The Cry Of The Butterfly

Matthew Baker

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Of course, from the moment the aliens had arrived, alighting with an eerie grace from the shuttle that had carried the aliens to the surface of the planet from the spacecraft that had appeared in orbit days before, we wondered why the aliens had come. But we had still only just gotten used to the presence of the extraterrestrials—seeing footage of the aliens drifting into offices to meet with government officials, seeing photos of the aliens visiting famous monuments and landmarks with appointed guides, hearing the aliens referenced on podcasts and the news—when the announcement was made. The aliens hadn't come to invade, or kill, or enslave. The aliens were curators. For over a century, a panel of extraterrestrial artists, historians, and archeologists had been studying our species from the depths of space, for a single purpose: to identify the most magnificent work of art that our species had ever made. With over a billion known species of sapient lifeforms in the universe, spread across just as many galaxies, the museums that the aliens operated could feature only one artifact per civilization. A representative artwork had to be chosen. A lone artwork would represent humanity universally. And now that the aliens had arrived at a decision, the panel had come to announce the selection in person, in a ceremony to be held in a month's time. The sense of excitement that swept across the planet at this announcement was unprecedented in both intensity and scale. Those of us who were artists were especially enthralled. Our scientists were of no interest to the aliens, whose technol-

ogy was vastly superior, engineered with theories of mathematics and physics so overwhelmingly advanced that we looked like cave dwellers in comparison. Our philosophers were of no interest. Our theologians were of no interest. Only those of us who were artists had achieved something that the aliens deemed worthy of sharing with the rest of the universe. We felt an awed pride at the thought that extraterrestrial societies would soon contemplate a work of art that our species had created. Initially the press assumed that the aliens had chosen a visual artwork, likely a painting or a sculpture, so when rumors began to circulate that the chosen artifact was a piece of literature, those of us who were writers admittedly became somewhat smug. And when word leaked that the chosen artifact was a modern novel by a living author, then we became downright ecstatic. The suspense was palpable. The gossip was sensational. Those of us who had received invitations flew to the capital on the eve of the ceremony, got manicures and pedicures and facials in the morning, made toasts in hotel rooms with sparkling glasses of champagne, donned gowns and tuxedos, strolled through the dazzle of camera flashes on the red carpet, and streamed through the doors of the palatial theater to take a seat in the grand auditorium. Fireworks shimmered above the roof. Trumpets sounded in the wings. Those of us in the audience who were writers, particularly the prizewinners and the bestsellers, were nearly bursting with anticipation. As the panel of curators glided elegantly onto the stage, the feeling in the air was electric. And yet the mood changed rather abruptly when the aliens formally announced the title of the selection: *The Cry Of The Butterfly*, a self-published novel that nobody had ever heard of, let alone actually bothered to read, written by an elderly janitor named Janet Fankhauser, who reportedly lived with half a dozen cats in a cluttered duplex in rural Minnesota.

Murmurs passed through the auditorium. Screens emerged from pockets and clutches. Discreetly, we googled the title en masse. The novel could be purchased online for the

modest price of one cent, yet the book appeared to have been downloaded fewer than a hundred times. We glanced up at the stage, where the aliens were still speaking, and wondered if the aliens might be fucking with us. Admittedly, the aliens had a breathtaking sense of fashion, dressing in glamorous intricate garments made from sleek lustrous materials that reflected the light in seemingly impossible ways, and the images we had seen of the furnishings in the shuttle and the spacecraft had convinced us that the aliens had a sophisticated sense of aesthetics. We had never doubted the judgement of the aliens for even a moment. Yet a cursory skim of the chosen novel revealed that the book was riddled with grammatical mistakes, superfluous punctuation, redundant phrases, botched idioms, mixed metaphors, sappy dialogue, indefensible cliches, misspellings both common and idiotic, and a character whose name inexplicably changed halfway through from Todd to Ted, not to mention that the title made absolutely no fucking sense, with all due respect, because a butterfly had no voice and literally could not cry. The aliens, however, not only were serious but actually cited many of these very defects as examples of why the novel had been chosen. *The Cry Of The Butterfly*, the curators said, was perhaps the most honest, authentic work that the panel had ever read. Janet Fankhauser, who had been flown to the ceremony by the aliens, seemed just as bewildered as the rest of us as she was ushered onto the stage. When asked to speak, she confessed that for many years she had forgotten that she had ever even written a book at all. The novel had been written the year after a breakup with her one and only lover, in what she recalled as a sudden frenzy of emotion between periods of depression, during which she had subsisted almost exclusively on tubes of raw cookie dough. From what she could remember, she hadn't done much else that year other than lie in bed, binge-watching anime and videos of baby animals online. She had eventually dropped out of university. She didn't know what else to say. She backed away from the podium. The audience reacted with a combination of involuntary applause

and expressions of speechless disbelief. The human species had spent millions of years evolving the necessary intelligence to create a work of art, and there she stood, the author of the greatest masterpiece of our world, the creator of the ultimate achievement of our civilization, an elderly janitor with a frizzy gray bob cut and a crude face, wearing rumpled slacks and a frumpy cardigan pinned with a cheap rhinestone brooch, covered with cat hair, a mumbling simpleton who lacked sufficient interest in the arts even to be referred to as a dilettante, who'd just admitted to having never visited a gallery, attended a symphony, watched a ballet, or seen a play even once, who hadn't bothered even to read a book in over half a century, a homely-looking creature whose only apparent hobbies were television and binge-eating. Horrified by the selection that the aliens had made, a group of us took the curators aside after the ceremony and begged the aliens to reconsider, some of us dropping to our knees in desperation, several of us openly weeping in shame and distress. Yet the curators only chuckled, in those hypnotically melodic tones that the aliens produced when amused. There was nothing that could be done. As the aliens considered copyright to be merely a quirky ritual of a laughably primitive economic system, the novel was already on display in museums throughout the universe, being enjoyed by countless species of sapient lifeforms. The rest of the universe had read the defining cultural artifact of our species before we had.

And thus we left the ceremony in despair. We went out in droves to pubs and bars, consoled each other over pints of beer and shots of vodka, complained, whined, fumed, raged, bitched, and cursed, got fantastically drunk, broke several stools unintentionally, punched a restroom mirror, insulted an innocent cabbie, wandered through the desolate nighttime streets of the capital, mistook a police officer for a statue, recited poetry to a fountain that was shut off for the winter, and then flew home in the morning to destinations across the planet, nursing hangovers that made the faint pink light of the dawn seem dazzling. We

had sworn to each other that we would never read the novel. Ever, under any circumstances. But over the following week, as the rest of humanity read the book, those of us who had been at the ceremony read the book too, sitting in recliners with mugs of coffee, lying on sofas with boxes of chocolate, sprawling across blankets in leafy parks, swaying in hammocks on black-sand beaches, sweating in the hazy steam of hammams, dabbing joints into ceramic ashtrays on tatami, leaning against dryers of tumbling clothes in lavanderias, waiting in line at patisseries, hunching on toilets in clubs, standing in clattering trains with grimy windows, perching on couches and benches and rockers and swings that creaked in the breeze, staring rapt at our screens as massive continents of clouds flickering with lightning drifted across the planet, and snowflakes fell onto mossy boulders, and raindrops dripped from magnolia trees, and sunlight glittered across trickling streams. The writing was pitifully earnest. The story was pathetically sentimental. No attempt had been made to polish any of the flaws in the text. And yet, though we resisted the idea, we couldn't help feeling like the aliens must know better than we did. We had to admit, there was something in there that did look a lot like us.

About The Author

Matthew Baker is the author of the graphic novel *The Sentence*, the story collections *Why Visit America* and *Hybrid Creatures*, and the children's novel *Key Of X*. Digital experiments include the temporal fiction "Ephemeral," the interlinked novel *Untold*, the randomized novel *Verses*, and the intentionally posthumous *Afterthought*.

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