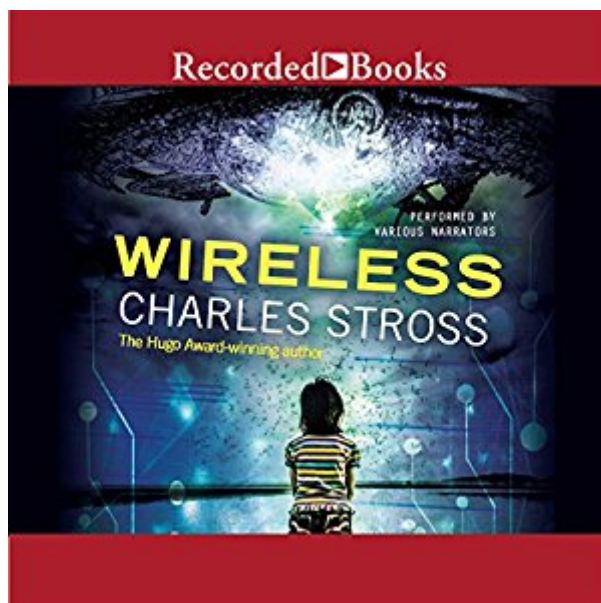


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Synopsis

Prolific novelist Stross pauses to collect short stories that have not (yet) been stitched up into his longer work. Stories that move the US - USSR conflict onto a massive disk in another galaxy (Locus Award-winner "Missile Gap"), offer a spam-filter solution to the Fermi paradox ("MAXOS"), and suggest clever bargains with the devil in a newly frozen Scotland ("Snowball's Chance") demonstrate Stross's ability to crisscross genres, blending SF, fantasy, horror, and espionage.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I've been a fan of Charles Stross writing ever since I encountered his homage to Lovecraft in A Colder War. This volume reprints that story together with eight others of varying lengths. If you prefer novel-length stories you should be aware that two of the titles (Missile Gap and Palimpsest) are substantial enough to hold their own with much longer works. The first story, Missile Gap, is set on an Earth that has been translated to a giant flat disk and set in an ocean with many other translated worlds. It's a little bleak - don't expect a bunch of plucky humans to triumph because of their native can-do-it-ness. The vast godlike forces that could do something like this would be practically oblivious to the survival of species, let alone individuals. The second is Rogue Farm: A farmer has to deal with a post-human entity that wants to use his farm as a launching site. It's a very short (and light) work and I didn't really care for it. A Colder War is one of my favorite stories. Charles Stross uses Lovecraft's stories as the basis for an alternate history Cold War thriller. It's *very* bleak - the best possible outcome is the annihilation of humanity. I'd love to

see this as a graphic novel. *Maxos* is a vignette originally published in *Nature*. It's quite funny and deserves more elaboration. *Down on the Farm* is set in Stross's Laundry universe (*The Atrocity Archives*, *The Jennifer Morgue*) which use Lovecraftian horror as their background (they're related but not connected to *A Colder War* which also appears in this collection). The Laundry stories seem to follow a standard pattern - the narrator is thrust into a crisis where things are not what they appear and he has to save the day through improvisation, facing eldritch horrors which are often less frightening than the nightmare that is government work. I liked this story, but it doesn't really stand alone. I'd recommend reading Stross's *The Atrocity Archives* first. *Unwirer* was written with Cory Doctorow. The hero is part of a team that sets up wireless networks against government and MPAA interference. It's surprising how well the two authors' styles merge but it's not a very deep story. *Sonwball's Chance* is a deal-with-the-de'il story (I once read that every author has to do one of these) that taps into Stross's interest in planetary engineering and government bureaucracy. It's short and slight but worth the read. *Trunk and Disorderly* is a Wodehouse pastiche. I used to like Wodehouse but I just couldn't get into this story. The author notes its relationship to *Saturn's Children*: if you were a big fan of the latter you might appreciate this more. The last story, *Palimpsest* is nearly worth the price of admission by itself. It's more than a little reminiscent of a famous story by Isaac Asimov but so, so much better. The key to time travel is held by an organisation that wants to stop humanity going extinct. To do this it periodically re-seeds Earth with populations taken from earlier iterations of humanity and, between epochs, does things like re-ignite the sun (which ought to have burned out within a few billion years). This story has it all - deep time, stellar engineering, time travel, paradoxes, the Singularity and more. The author notes that it's a novella that wanted to be a novel, and I think it feels a little constrained. None the less, it's an amazing read and highly recommended. I gave this book five stars. There were a few stories I didn't care for, but that's true of any collection. The gems of this collection would be worth buying on their own and justify the ranking.

I am liking Stross more and more, but my favorite of this collection was *On The Farm*, a Laundry story, which has spurred me to want to read much more about the Laundry. *A Colder War* was spectacular as well, with its interesting 'what if' scenario spun off of Lovecraft's *At The Mountains of Madness*. I also liked some of the far flung timescape of *Palimpsest*, which could have been a more gritty version of the Time Lords of Dr. Who fame. I didn't like *Trunk And Disorderly*. Just not my thing mixing overt humor into sci-fi (Douglas Adams notwithstanding). My four star rating comes from the first two stories mentioned; the lack of the fifth comes from the last.

Disclosure - I am a Charlie Stross fan. Read this review with that in mind. This is a collection of 9 short stories and novellas. Of the stories there are 3 standouts; "Missile Gap" - which should be made into a novel. Earth's crust is laid out on a huge disc orbiting another star by aliens who watch how we manage with the changed circumstances as we explore and find evidence of other planets and intelligences similarly placed. "Palimpsest" - ditto. This is a modern rendering of Asimov's "The End of Eternity" and much better and richer by far. This tale alone is worth the price of the book. "Unwirer" - a collaboration with Cory Doctorow which is a bitter sweet, almost poignant tale about a US dystopia due to corporate interests controlling how the internet infrastructure is developed. This is a wonderful cautionary tale populated with believable characters. The weakest stories are: "Snowball's Chance" - a comedy based on beating the devil "Trunk and Disorderly" - a comedic precursor idea to the novel Saturn's Children, but which doesn't really work that well. This is a worthy successor to his collection "Toast" and affirms for me why Stross is one of the few great contemporary SF writers. His imagination roams far and wide and treads ground where few others have gone. Highly recommended.

You don't often see good science fiction short stories collections anymore. Charles Stross honours this old tradition with this book. Some of the stories are bad, some are difficult to read, some are sublime! What he does is to use the special power of the short story to emerge you directly into a situation that force you to think and challenge your preconceptions. Last in this book Stross doesn't fall into the trap of exposing his fascination with bureaucracy, banking and economy that have made some of his recent books rather boring.

I wish more authors took the time to consolidate their attempts in mini-stories and "trials" in writing into anthologies like this (and their editors and publishers supported the efforts). These used to be so common in the past, and I think we are much poorer for the loss as we miss many attempts by some of the greats in trying their hands at both novel ideas and approaches to writing. This one by Stross is very good in both forms of writing presented and novel thought provoking stories. Enjoyed it greatly.

Stross writes science fiction like he means it, making his stuff a joy to read. Real people, completely unreal problems, wonderfully curly logic. If you like science fiction, there's little chance you'll dislike this varied collection of tales.

This is worth the price to read the novella Palimpsest. The other stories were not as well written, in my opinion. Most jarring was the fact that the Kindle edition has typos, about one every five pages. It looks like the book was scanned and hyphenated words were recognized incorrectly. There are lots of extra spaces in long words, like "under standing". Most amusing was the use of "time-subjunctive" instead of "time-subjective" in one spot -- good thing time travelers have great grammar!

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