

Women at Warp Episode 194: Book Club: *Strangers From the Sky*

Sue: Hi, and welcome to Women at Warp, a Star Trek podcast. Join us on our continuing mission to explore intersectional diversity in infinite combinations. My name is Sue and thanks for tuning in. With me today are crew member Andi...

Andi: Hello!

Sue: ...and our guest Anika.

Anika: Hi!

Sue: Anika, you've been here plenty of times before, but why don't you reintroduce yourself to our listeners anyway?

Anika: Hi! I'm Anika, AKA Pixie, and I am a Star Trek fan from childhood. I grew up with TNG and Voyager, and I really never stopped loving it. I now have a Star Trek podcast, too! Antimatter Pod, which you can find at antimatterpod.com and antimatterpod on social media. Yay!

Sue: When Anika heard we were going to be talking about our topic today, she said, 'I'm gonna be a guest on that episode.'

Andi: Yeah, there wasn't even a question. She informed us. *Anika laughs*

Sue: That topic is Margaret Wander Bonanno's 1987 Star Trek novel *Strangers from the Sky*. But before we get into that, we have our typical housekeeping to do first. Our show is made possible by our patrons on Patreon. If you'd like to become a patron, you can do so for as little as a dollar a month and get awesome rewards, from thanks on social media to silly watchalong commentaries and informal podcast episodes on non-Trek topics. Visit us on patreon.com/womenatwarp to find out more. If you're looking for podcast merchandise, you can check out our TeePublic store. There are so many designs, with new ones being added all the time on everything from t-shirts to coffee mugs to even wall tapestries sometimes. Find us at teepublic.com/stores/womenatwarp. Also, our remaining convention merchandise is now available to purchase online. We have our Boldly Gathering design, which celebrates 50 years of Star Trek conventions as both an enamel pin and a patch. Plus our 2021 embroidered patch featuring an LCARS display playing the podcast. To look at or purchase these items, head to womenatwarp.com/shop. Supplies are limited and will not be restocked. And finally, we have a word from Aliza. *communicator sound*

Aliza: Hey there! This is Aliza Pearl, one of the hosts of Women at Warp. And I am here to tell you about a new campaign that I am running. Many of you know that I'm a professional actor, writer, and tabletop RPG game master and player. If you don't know what all that means, that's okay. All you need to know is that, if you like Marvel, if you like superhero stories led by women and people of color and queer people, we have a campaign for you. It's called Marvel's New Vanguard: Piercing Chaos. I'm the game master. We are telling amazing

multiversal stories using Marvel canon and characters as inspiration. You can watch it live starting Wednesdays on July 6th at [twitch.tv/kira858](https://www.twitch.tv/kira858). That's K-I-R-A-8-5-8. We also will be coming to podcast at some point in the future. But for now you can watch us on Twitch for free. You don't even have to sign up for a Twitch account if you never have done that. So check us out. Marvel's New Vanguard: Piercing Chaos. *communicator sound*

Sue: And with that, let's get into this topic, *Strangers from the Sky*. This was a patron suggestion from our good friend Robert Reyes. So we're all wearing red sweaters today—you just can't tell. Originally published in July 1987, it has since had a second edition in '93 and a third in 2006. It's the second of Pocket Books' Giant Star Trek novels; the first was *Enterprise: The First Voyage [Adventure]* by Vonda McIntyre. It's a 400-page Star Trek novel in the eighties, which is unusual. It earns its name as a giant one. And it also has an audio adaptation, which is read by George Takei and Leonard Nimoy. And it takes that 400-page novel and brings it down to about an hour and a half of audio.

Anika: They cut out all the good stuff. *Sue laughs*

Sue: So, if you haven't read this novel and you wanna listen to this episode, you can go find that audio adaptation. It might be on YouTube, maybe? I don't know, but it's there and it'll only take an hour and a half of your time if you don't speed it up. Anika, since this is one of your favorites, can you give us a short summary of the novel?

Anika: Okay, a short summary. I'm gonna skip all the good parts too. So it's divided into two parts. The present part takes place before *Wrath of Khan*, in between *The Motion Picture* and *Wrath of Khan* when they're all on Earth being retired, but not really. And the second half takes place in one of *Enterprise's* first missions with Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock, and McCoy isn't there yet because it's pre-"Where No Man Has Gone Before." And basically, in the past, they come across a disappearing planet and through shenanigans end up more in the past, of now let's say 2022 Earth. I don't know exactly when it is—I think it's 2057 or something random like that.

Sue: '63, something...no, '45, it's 2045, cuz it's 19 years before actual first contact.

Anika: Right. And they become embroiled in a first contact mission with the Vulcans, but the Vulcans aren't supposed to be there because, as Sue mentioned, it's 19 years before the actual first contact happened. And so our crew of Kirk, Spock, Gary Mitchell, Elizabeth Dehner, Lee Kelso, along with Egyptian Merlin, Parneb, have to fix time and make sure that they don't know that the Vulcans are early and they have to get the Vulcans back into space.

And then in the present, Kirk is reading a book where all of that happens, and it doesn't mention him, but he remembers everything and he starts having nightmares. He has a psychotic break and is institutionalized for it. And, basically, he has forgotten that that happened, but the book recalls it. And he has to team up with Spock and McCoy to figure out why he has memories that he's not supposed to have. And it turns out that he's not insane; he just actually lived that time and succeeded in getting the Vulcans back in space so that nobody knew, except whoever wrote this book.

Sue: Yeah, there's a lot that happens.

Anika: Yeah. There are so many subplots. There are like 10,000 original characters. It's intense. It's definitely a giant novel. And so the reason I wanted to be on this episode so badly is because this is the Star Trek novel that I have purchased three times. *Sue and Andi laugh* Because I moved twice, and both times I decided that I would never need to read *Strangers from the Sky* again. And so I could leave it behind or, you know, could give it away and not worry about it, cuz it was okay. I had read it, I enjoyed it, but it's also terrible. It's not a good book, but it's very, very enjoyable. So I got rid of it twice moving and then both times I wanted to read it again. I just had this itch of, 'You know what I really want to do is read *Strangers from the Sky*.' And so the third time I purchased it as a digital copy so that I wouldn't have to think about moving, as it could just move with me. It would be okay.

Sue: Oh, I love it.

Andi: I found this very interesting, but also I think my biggest issue with it was exactly why Anika struggled to summarize it, which is, it kept switching perspectives. It kept switching time periods. It felt like every time I was starting to get focused on what was happening and interested in what was happening—cuz the characters are pretty good—I would get confused, or I would get pulled out and we would switch perspectives again. And so I would start getting invested again and then it would switch perspectives, and I would be like, 'Nooo! But I was finally interested in this plot.' Like, 'Let me go back to there.'

Sue: Yeah. So I've read in the past week or so several different reviews and takes and threads about this novel, and the reviewer on Tor.com, actually, Ellen Cheeseman-Meyer refers to this story as a "plot squid." *Andi and Anika laugh*

Andi: There was a moment where I was trying to figure out how I would describe the different chronological perspectives of it. And I started thinking 'wibbly-wobbly, timey-wimey.' So plot squid makes perfect sense to me, I love that.

Sue: But it's true. There is so, so much happening in this novel, and so many subplots. There's even an entire one that I don't think I internalized as I read it.

Anika: Is it the terrorists?

Sue: With the terrorists, yeah. Every time the terrorists came out, I read the things, I read the story, I read every word, but I just didn't take it in. And it's like my brain just shut off to that storyline.

Anika: Exactly. That is exactly how I would describe it as well. I was angry that the terrorists were kept in the audio recording. So I was like, 'No, this is the worst part of the book. Can we just not?'

Andi: How then, if you took the terrorists out, how then would you have an external threat at the end? So I see why they had to keep it in?

Anika: I just wish, I guess, it was more creative. Back to Bonanno, I wish that she had come up with a better external threat than the terrorists, because I just can't focus on them. It's like, I see Racher and Easter and I just turn off. And I just don't want to understand it.

I've read this book so many times; I still don't know who they even are. What country they stand for. And yet I don't actually want to spend the time trying to figure it out.

Sue: But I would argue that the threat from the media is enough of a threat. The idea that this story is going to get blown outta proportion, that the news of the Vulcans is gonna get to the world and people are gonna freak out, that they're gonna be demonized and vilified. I think that, in my mind, that's enough. But it's also used to—at the end of the novel, in our epilogue, we sort of get this nice little bow tied about like, because these two individuals died in this confrontation, terrorism went away. And because the kelp were saved, then food shortages were no longer a thing. This one incident and the way it played out changed the trajectory of Earth and society forever.

Andi: To be fair, I think that's kind of the point of the book.

Sue: Yeah. Yeah. I think so too.

Andi: Yeah. The point of the book is like, small decisions beget large decisions beget whole changes in time and space, apparently. And I like that theme. Okay, so let's finish up our dragging of the terrorist subplot, and then I can move on to some things I did like. But, first of all, if I'm understanding correctly, one of the terrorists was a cyborg with, like, laser eyes? And that is way more interesting than it should be and yet is not explored at all.

Sue: Yeah, it's like two sentences.

Andi: It's kind of like, she's describing hair and eye color. She's like, 'And also he's a cyborg with laser eyes,' and then just keeps going. And I'm like, 'Wait, wait, wait! That's actually pretty cool. Tell me more about this cyborg man and why he's a terrorist.' But my bigger issue with this is this idea of these cartoonishly evil guys that are apparently just wanting to do chaos. Most terrorists have an actual goal. And actually, the addition of having an IRA terrorist, straight from The Troubles, plunked into this future time, was really interesting to me because it made it seem like there wasn't an actual reason for the IRA, and rational goals, and reasons why they were bombing things. So I just found all of that very like, they were there, they had no motivation that made sense. One of them was a cyborg, and then one of them was an actually kind of offensive Irish stereotype. And then the offensive Irish stereotype apparently made a mistake during the mission and decided he was just going to sit there until he died. Again, no explanation for this whatsoever is given. So yeah, not the strongest part of the various plot squids.

Sue: Yeah. You bring up the stereotypes. There are several.

Andi: Are we going to move into the sorcerer?

Sue: Before we even get to the sorcerer there's the whole Dreamtime situation.

Anika: Yeah, the New Age Indigenous people.

Sue: Yeah. I mean, it's just—it's not great.

Andi: I forgot about them. There is so much. Actually, I remember when I was first reading this I was like, 'I am really cool with Maori characters being here,' but it felt very much like what unfortunately Star Trek has had a long history of doing with Indigenous characters, which is just, 'Woooo, spooky.' You know what I mean?

Sue: I certainly can't say I'm an expert, but I tried to do some research and I learned that dreams are very important to that culture, but I couldn't find anything even remotely close to what is described in this novel, that Kirk participates in. I could be wrong, I could be looking for the wrong thing, but, for me, it's currently just a little cringe.

Andi: A little? *Sue laughs*

Sue: More than a little.

Anika: I got a lot of Chakotay flashbacks. So I just wanna say that that whole section is in the first part, which is in the present. So it's not even in 2045; it's in the 23rd century or 24th century or whatever. So it's like, these are...

Sue: It's like Chakotay.

Anika: Yeah, it's very made-up Indigenous ideals...

Sue: Mm-hmm.

Anika: ...based on, you know, crystals and New Age, timey-wimey stuff from whenever this book was written, 1985. So, on one hand, there is this huge cast and she goes out of her way to make it very diverse, to add a lot of different cultures into the huge cast...

Sue: That's true.

Anika: ...but they are not—they're fully fleshed characters, but it's not about their identities at all. And the Maori people are not fully fleshed characters. And it's strange because it's suggested that the Maori shaman-type person and Parneb the Egyptian Merlin sorcerer are related in some way.

Andi: Okay I missed *that*.

Anika: At the end, when the kid who he'd befriended and who brought him to the shaman in the first place—then at the end that kid finds the peace symbol that's Jeremy Grayson's. There's a lot of weirdness going on.

Sue: I didn't realize that was supposed to be the same kid.

Anika: I think it's supposed to be the same kid, cuz Spock's in the same place.

Sue: I thought the kid was supposed to be Parneb.

Anika: I mean, right. So that means that Parneb and that kid are the same.

Sue: Wait, no, but the kid that Kirk befriends is in the South Pacific. And the kid that Spock meets, who is supposed to be Parneb, is in Egypt.

Andi: So I would just like to take—let's pause for a second and think about what it would be like to, if you haven't read this book, to listen to us talking about this book. *Anika and Andi laugh* You would feel high. You would feel like you ate too many edibles, like wandering the desert. So yeah, I would say, overall, I didn't get any of that, but it's entirely possible, because honestly who knows. Because one thing that she does have a tendency to do is to try and tie everything up in a really meaningful way. So the number of times that it was like, 'He just happened to have a relative in Boston. And then that relative also happened to be the worldwide leader in peace rights and refugees and stuff'—that stuff is all too coincidental to be realistic, but it was very clearly deliberate. She was trying to show that everything is connected, right? And I get that and I am fine with that.

Sue: Mm-hmm.

Andi: So the Maori part? Yes, not great. I also really was confused—well, the thing about Parneb is he was very much, to me, an orientalist stereotype of every Middle Eastern kind of, again, spooky...

Sue: Yeah.

Andi: ...stereotype of like, mysterious guy. And apparently I don't even understand—did he have powers? He had powers, but I don't understand why he had powers.

Sue: Supposedly—I was getting the impression that he was supposed to be like a Trelane type. Very long lived, and they called him a sorcerer...

Andi: But living backwards.

Sue: Yeah, living backwards in time. This feels to me like a very Doctor Who conceit, not so much a Star Trek conceit.

Andi: Well, I mean, his whole section felt fantasy-like, rather than sci-fi.

Sue: But like, sorry. If Parneb is supposed to be a child, you know, in the 23rd century when he meets Spock, he ends his life in what we consider ancient history in Thebes, right? So he's incredibly long-lived.

Andi: Huh.

Anika: So, yeah, is he an alien who just lives on Earth, or is he some kind of magic human, or like... Yet, like Andy was saying, none of this is ever explained.

Andi: Well, it's kind of like the cyborg guy in that his description is like flavor. It's not plot; it's aesthetic.

Sue: He has enough power to move the away team from M-155, this reappearing and disappearing planet back in time and space to Earth.

Andi: Well, doesn't he also have the power to move the entire planet, cuz isn't that what he's doing?

Anika: Yes, yes.

Andi: Yeah. So that's pretty impressive. Would like to know more about that.

Anika: And yet he also lives in an underground pyramid and has tea parties. And it's very strange. He's just a bunch of—I think what you said, “flavors” is a good description. It's like a recipe of a person.

So I thought that Spock—that they leave Antarctica and go to...

Sue: Oh, right. They're also in Antarctica. *Sue laughs*

Anika: ...they go to New Zealand. I'm trying to explain why I thought it was the same kid. So, in the past, they escape with everybody in the Vulcans' submarine and they go to New Zealand, and that's where they meet up with Parneb, who's come in from Egypt. And that's where Spock buries his peace sign, which I wanna talk about in a minute as well. So he goes to get it, and so he is in New Zealand, and that's why I thought it was the same person.

Sue: I have to look...

Anika: But it's not important.

Andi: No, no, no, no, no, no. So I think what we need to do is the three of us need to put together a wall like Charlie does in *It's Always Sunny in the Valley* with the strings. And then we need a world map and we need to plot like, okay, so they were here at this time and they were here at this time. And we need pictures of everybody. It needs to look absolutely ridiculous. And then we can finally figure out, is that kid the same kid?

Sue: It says Spock walked alone through the crowded streets of Thebes.

Anika: Oh. Well, why is his... Whatever, it's fine. I don't care.

Sue: After they sent the Vulcans back in the missile...

Anika: ...then they go back to Thebes?

Sue: ...then they go back to Egypt cuz Parneb has to send them back to their future.

Andi: Ooooh, okay.

Anika: From his tea party, underground pyramid.

Andi: Okay Anika, get the red yarn, get the red yarn. They're goin' from the Pacific, back to Thebes, and then back to M-155.

Anika: And then back to the *Enterprise*.

Sue: Oh my gosh.

Andi: Yes. And then when they make it back to the *Enterprise* they've forgotten everything, until he starts reading a book that's written by... Question mark: how did they know to write the book?

Anika: Well, the epilogue, where they tell about the futures of everybody who is involved in this cute little excursion—so I love that there, they do mention that there were strangers that they don't know who they are, and that's obviously our crew. But they give everybody this happy ending where Tatya decides to become the alien welcome committee and Yoshi retires to Vulcan. But the military people die before the Vulcans get there, which is really sad. And they are depressed, always looking up at the stars and trying to figure it out but don't remember what they've forgotten. So...what was the question that I was answering? *Andi and Sue laugh*

Sue: The book within a book.

Andi: Who wrote the book?

Anika: Oh, who wrote the book! So I would say that it's probably someone's child, you know, grew up with these stories of something...

Sue: Didn't they say it was a journalist.

Anika: So one of the media? An ancestor of one of the media people who wrote things down?

Sue: I really, really thought that they said—I think it was in the beginning—that the last person involved had died and their journals had been released to the public and a journalist took the—or somebody took those journals and wrote this book from them.

Andi: Look, Sue, so much happened between the beginning of this book and the end, like...

Sue: I know!

Andi: And I read this book in like two days, so...

Sue: I'm not convinced I didn't just make that up. *Anika and Andi laugh*

Andi: Okay. So we've dragged this book thoroughly for like 30 minutes, so I would like to talk about some of the things I really did like.

Anika: Yes.

Sue: Yes, let's do that. That's a good idea.

Andi: So first of all, I actually—as I kind of alluded to before—I really like the themes of this book, and I really like just the... Probably the number one overarching theme is about working together and communication and listening to each other and being open to other people. All of that is very Star Trek. All of that is very awesome. And she does a fair job of exploring that theme. In fact, one of the things that was so frustrating about all of this other stuff, the plot squid, is that it took away from what she was doing really well, because when she was exploring that theme, she was really exploring that theme well. And then I would suddenly be like, 'Oh wait, I'm back in Antarctica with the cyborg,' you know? And that was

frustrating to me because I actually really enjoyed that part. And I thought a lot of these characters were really good, and I really liked them, and I really liked their relationships. I really liked Taty and Yoshi, and I really liked how Sorahl kind of fit into them. And there was a part of me that was like, 'Am I starting to OT3, this?' And I was like, 'A little bit. A tiny bit.'

Sue: I kind of thought that's where they were going.

Andi: Yeah! And I would've liked that. I genuinely would've liked that just because, for one thing, I think polyamory is something that I would like to see more good media portrayals of, because it's a thing. And I just feel like, in the universe, if we're talking about all of the living beings in the universe, we should see it more often than we do in Star Trek. So all of that I thought was really good and I really enjoyed that. And even the characters I didn't like as people, like Melody Sawyer—I thought she was really well done though. I thought her motivations made sense and she was well-drawn in all of those things. She kind of represented the worst impulses, but she did it really well. So yeah, I'll stop there. But overall, there was lots of parts of this book that I enjoyed. And then she would just yank me out of what I was enjoying and set me back down in Boston, you know? *Sue and Anika laugh*

Sue: I agree. I really like Melody and Jason and how, when we first meet them, they're super, super close, but then we see how they really take the two extremes of their reactions to learning that aliens are on the planet. And I think that's a really interesting contrast. I like the way those characters were formed, even if I didn't—I agree, I didn't necessarily like Melody as a person by the end of the story.

I also really like that this book shows us a huge shift in the Kirk-Spock friendship.

Andi: Yeah.

Anika: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Sue: When we first begin the story, Kirk is very new to command, and I guess his crew has been hazing him, is the impression we're supposed to get? And he has this antagonistic relationship with Spock, and he is not sure he can trust him, and he thinks that Spock is playing jokes on him with this appearing-and-disappearing planet and this whole situation, and is surprised when they find him again in the past, how good it is to see him. And they sort of come to this understanding during this mission and then become the Kirk and Spock that we know from the show.

Andi: Yeah. I didn't get the impression so much that they were hazing him so much as he was feeling really insecure, so he was paranoid. And things that were normal he was viewing as a challenge to his authority or his abilities. And then I also enjoyed just seeing—we got to see kind of the turn in their relationship, which I really enjoyed. I really enjoyed seeing them come from like, 'Okay, they're new. They don't really know how to relate to each other yet.' And then Kirk, with the backdrop of everything else we were talking about about this first contact situation, realizing that he's been shortsighted and prejudiced and trying to get past that. I thought it was great.

Anika: I also really like, because we have the two different time periods, that we get to see Kirk and Spock when they're not the people that we know, and they don't have the relationship when they're *very* new to each other, where, yeah, Kirk is really paranoid and thinks that Spock is playing games with him. And Spock is completely confused because he would never. And I love the part where Spock takes pictures of the planet every minute or something, cuz he wants to prove that he wasn't playing games and that the planet absolutely was there, and he overdoes it by a lot. And it's just these little small character beats for these characters that, in the present, which is the first half of the book, it's super shippy. I don't even ship these two and I'm sitting there going, 'Well, they're married.'

Andi: Yeah.

Sue: A hundred percent.

Anika: It is just soooo close in the future time period, which makes sense because it's, again, right before *The Wrath of Khan*, so they're at their xenith of the relationship. And so I really love having the contrast. And then, like you're saying, watching it go from, 'We don't trust each other;' to, 'We *have* to trust each other. And once we realize that we can, we can start building this amazing relationship that we have for so many years.'

Andi: I was thinking when I was reading the first half of this book—I was like, 'The shippers like this one,' because they were full-on romantic with each other. And some of the ways that they described each other got very shippy. And I enjoyed that. I always enjoy seeing their relationship explored. I mean, obviously, their relationship is so great. And McCoy too, because we got a lot of good grumpy McCoy in this so much.

Sue: So much good grumpy McCoy.

Andi: Yes, definitely. The strength of the three of them together as a character dynamic was strong enough to propel this franchise to 2022. Let's be real. That was the strength of the original show, so whenever we get to see that more, I'm always super stoked.

Anika: I have a bunch of moments highlighted. And one of them is literally McCoy is thinking—it says, "For weal or woe, as McCoy would say, for as long as they both should live." And it's literally like a marriage vow that is a part of this book. It's just incredible to me.

I also really like the other three characters that are not original characters, the ones that all die in "Where No Man Has Gone Before." I love Elizabeth Dehner and I only need that one episode to love her, but her getting any attention at all is always good in my book. And then Lee Kelso, I don't even know who that is in "Where No Man Has Gone Before," but he's adorable in this book. He is this sort of goofy tech guy who gets all of the fun stuff to do and then disappears.

Sue: He's arrested for hacking, basically.

Anika: Yeah. *Anika laughs* But because he was trying to make the media circus less of a media circus. So I love him. And then Gary Mitchell I don't like in this book as much as I don't

like him in “Where No Man Has Gone Before,” so I think he must be very in-character. But, to be fair, he spends most of his time with the terrorist plot, so...

Andi: He also just has a bad vibe, man. He has a very misogynistic vibe.

Anika: Right. He hits on every woman that he comes across and also encourages everyone else to. And it's just, no.

Andi: Kind of going back to the Kirk/Spock thing, I just wanna—the other one that I highlighted before we move on from how shippy this book is: “Spock sat while Kirk paced, listened as Kirk talked, provided as always the balance for everything Kirk was, shadow to his sunlight, coolness for his fire, calm against his agitation.” A hundred percent man, love that. *Sue laughs*

Sue: I gotta say, I don't hate the stuff in Boston. And I think it's because I'm viewing it through Spock-colored glasses. Knowing that Nimoy moved back to Boston at the end of his life, and that his family's all from there, I thought it was very cute and not just a tribute to Spock's history but to Nimoy's history. I might be reading too much into it.

Andi: No, I agree. I enjoyed those parts. It's just—the only criticism I really have about that section is just that it's too convenient...

Sue: It's very convenient.

Andi: But him meeting his ancestor—and his ancestor was really cool. I really enjoyed their conversations. I also really enjoyed that he's wearing a yarmulke when they first meet, and they mentioned his marriage to a Jewish woman. I agree with you, Sue, that I think it was probably deliberately kind of hearkening back to Nimoy himself rather than Spock. And I enjoyed it very much.

Anika: And it makes Spock Jewish because it's through the wife.

Andi: Mm-hmm. I just dig that.

Anika: My only issue—I mean, I agree that it's very convenient, but also I don't care in fiction. I'm fine with it being convenient. My only concern with the whole Jeremy Grayson and the Peacenik organization subplot is that Spock uses a necklace, a peace-symbol necklace as his only identification to travel from Boston to Antarctica. And everyone's like, ‘Cool, no problems.’

Sue: The whole history of that idea, that the peace symbol was used with prominence in the sixties, and then used as an underground symbol in World War III, and then is so uncommon by 2045 that it is proof that a specific individual sent you.

Anika: You can literally get one in a gumball machine where you put 50 cents in and you get fake jewelry.

Sue: I realize we're talking about 1987 looking forward 60 years, but it's still less than a hundred years for this symbol to fall into obscurity? I'm very confused by that.

Anika: That's where it becomes too convenient for me. That's unbelievable.

Andi: She's like, 'I can excuse the magical ancestor that is the head of the [inaudible], but I draw the line at using a peace symbol as a boarding pass. That's one step too far.' *Anika laughs*

Anika: Exactly. I never said—I am not a Vulcan, I am not logical.

Andi: No, I agree with you just in general. Magical things happen in books. That's fine with me. As long as it feels internally consistent to the characters, I'm usually fine with it and just hand waving it. But yeah, that's true: he did manage to—I remember when he got to the final point where she was like, 'ID?', he was like, 'Well, that's not something I have, but what I do have is this blinged-out necklace, what do you think of that?' *Anika and Sue laugh*

Sue: I also just love that the line in the book was something like, 'This was something he was hoping to avoid.' *Anika and Andi laugh*

Andi: So this is literally aliens on Earth, like a military base. That's the other thing—they all made it there so easily.

Anika: Lee Kelso's amazing hacking skills.

Andi: Yeah. I actually thought that—that part I was okay with, the idea that he could print up IDs that would make everybody be cool with them just showing up. I will buy that. Yeah. But then when Gary Mitchell is like, 'Here I am on my snowmobile.' *Anika and Sue laugh* But are you though? And then Spock, obviously just showing up out of nowhere with his necklace. That stuff was a little bit too much, but I did like the idea that they get there and Lee Kelso is like, 'Hey, by the way, I'm an amazing hacker. Here's your new identity; go forth.' And then they all split up and started living lives. And apparently Gary Mitchell speaks Polish. All that stuff I'm down with. Let these people be ridiculously competent. I love that. Bring me more magic hackers.

Anika: Speaking of convenient, I really enjoy that Elizabeth Dehner is given—she's the only one with a real person that she's taking over their position. And it's a psychologist who specializes in potential aliens, whose entire village was destroyed. So no one knows what she looks like.

Sue: 'Your whole family's dead. Don't worry about it.' *Anika and Andi laugh*

Andi: Honestly, I've kind of come back around on this book just from this discussion. So I finished the book last night and was like, 'Oh no.' Cuz I always hate it when I have to talk about things I don't like, because that's not what I like to do, you know? What if she listens to this and is sad that I didn't like her book, you know? I don't enjoy it. So there last night I finished it and I was like, 'Oh no, I didn't like it.' But the more we talk about it here, the more I'm realizing that this book is camp and therefore I love it. So I have come completely back around. I am getting on goodreads as we speak and I'm going to change my rating from three stars to five stars. Because the more we talk about it, the more I realize this book is amazing.

Anika: This book is amazing! I absolutely agree. Again, not good—but amazing, like incredible.

Sue: There is a more serious topic that I wanna discuss for a minute. And that is the idea of the Vulcan Prime Directive. They have this idea that, rather than be detected, they're going to self-destruct. Death before detection, right? But by the time that the Federation comes around, it's very, very different. They're detected all the time in first contact situations. And it's never even been part of the conversation that we've seen in a Star Trek show, of like, 'We need to kill ourselves so we are not found by the inhabitants of this planet.' And it got me thinking, in the way my brain works, of like, 'Did humans soften up the Vulcans or did they make some concession? Was there a big fight about what this Prime Directive together should be?'

Anika: So this is one of the things that I really love about this book, and it's that they have these, again, cast of thousands, so many original characters, and they're all interrelated. And this is brought up in the beginning with T'Lera, who is the elder Vulcan, who ends up stranded with her son. And she grew up in space because her father was one of the first space explorers on Vulcan. And he's the one who came up with this death-before-destruction [detection] Prime Directive. And her husband—so Sorahl's father—is, I think it's called "interventionist." And so this is only in a couple paragraphs in the beginning, but I find it fascinating that the author introduces this idea of the death-before-destruction [detection] Vulcans and the interventionist Vulcans and literally creates a child of the two. Sorahl is the child of both sides. So throughout the novel you end up thinking about Sorahl as—it's sort of like with the Kirk-and-Spock stuff where there's two sides that have to eventually come together. And so I think that the humans did influence it. And I also think that the interventionist Vulcans already existed, so they already had some people on their side. And Sorahl going through this adventure and seeing that there are people who will work to preserve both history and life. And that that is a worthy goal. So I think that that is what eventually becomes the Prime Directive as we know it.

Andi: I actually wanna talk a little bit about Sorahl and his perspective on this, because there was a really amazing moment at the very beginning where he's kind of pushing back on T'Lera and some of her ways about going to observe and not to interfere or whatever. And she gets a little bit Vulcan snappy with him. And she basically is like, 'Before we enter orbit, you're going to need to do a study of all record tapes designated "colonialism." I will expect a full report.' And I loved that. That was amazing to me. First of all, it gave me such a good sense of what the relationship was like and what she was like as a character, but also the underpinnings of where this Prime Directive stuff comes from. Both the Vulcan version we see here and our more well known Star Trek version that we have now. The underpinnings is like, they're trying to avoid colonialism. Do they succeed? Is it problematic still? Yeah, I think it's a really murky ethical area. And, hey, if you wanna listen to us talk about it, we have an episode on both the Prime Directive and colonialism in Star Trek, and I think it gets to a really nuanced place. But where the idea comes from is they're trying to avoid colonialism. And I just love that little moment and it kind of goes to what you were speaking to.

Sue: I just really like the idea that this encounter between Taty and Yoshi and Sorahl and T'Lera not only affected Earth's trajectory, but Vulcan's. And I hadn't thought about it that way until your response, Anika. So that's cool.

Andi: Well, and it goes back to the major theme of this book that is really compelling. And she literally in the book says neither Vulcan nor Earth could have achieved what they have without the other. Neither could do it alone. And I love that. Because I think some of the ways that we think about Vulcans and then we think about the Vulcan-human relationship is very much like, 'We were a hot mess, and then they showed up and they were like, "Okay, have you considered not being a hot mess?"' And then humans were like, "Wow, these people have the right idea. We should actually not do all of this that we've been doing. We've been doing too much.'" So there's an almost patronizing vibe. And not in a bad way, I don't think. But I do think that that's how we generally think about it. We think of the Vulcans being the wise ones and the humans needing their guidance. But it's nice to think of that as a relationship that goes both ways. And it always goes back to Kirk and Spock, like always: Kirk needs Spock and Spock needs Kirk. They can't do it alone, which is the whole point of this book. And I really enjoyed that aspect of this book.

Sue: And you're not there yet, Andi, but that's sort of how it's portrayed in *Enterprise*. That the Vulcans came in and they're running the show and they won't let the humans do what they wanna do or explore how they wanna explore. And it's very antagonistic for a while.

Andi: Yeah, that makes sense. Because I think Melody Sawyer is a great example of this, where she's like, 'Stop being so freaking noble. It's making me mad,' you know, she was like, 'Are you perfect? Are you trying to pretend to be perfect? I don't trust this perfection,' you know? And yeah, she kind of sucked in a lot of ways, but she has a point that a lot of people would react poorly to that.

Anika: And do in *Enterprise*.

Sue: Mm-hmm.

Anika: And in the scene where, after she says, 'Both of you need to. The only way you're going to convince T'Lera is if you go together.' And then they do. So one of the things is that T'Lera can't be mentally—she can't be mind wiped. So she's definitely going to remember all this. So we are changing her trajectory as a person, as well as setting history back. And I love the moment where they tell her, and then she has to decide, and she looks—Spock reveals that he is a Vulcan, and she has sort of this psychic connection with him type thing where she figures out that he is both human and Vulcan. And so she understands that Spock is like her in certain ways, because he is a Vulcan, but he's also not a Vulcan. And she has always felt like she was a little bit different from all her Vulcan peers, because she loves space so much and she grew up there and she loves watching aliens. And then she looks at Kirk and has the realization that Spock isn't the only kindred spirit; that Kirk is also a kindred spirit because he is also someone who loves to live in space and finding new things and is interested in relationships between different cultures. I think the line is that 'She looks at the future and accepts the challenge,' or something like that.

Sue: Yeah, that was really nice.

Anika: And I just think that was so powerful. I loved the idea of—like Andi's saying—the actual theme of this book is we have to come together in order to create the future that we want.

Andi: Yeah. Basically, if you can get past all of the camp plot squids, *Sue laughs* the heart of this book is very powerful.

Anika: It's really easy to—if your mind starts not caring about something, I would just say allow it and it'll be fine. Then you can just care about the things that you actually do care about.

Andi: I like that there was a tense tennis scene...

Anika: Yes!

Andi: ...where it could have all fallen apart because Vulcans are too good at tennis.

Sue: It's just very, very specific. I think though, it does also kind of take the piss out of Star Trek a little bit for having Vulcans appear so perfect to humans. You've never played this game before, you don't have the right equipment, and you're beating someone who used to be a pro at this game your first time out.

Andi: Barefoot.

Anika: Yeah. But I really liked Andi's description of, 'The humans were a hot mess and then the Vulcans came in and told them, "Have you considered not being a hot mess?"' *Andi and Sue laugh* That was great. But in my opinion—and I am known for this—the Vulcans are also a hot mess. *Andi laugh* They went too far in their side of things and have created just as many problems.

Andi: Well, one of the things that I found so very compelling about the Vulcans, and the reason why they're my favorite, is—I love the idea of, they actually feel really, really deeply. And they basically feel so deeply they freaked themselves out. They're like, 'We are the drama, and it's too much. So we need to find a way to hide that part and dampen it as much as possible.' And then that's where we get Vulcans, where they're like volcanoes. There's so much going on underneath and they're trying to pretend like there's not, and I find them endlessly fascinating. And it's one reason why I think it's hard to find someone who can really play a Vulcan well, because they have to portray someone who looks deadpan, and they're expressionless, while also showing the immense amount of emotion that's underneath. And we've been very lucky in this regard with the casting of many of our Vulcans. So yeah. Love me some Vulcans. Bring more Vulcans.

I do also wanna give a shout-out. So we were talking a little bit about Sorahl and how perfect the Vulcans are. One thing I enjoyed is how out of her way she went to tell us how hot he was over and over again. *Anika and Sue laugh* I really enjoyed that. And I also really wanted to give a shout out to "velvet dark eyes," which I have never heard before but she repeated a lot. And it reminded me that in the previous book that we read by her, which is *Dwellers in the Crucible*, she goes on and on about her "Byzantine eyes," Cleante's "Byzantine eyes." And I love that they made a cameo. Our lesbians made a cameo in this book and she found a way to bring up Cleante's Byzantine eyes yet again in a totally different book. And I find that to be such a power move, and I respect it so much.

Sue: There is just one more thing from that Tor.com review that I wanna bring up, and that is Cheeseman-Meyer writes, “Margaret Wander Bonanno is wrestling not just with the plot squid, but with race and class issues in disparate centuries.”

Andi: Yes. True.

Sue: And that’s definitely there, but I would say I wish it were a little more forward. And that might just be me looking at it from, you know, 2022. But there’s a whole scene between Sawyer and Nyere about, you know, ‘How are these Vulcans gonna be treated if the world knew about them?’ And Jason is just like, ‘Well, I know more than you think I know,’ or something, or, ‘I know better than you.’ But his descriptions are offhanded, and it’s like, ‘Oh, his family back in Lagos,’ and it’s not as forward as I want it to be. It’s almost like it’s hidden. And you only get it if you pick up on it—that this is a Black man arguing with a Southern white woman about race.

Anika: Yeah. I think that it is too subtle. But maybe she was trying for that in 1987?

Sue: Right. That’s why I’m saying I have future eyes on this book. So I can’t be totally sure.

Andi: Well, that’s the common conflict that we have with Star Trek, is it’s people writing in, you know, the eighties in this case, ‘87 or whatever, about the future with the blinders on from their present. And I found that a lot of the language and even just the way she was writing—the writing style was super dated in a lot of ways.

Sue: Yes.

Andi: You could tell it was not contemporary. And I always try and give people a break. They’re doing the best they can. It’s really hard to put yourself into the mind of someone from 2047 and also someone from the far-off utopian future. I just take those glasses off. It’s almost impossible. So I like to think of them as kind of like time capsules. So you can kind of see how this woman in 1987 was thinking about some of these things. And if you look at it from that perspective, it becomes very interesting, kind of meta commentary.

Sue: Yeah. But even for 1987, at times, the style and the language felt very flowery.

Andi: That’s actually one of the things I like most about her style, is it’s super lyrical to me. And it’s an interesting style for Star Trek.

Sue: And I would be remiss or, slash, we would get a whole lot of tweets if I didn’t just quickly mention that we had some similar stories on screen. We had some “Carbon Creek” in Enterprise, where we have Vulcans crashing on Earth much earlier than we thought they did. And also in Picard season two, we had some Vulcan observers on Earth earlier than we believed.

Anika: So “Carbon Creek,” I really feel like it’s an homage, because they even have the Vulcan—T’Mir, I think is her name, T’Pol’s ancestor—who comes up with Velcro before. And so it reminds me of the kelp issue.

Andi: Of course Vulcans are responsible for Velcro. Of course they are. That makes total sense to me.

Sue: Isn't it great? I love it.

Anika: So, the one thing I want to bring up—because I would be remiss if I didn't mention it—is the not-great presentation of mental health.

Andi: Oh *yeah*. I was like, 'Wait a second. You got a scan that showed some stuff. And apparently that means that you no longer have rights?' Okay. They hunted him down like he was a criminal. And then they were like, 'Well, you're a prisoner now. Heyyy.'

Anika: He's only really let go because Spock shows up and says, 'Well, I have the same brain scans and you're not allowed to treat me because you don't have any Vulcans on staff.' Everything about that is bad. Everything about that is bad.

Andi: I really liked that when Spock shows up the psychiatrist lady is like, 'Oh, I've made a huge mistake. This is gonna go poorly.' She's super intimidated by him right off the bat. And I'm like, 'As you should be, you're about to get rocked, enjoy your life.' *Anika laughs*

Anika: And then there's also that horrible scene where they're having a meeting with Starfleet brass to discuss Captain Kirk.

Sue: Oh yeah. And what did Kirk say?

Anika: And she's like, 'Oh no, I didn't want everyone to know who he was.' It's so bad. There's so many red flags going on here.

Sue: Yeah. It's not great.

Andi: I still would like to pitch my Star Trek HR show. Cuz if they had a Star Trek HR show where it was just like traveling HR, where they have to go to the ships and be like, 'You can't do that.' Like, 'That's not okay.'

Anika: Yes, please.

Andi: 'Please do not hunt down an admiral on his own time and throw him in a sack.'

Anika: Right?

Andi: Like, okay, well...

Sue: You can't have a whole staff meeting about someone else's mental health.

Anika: And they make a point of saying that he's not on duty, that he's on vacation. And they still hunt him down and then literally institutionalize him. For weeks. And tell no one.

Andi: If they gave me a Lower Decks-style show to make this Star Trek HR, it would be good. It would be funny. We would have to revisit—they'd have to be able to time travel too, but they'll just show up places and be like, 'Sorry, um, can't discuss that in a staff meeting. That's not okay.'

Sue: I think we need to get Mike McMahan on the phone.

Anika: Yes.

Andi: Yes.

Sue: And at the very least make this an episode.

Anika: Yes.

Andi: Oh my god. I will pitch it to him the next time we see him at a con. 'Listen, listen. You've done *Lower Decks*. Now what about this? The HR professionals that are just like, "Noooooo!"'

Anika: I can think of easily 15 examples just off the top of my head.

Andi: I know! It's very bad. It's very bad. This is a workplace. *Sue, Anika, and Andi laugh*

Sue: Ohhhh my. Final thoughts on *Strangers from the Sky*? So why don't we start with our guest, Anika? What is your rating of this novel?

Anika: Well, like I said, I'm gonna give two ratings, because there's the rating of, 'Is this a good, well plotted, well presented book/story.' And, 'Did I enjoy reading this novel at least 20 times?' So on the, 'Is it a good book?' I would have to say, I think Andi was right in the 3 stars. So I guess it would be 3 underground pyramid tea parties. But in terms of, 'Did I enjoy this book and would I recommend reading it?', I gave it 5.

Andi: Excellent. And I started my rating at 3 stars, but I'm gonna end on 5 out of 5 cyborg laser eyes. Because overall the message is there, and it's very camp. And is there a lot of problematic stuff? Yes, but it's meta. So, yeah, I struggled when I was reading it, but it's fun to talk about. So, in the end I enjoyed it.

Sue: With all of these same caveats, which is essentially what I would tell an individual if recommending this novel, yeah, I'd go about the same route. I'm gonna change the scale a little bit and say 9 out of 10 antique peace symbols. *Andi and Anika laugh*

Andi: Slash boarding passes?

Sue: Slash boarding passes.

So with that, I think we are out of time for today. Anika, where can people find you on the internet?

Anika: You can find me on Twitter @manicpixiedane, and I'm linked everywhere else from there. And you can find my podcast @antimatterpod on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram and antimatterpod.com.

Sue: And Andi?

Andi: Yeah, so I am on Twitter @FirstTimeTrek.

Sue: And I'm Sue. You can find me on Twitter @spaltor. To learn more about our show or to contact us, visit womenatwarp.com, email us at crew@womenatwarp.com, or find us on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram @WomenAtWarp. You can also join our goodreads book group at goodreads.com.

Thanks so much for listening!