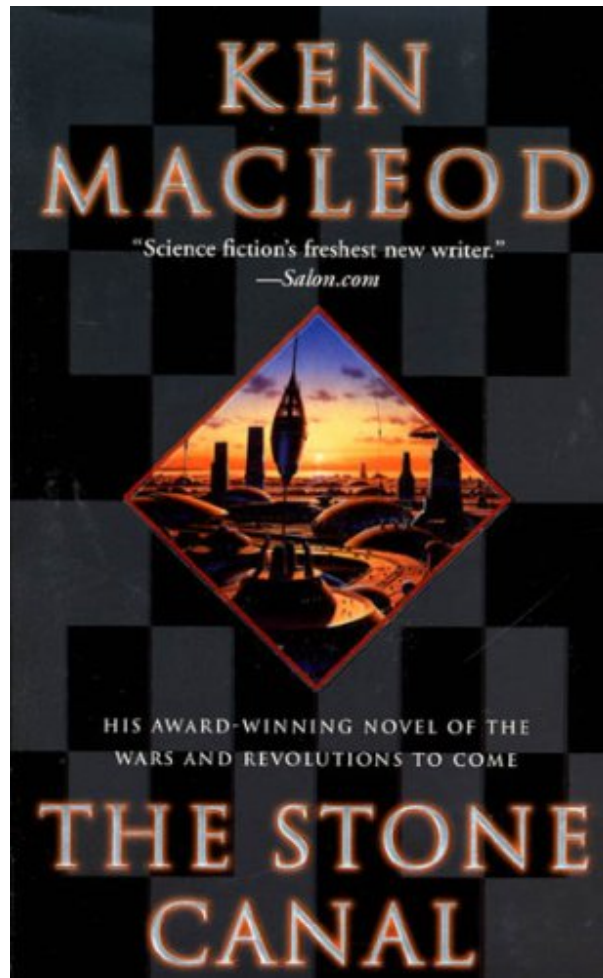


THE STONE CANAL: A NOVEL (FALL REVOLUTION) BY KEN MACLEOD



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Life on New Mars is tough for humans, but death is only a minor inconvenience. The machines know their place, the free market rules all, and only the Abolitionists object.

Then a stranger arrives on New Mars, a clone who remembers life on Earth as Jonathon Wilde, the anarchist with a nuclear capability who was accused of losing World War III. That stranger remembers David Reid, New Mars's leader...and the women they fought over ideals they once shared.

Moving from twentieth-century Scotland through a tumultuous twenty-first century and outward to humanity's settlement on a planet circling another star, *The Stone Canal* is idea-driven science fiction at its best, making real and believable a future where long lives, strange deaths, and unexpected knowledge await those who survive the wars and revolutions to come.

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Most helpful customer reviews

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful.

Yesterday's Radical Politics and Tomorrow's Technology

By Bluejack

Imagine you wake up perfectly healthy, but naked in a strange place with your most recent memory being shot and killed in a snowstorm.

This is the predicament of Jonathan Wilde, who discovers not only that he is a resuscitation of himself on a strange planet in a distant future, but a few other things as well:

- * A robotic copy of his wife has been existing as a sex slave for a man he once thought a friend;
- * This man is also the one who killed him;
- * Someone with his name has been building quite a legend around the world he has woken up in;
- * The machine that apparently brought him to life might just be yet another copy of himself;

MacLeod is a very talented storyteller: not only is this mystery compelling, but he approaches the central puzzle not only from this distant future but also from the past. Two timelines interweave as we see the fascinating and complicated relationship between Wilde and a college buddy at once more involved in actual radical politics and also more worldly. The uncomfortable friendship between these two very believable characters takes on different dimensions over time as they compete for the love of one woman, and as their respective politics move in different directions.

The comparison with Kim Stanley Robinson is unavoidable, for both good and ill. Prior to discovering Ken MacLeod, the only science fiction writer since Ursula LeGuin who really tackled social, political, and economic issues that I have stumbled across has been Robinson. But where Robinson strongly imagines a realistic future evolution of political ideas and the clash between corporation, state, and individual, MacLeod is using science fiction to explore philosophical ideas of socialism, marxism, corporate responsibility, and anarchy. In this sense, *The Stone Canal* is more like *The Dispossessed* than the Mars series.

In writing style, as others have commented, MacLeod seems to draw more on the work of Robinson, and not always for the best. Perhaps the Mars series' greatest failing was the time spent charting out history, and similarly some of the later portions of *The Stone Canal* read more like blocking or choreography than like an integral portion of the story itself.

That said, the evolution of the characters is beautiful and brilliant and you won't want to put the book down. It is delightful to encounter these flavors of politics in science fiction -- the genre is so heavily weighted with military buffs, rabid anti-government individualists, and social darwinists of every unpalatable variety. I found myself reinvigorated by finding the memes of my youth returning in a technology friendly medium.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful.

Ideas and Ideology

By Patrick Shepherd

This is the second MacLeod book I've read, and once again he impresses me with his breadth of concepts, original ideas, depth of political insight, and rigorous plotting. Told as a dual time-line story structure, one based on the immediate continuation of our current world (with a large overlap with the time-frame of *The Star Fraction*), and the other as a (real time) far future colonization of a new planet, united in the person of the protagonist, Johnathan Wilde, the two story lines slowly merge into one coherent whole that provides a good explication of his entire future universe. And his universe is filled with mind-boggling societies and technologies, from self-aware robots working towards some rights in a human society, to using the resources of Jupiter to build a worm-hole whose other end is literally at the end of time and the universe, to computer entities (the 'fast folk') originally modeled on humans whose thought processes become so fast that waiting for things to happen in the physical universe becomes excruciating ennui, to a society where murder is punished by fines for the 'lost time' of the victim until he can be re-incorporated in a new body-clone.

But although this book has all these great ideas, I found I didn't like this one as much as *The Star Fraction*. I think one of the major reasons for this was his depiction of his far-future colony. While several great details were introduced about this society, like the 'abolitionist' movement, an anarchistic and computer aided court/legal system, a mix of robot and human territorial infrastructures, what was missing was the fact that Wilde does not actually get to 'live' in this society. Instead he spends all his time running away from or fighting his old rival Reid from Earth, and has no chance to do ordinary things on an ordinary day. This made the society too much of an intellectual exercise, and not a vibrant, breathing thing the reader could experience. This same 'distancing' effect occurs with the earlier Wilde's experiences in interacting with the 'fast folk', and the whole rivalry between Wilde and Reid seems to be at the philosophical discussion level, with the effect of their battle on the 'common folk' seen only remotely. The net effect was to leave me somewhat emotionally disconnected from this book, even though Wilde, Reid, and several other secondary characters are well drawn and potentially emotionally engaging.

In short, a book of wonderful ideas that will certainly make you scratch your head and excite your sense of wonder, but not one that will grab your heart or make you long for being born into MacLeod's world instead of your poor, mundane earthly one.

16 of 18 people found the following review helpful.

Intriguing SF About Artificial Intelligences and Politics

By Richard R. Horton

The Stone Canal is Ken MacLeod's second novel. It is in the same future history as his first novel (*The Star Fraction*) and his third novel (*The Cassini Division*) but it can be read without difficulty on its own, and I found it to stand alone just fine. At a first brush, MacLeod reads like "Iain Banks meets Bruce Sterling". The novel's opening, with a somewhat smart-alecky "human- equivalent" robot briefing a confused newly-awakened man, and its structure, alternating chapters on different timelines, definitely echo some of Banks' work. (Note that Banks acknowledges MacLeod's help with *Use of Weapons*, in terms which suggest to me that he may have helped with that book's unusual structure.) The deeply political concerns, and central character's habit of talking at length about politics, as well as some of the technology and the attitude

towards technology, reminded me of Sterling (and also, in a different way, Kim Stanley Robinson. Which is to say, at times this book is a bit talky.) But in the final analysis, *The Stone Canal* is a very original, very impressive novel. It's true SF, chock full of sense of wonder concepts, interested in new technology, in future politics, and in how technology affects politics (and human life in general).

The novel opens with a man awakening in the desert of a Mars-like planet, accompanied by a "human-equivalent" robot. Soon we meet another robot, Dee Model, this one a "gynoid" (female android), who has escaped her owner (for whom she was a sex toy), and is proclaiming her autonomy. The man is soon revealed to be Jonathan Wilde, a legendary figure of political resistance among the inhabitants of New Mars, and the gynoid is based on a clone of Wilde's long-dead wife. The two encounter each other, and both end up in the hands of the "abolitionist" movement, which favors freeing intelligent robots from human slavery. Soon they are jointly involved in lawsuits brought by Dee Model's owner, who is Wilde's friend, long time rival, and apparent murderer, Dave Reid.

This seems like plenty of background for a novel in itself, especially given the interesting environment of New Mars, with its single City, 5/6 of which is given over to "wild machines", and with the pervasive semi-VR technology, the grounds for speculation about the nature of human vs. machine intelligence, and the semi-anarchist political structure of the colony. But in parallel tracks we follow the early life, on roughly present-day Earth, of Jonathan Wilde, Dave Reid, and the two important women in their lives: Myra and Annette. Reid is a diehard Trotskyite socialist, and Wilde an anarchist and "space nut"; and the tension between their political views, as well as the tension resulting from their relationships with the two women, is followed over the decades. Both men become very powerful in the decaying near-future environment; as both in their ways push to open up space travel for people in general.

The two timelines inevitably converge, and the real concern of the novel comes clear: understanding of the nature of the "fast folk" (originally human simulations run on very fast computer hardware), and understanding the link between New Mars and Earth. MacLeod speculates fascinatingly on nanotechnology, virtual reality, and astrophysics. Everything is well-tied together in the end, although in a slightly disappointing manner. (The first and last lines of *The Stone Canal*, by the way, are both stunners, if a bit contrived also (as overtly "stunning" lines often are).) The characters of Wilde and Reid are very well presented, though the female characters are a bit sketchier. The novel's weaknesses are an occasional tendency to talkiness, the rather familiar setup of the relationship of the main characters, along with their realization of enormous political power, and the slight flatness of the ending. But all in all this is an excellent pure SF novel, and one which bodes well for a career to watch.

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