, himself having a keen interest in nuclear science, any excitement is eclipsed by the trouble dogging his heels: a narrow escape from dishonorable discharge for homosexuality and the wrath of his father.

Flynn just wants to keep his head down and succeed at this post long enough to finish out his term with the Air Force and accept a discharge that won't ruin his life. But those plans are derailed when he meets and befriends Dr. Aaron Antares, a strange but brilliant scientist working on the reactor, who seems impossibly immune to both the forces that drive Brian's nightmares and the forces of nuclear radiation. His confidence—and his casual handling of irradiated material—put Brian on edge, but nevertheless he's drawn into the man's orbit, and they grow closer as work on the reactor also progresses inch by inch, no matter how much Brian tells himself to stay away and focus on flying under the radar.

But the closer the two men grow, the more inexplicable Dr. Antares becomes, and the less his jokes about eating uranium for breakfast sound like jokes. And beyond Brian's internal and interpersonal conflicts looms something much larger: the specter of McCarthyism hangs over every chapter of this book, interspersed with excerpts from real-life documents describing the sort of grim future Brian faces if his discharge "for reasons other than honorable" goes through.

Before that can happen, Brian's life changes in an entirely different way when he learns Dr. Antares's secret and the new possibilities it opens for Brian's own future. The two men have to overcome the shadows of the past in order to move forward to a new and brighter day.

Nuclear Sunrise is many things at once—at turns both achingly optimistic and pragmatically cynical, both a sci-fi heavy on the science (both real world and imagined) as well as a romance, both a work of historical fiction and a work with its eyes fixed on the future. The characters exist

within their historical context, and their hopes for the world are occasionally painful when a modern reader reflects on what has not come to pass, yet their hopes still resonate with the reader as, like science fiction often strives to, *Nuclear Sunrise* asks us to consider how the world could be.

This book is ideal for readers with an interest in history, as the look back at the early post-Manhattan Project days of the US nuclear program is thorough, colorful, and surprising for readers unfamiliar with that particular slice of scientific progress. However, readers who look for a more futuristic and fantastical setting for their sci-fi may be dissatisfied by *Nuclear Sunrise's* grounded approach. Additionally, *Nuclear Sunrise* is perfect for those who enjoy character-focused stories, as Brian's personal journey is the impetus which drives the developing plot as well.

Nuclear Sunrise is a successful debut, a tender exploration of trauma and masculinity at a hyper-focused historical moment, and also a story about 1950s aliens stealing plutonium from the US government to power their spaceship and go home to save their world. It's heart-wrenching and romantic and fun, and it's well worth a read. *Nuclear Sunrise* is set to release in ebook format on December 19, 2023, and an ARC was kindly provided for purposes of review. [This review was submitted in advance of the release date. Paperback copies are now available.]

