

Questions to consider (Fiction):

1. How did you experience the book? Were you immediately drawn into the story—or did it take a while? Did the book intrigue, amuse, disturb, alienate, irritate, or frighten you?
2. Do you find the characters convincing? Are they believable? Are they fully developed as complex human beings—or were they one-dimensional?
3. Which characters do you particularly admire or dislike? What are their primary characteristics?
4. What motivates different character's actions? Do you think those actions are justified or ethical?
5. Do any characters grow or change during the course of the novel? If so, in what way?
6. Who in the book would you like to meet? What would you ask, or say?
7. If you could insert yourself as a character in the book, what role would you play?
8. Is the plot well developed? Is it believable? Do you feel manipulated along the way, or do plot events unfold naturally, organically?
9. Is the story plot or character driven? Do events unfold quickly or is more time spent developing characters' inner lives? Does it make a difference to your enjoyment?
10. Consider the ending. Did you expect it or were you surprised? Was it manipulative or forced? Was it neatly wrapped up—maybe too neatly? Or was the story unresolved, ending on an ambiguous note?
11. Can you pick out a passage that strikes you as particularly profound or interesting?
12. Does the book remind you of your own life? An event? A person—like a friend, family member, boss, co-worker?
13. If you were to talk with the author, what would you want to know? (Many authors enjoy talking with book clubs. Contact the publisher to see if you can set up a phone or Skype chat.)
14. Have you read the author's other books? Can you discern a similarity—in theme, writing style—between them? Or are they completely different?

Author:

Lee, Yoon Ha, 1979-

Adult Fiction

Book Appeal Terms: Definition of Appeal Terms

Genre: Military science fiction; Science fiction; Space opera

Character: Flawed; Introspective

Storyline: Sweeping; World-building

Pace: Intensifying

Tone: Dramatic; Suspenseful

Writing Style: Compelling

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United States

American, Asian-American

Genre:

Science fiction

Military science fiction

Space opera

Character:

Flawed

Introspective

Storyline:

World-building

Sweeping

Pace:

Intensifying

Tone:

Suspenseful

Dramatic

Writing Style:

Compelling

Subject headings:

Imaginary empires
Space warfare
Women soldiers
Power (Social sciences)
Political intrigue
Trust
Traitors
Alliances
Life after death
Command of troops
Imaginary wars and battles

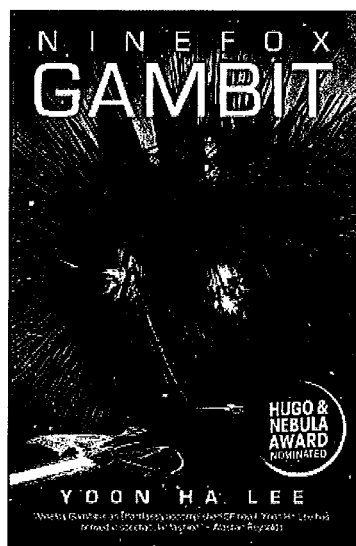
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Space

Credits:

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Popularity: ☆☆☆☆☆

Ninefox gambit (Jun 2016)

Author: Lee, Yoon Ha, 1979-

Adult Fiction



Series: Machineries of empire, 1

Description:

Given the opportunity to redeem herself for past crimes, Captain Kel Cheris is tasked with retaking the Fortress of Scattered Needles, a star fortress under the control of heretics, a mission that requires her to partner with an untrustworthy ally.

Book Appeal Terms: Definition of Appeal Terms

Genre: Military science fiction; Science fiction; Space opera

Character: Flawed; Introspective

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Pace: Intensifying

Tone: Dramatic; Suspenseful

Writing Style: Compelling

Persistent link to this record (Permalink):

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Database:

NovelList

Author Information:

Yoon Ha Lee

Publisher information:

New York: Solaris 2016.; 384 p.

Dewey Number:

813

Genre:

Military science fiction
Space opera
Science fiction

Character:

Introspective
Flawed

Storyline:

Sweeping
World-building

Pace:

Intensifying

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HEXARCHATE FACTION CHEAT SHEET

Because a couple people asked for it, here's a hexarchate faction cheat sheet! I'm sorry I didn't think to include one in *Ninefox Gambit* proper.

UPDATED: Solaris came out with a series of posts on the factions that include some new material, so I'll link those here as they come out: [High Faction Rahal](#), [Low Faction Nirai](#), [High Faction Andan](#), [Low Faction Vidona](#), [High Faction Shuos](#), [Low Faction Kel](#), and [Heretical Faction Liozh](#).

Rahal

High faction

Hexarch Rahal Iruja

Emblem: the scrywolf (also known as "execution wolf")

Motto: *many lenses, one mind*

Colors: gray and bronze

Faction ability: signifier scrying, which helps them in interrogations, but is not as good as actual mind-reading—think of it as slightly more reliable Tarot readings.

The Rahal are nominally the hexarchate's leaders, legislators, and judges, responsible for maintaining the calendar and its regulations. Despite this, their habitual asceticism means that they are one of the poorer factions. They also protect citizens who have no faction affiliation. Because local day-cycles on planets or moons requires calendrical corrections, they also snap up a certain percentage of the mathematicians.

What the Rahal think of the other factions:

- Nirai: Rahal and Nirai relations tend to be good due to the fact that both of them are invested in the mathematics of the state religion.
- Andan: Distressingly xenophilic and flexible in their worldview. However, their diplomats make it possible to deal with foreigners without falling to the inevitable corruption of their heretical ideas.
- Vidona: Nobody likes them, but the Rahal acknowledge the necessity of their work policing the hexarchate, and tend to accord them a certain grudging respect.
- Shuos: Unreliable, not least because of their habit of producing unstable geniuses. Their amorality is also problematic. Possibly one of the hexarchate's greatest liabilities as a faction.
- Kel: The Rahal regard the Kel largely as a blunt instrument with which to get the job done, and have no problems expending their lives to put down heresies. However, both factions tend to be conservative in outlook.

Nirai

Low faction

Hexarch Nirai Kujen / False Hexarch Nirai Faian

Emblem: the voidmoth

Motto: *every sky is full of stars*

Colors: black and silver

Faction ability: a Nirai always knows what the local time is, useful for detecting calendrical rot by comparing it to high calendar time. (The high calendar implies a privileged frame of reference, so yes, the magic system violates special relativity.)

The Nirai are the STEM faction, mostly focusing on applications. The faction as a whole tends to be apolitical, since they select for technical ability rather than ideology. Technologies that the Nirai have produced include the mothdrive, which permits FTL travel between star systems, and any number of Kel weapons.

What the Nirai think of the other factions:

- Rahal: Rigid and concerned with legal niceties. Despite the fact that both factions compete for mathematicians, they don't always get along. Most Nirai would prefer that the Rahal stay out of their way.
- Andan: Useful for funding research ventures, not of much interest otherwise.
- Vidona: Too similar to the Rahal in outlook, but they perform a necessary function in keeping the heretics subdued so that Nirai exotic technologies can function. The Nirai also maintain close ties with the medical branch of the Vidona.
- Shuos: Overly impressed with their own cleverness. However, the Shuos have an unquenchable thirst for fancy spy toys, which the Nirai are happy to provide.

- Kel: The Kel's ever-ravenous hunger for new weapons and better starships keeps the Nirai in business. The average Kel may not be all that intelligent, but it's nice doing business with them.

Andan

High faction

Hexarch Andan Shandal Yeng

Emblem: the kniferose

Motto: *petal-sweet, thorn-sharp*

Colors: blue and silver

Faction ability: enthrallment, or the ability to hypnotize and mentally dominate a social inferior in physical proximity. The strength of the effect diminishes with repeated use against a given target.

The Andan dominate culture and finance, and are usually the richest faction. They are also responsible for first contact, diplomacy with foreign powers, and, along with the Vidona, for assimilating heretics who are deemed capable of being transitioned to following the hexarchate's Doctrine. The Andan value beauty as a weapon, and are more liberal in their use of body-modding than most of the other factions for utilitarian reasons: to make an impression on others, including foreigners with different aesthetic standards.

What the Andan think of the other factions:

- Rahal: Too wrapped up in the letter of the law to adapt to circumstances as necessity dictates.
- Nirai: Easily manipulated and no threat.
- Vidona: An essential tool for maintaining social control, not least because their blunt methods contrast usefully with the Andan's more subtle ones.
- Shuos: Hated rivals, mainly because the two compete for influence in similar spheres of interest. The Andan frequently try to outmaneuver the Shuos, whether in business or the court of public opinion. They also claim that the Shuos were founded by a renegade Andan. (The Shuos claim the reverse.)
- Kel: A hammer in search of the nail, but even the Andan acknowledge the value of a military.

Vidona

Low faction

Hexarch Vidona Psa

Emblem: the stingray

Motto: *through blood we prevail*

Colors: green and bronze

Faction ability: deathtouch.

The Vidona enforce Doctrine in the hexarchate and punish or execute heretics on remembrance days. A few are doctors specializing in keeping heretics alive for torture. The Vidona are also

responsible for education up to the age of seventeen. Most of the rest of the hexarchate reviles them, and they tend to be more insular and conservative than the other factions.

What the Vidona think of the other factions:

- Rahal: The architects of the system. The Vidona have great respect for them.
- Nirai: The Vidona maintain close ties to the medical branch of the Nirai, although their emphases differ.
- Andan: The Andan's squabbling with the Shuos is borderline disloyal, and should not be tolerated to the extent that it is.
- Shuos: As above.
- Kel: The Vidona admire the Kel's loyalty and are sympathetic to their culture.

Shuos

High faction

Hexarch Shuos Mikodez

Emblem: the ninefox (also "eyefox")

Motto: *the more eyes the better*

Colors: red and gold

Faction ability: none. This was reportedly a deliberate decision on the part of the first Shuos heptarch...but no one knows for sure. People frequently wonder if the Shuos are lying about this, too.

The Shuos are strategists responsible for intelligence operations and are known for their cunning, amorality, and love of games. They would be more feared for their assassins and spies if not for their tendency toward extreme instability. Unlike the other factions, which have more or less orderly means of succession for their hexarchs, Shuos tradition is for a hexarch to claim the seat by assassinating their predecessor. A good hexarch is lucky to last a decade.

What the Shuos think of the other factions:

- Rahal: The Shuos tolerate the leadership of the Rahal, but only just, and frequently test Rahal authority.
- Nirai: Necessary, but frequently naive about the implications of their research.
- Andan: The Shuos hate the Andan with a passion. Not only are the Andan richer (the Shuos are usually juggling budget shortfalls), the general populace regards them more positively. Also, Andan specialties overlap with Shuos specialties, and the competitive Shuos find this infuriating.
- Vidona: A blunt instrument that is damaging the hexarchate in the long term.
- Kel: The Shuos work the most closely with the Kel, usually in a military context, although their view of the Kel is condescending: "Distract them with the guns so we can get the real work done."

Kel

Low faction

Hexarch Kel Tsoro / Kel Command hivemind

Emblem: the ashhawk (also “suicide hawk”)

Motto: *from every spark a fire*

Colors: black and gold

Faction ability: formation instinct (the emotional need to maintain military hierarchy and obey orders) and formation channeling (using geometrically based rituals to summon exotic effects, e.g. force shields and fire lances).

The Kel serve as the hexarchate’s military and specialize in kinetic operations. They are conservative, conformist, and hierarchical. While the Kel have their origins in an independent starfaring people in pre-heptarchate days, some of whose traditions survive to this day, the average Kel doesn’t think about this. These days the Kel are a volunteer army recruiting from anyone who can pass the entrance examinations.

What the Kel think of the other factions:

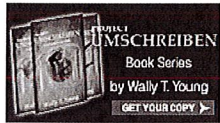
- Rahal: Kindred souls, who share their conservative mindset.
- Nirai: Strong ties due to Kel dependence on Nirai military innovations.
- Andan: The Kel despise the Andan, whom they see as suspect for their relations with foreign powers and cultural flexibility. The average Kel is strongly xenophobic and doesn’t see much difference between a foreigner and a heretic.
- Vidona: The Kel grudgingly acknowledge that the Vidona are necessary to preserve the hexarchate.
- Shuos: An ambivalent relationship: the Kel and Shuos often work together, but the Kel are never sure how far they can trust the Shuos, given their reputation for head games.

Since I am a tease, I will admit that my continuity bible also includes write-ups of the major characters and what they all think of each other, but I am not sharing on the grounds that it would spoil the entire trilogy!

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“WELCOME TO TRIUMPH BAND”

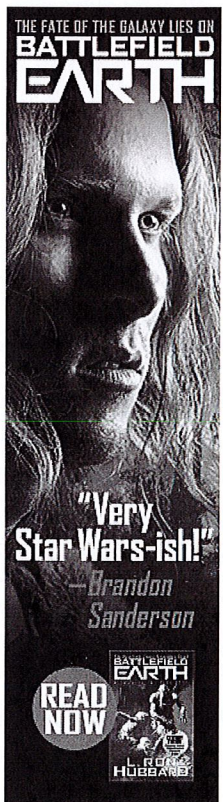
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Interview with Ninefox Gambit author Yoon Ha Lee

Jody Neil Ruth • December 15, 2016 • 0 Comment

'Starship Troopers meets Apocalypse Now – and they've put Kurtz in charge... Mind-blistering military space opera. An unmissable debut.' – Steven Baxter. We have talked to *Ninefox Gambit* author Yoon Ha Lee about the first book in his new series.

I'm biased but I loved *Ninefox Gambit*. It was the perfect blend of military sci-fi and psychological thriller to sate anyone's appetite. Do you have any military background at all? The procedures by both troops and military 'brass' are detailed enough to make it seem so!

Not really! My dad was a surgeon in the U.S. Army when I was a small child, so I have lived on two military bases (Ft. Leonard Wood in Missouri and Yongsan in South Korea). But I don't think I was old enough to absorb much—I have a distinct memory of a soldier bringing me in to my father's office at the hospital once and thinking that the soldier was as tall as the ceiling, that's how little I was.

I do like reading military history, though, and I like listening to the stories told by the grognards and folks with military backgrounds at my local game store. So I did try to do my homework!

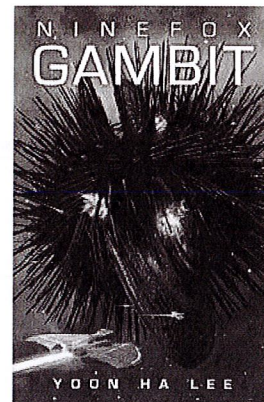
And – if you don't mind talking about it – what psychological/mental health background do you have? Anything in particular that relates to the Cheris-Jedao relationship? I have a background in working with/and experiencing mental health issues, and much of what you wrote resonated with my own personal demons and experience.

I have bipolar disorder and anxiety disorder, which I've been struggling with for years. I'm very used to the idea that my perceptions are distorted and perhaps not to be relied on, and I was able to draw on some of that for Cheris's paranoia in dealing with Jedao.

One of the things that informed Jedao's characterization was the notion that he's self-destructively playing a game both against the universe and against himself. Because of my long history of bipolar depression, I've struggled a lot with suicidal thoughts; I've been hospitalized 2.5 times for suicide attempts/ideation (the 0.5 was a day hospitalization, where you get to go home at night and check your email). It gets almost to a sort of game-playing against myself—trying to create checks and balances so that I can find some kind of release for the suicidal impulses without actually carrying through.

Would you be offended if I suggested *Ninefox* has a blend of Space Marines and Herbert's *Dune* at its core? Were either of these an influence?

Flattered rather! *Dune* I can answer straight off—I've heard a lot about it, but I actually bounced off it after the first 50 pages because I couldn't stand Herbert's prose. (Sorry! For what it's worth, my husband really liked *Dune*...) So if there's an influence, it's indirect, through things I've heard and other works I've read that have perhaps been inspired by it.



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Space marines, definitely. I enjoyed Robert Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* when I read it in high school, although I suspect Heinlein is one of those authors who I would find maddening now. And I'm not deeply familiar with the world lore, but Warhammer 40,000 is popular at my local game store, and I've played in a couple short Warhammer 40k adventures run by my friend Brent Morgan for a bunch of us when we meet up at Gencon. My real introduction to Warhammer 40,000 was not through the game itself but sideways, through a fanfic by Charles Bhepin, "Shinji and Warhammer 40k," which is a massive crossover between WH40k and an anime called Neon Genesis Evangelion. I learn about a lot of things through odd routes!

Did you map the solar system of your story? Complete with Footbreak, the Fortress of Needles, etc? ...can we see it?!

I had a vague scribbly map in a notebook, but unfortunately it was destroyed—I live in Baton Rouge and we were flooded out this August, so I lost all my paper notes. That being said, I managed to recreate a more extensive hexarchate map and have commissioned someone to do a proper rendering of it. It's not done yet, but I'm looking forward to it!

In the 'vermin' scene ('Are you afraid of creepy crawlies') how much of 'you' is in this book? And in Cheris? By that, I mean is the book at all about your own personal beliefs/fears? Obviously all writers are 'in' their books, but coupled with your trans-gendered status and (possible) fear of bugs, this book really feels like we're getting to see inside your head.

You got me, I'm a wimp about bugs. I used to kill bugs for my sister when we were both at Stanford (we overlapped one year when I was a grad student and she was an undergrad), and after I got married I decided that I was done killing my own bugs so now I make my husband or daughter do it for me.

But part of the inspiration for that scene was also a fabulous poem by Peter Wild called "Roaches," which you can find online if you Google for it. In one of my high school classes we each had to bring in our favorite poem. I forget what my pick was—probably A.E. Housman's "I to my perils"—but "Roaches" was a classmate's pick, and I have never forgotten it. It's now one of my favorites, too. That being said, I advise avoiding it if you are squeamish about bugs!

I drew on some of my own history to create Cheris. She's better at math than I am, though I do like math. I only have a B.A. in the subject, and in fact hated math until 9th grade Geometry, when we were introduced to proofs and suddenly instead of arbitrary memorization we had *reasons* for things being the way they were. Cheris is combination savant and "mathematician" (in a handwavy fantasy sense)—she was originally not a savant but one of my beta readers explained to me that this wasn't glamorous enough for a space opera so I caved on that point.

When Cheris talks about being a member of a minority group, and not speaking her mother tongue fluently anymore, that reflects my experience as a Korean-American. I was born in the USA but my parents are from South Korea, and my first language was actually Korean. I can vaguely get by, but I'm not really fluent in it anymore despite living in Korea for nine years; I have attended English-language schools all my life and for all intents and purposes my native tongue is English. But I regret that loss of connection to my heritage. We'll see that come up a little more in the sequel to *Ninefox Gambit*.

Jedao's interest in game design comes partly from my interest in the topic. I also thought it paired well with a manipulative character who sees people as chess pieces. I've written a couple IF (interactive fiction) games, and as part of my research I signed up for a speed game design workshop at Gencon one year, which was fantastic fun and very educational. I used to make terrible board games as a child, but back then I didn't know much about what goes into good game design. These days you can find all sorts of articles on the internet (if you're looking for a free course, I can recommend Ian Schreiber's Games Design Concepts: <https://gamedesignconcepts.wordpress.com/>) and textbooks.

The other thing that I tried to convey in the book was how terrible war is. I have never seen military service, so obviously what I know is all secondhand. But starting in high school I read up on My Lai and atrocities, and I kept wondering how such incidents could be prevented from happening. My interest in military sf came after reading Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*—and the character who interested me most was not Ender or Valentine or even Peter, but the instructor Graff. I wondered how a man responsible for training child soldiers could possibly live with himself—how desperate the straits must be.

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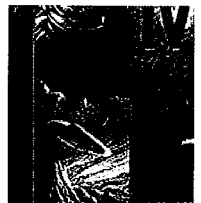
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I didn't grow up with war stories in the sense of soldiering, but I did grow up with stories about my family's experiences with the Korean War.

I'm sorry I didn't get to incorporate more of that—that's more of a civilian's perspective, and *Ninefox* was conceived as more of a soldiers' story. My mother's mother's family used to live up by the Manchurian border and fled south after the end of WWII; they had to evacuate Seoul during the Korean War. My mother was born during the war and my grandmother abandoned her by the side of the road because she already had two small children and she made the difficult decision that this was the best way for the family to survive. But another woman picked up the baby and brought her up to my grandmother and said, "You forgot this," and my grandmother didn't have the heart to abandon the baby another time. That woman, whose name I will never know, is the only reason my mother survived, and that my sister and I were able to be born. I think about things like that.

As for being transgendered, that obviously reflected itself in the dynamic between Jedao and Cheris—male mind sharing a female body—but I wasn't consciously aware of it while writing the book because I wasn't ready to look at the subject head-on. It wasn't until I'd finished writing the draft that I realized what I'd done. The mind is a funny thing sometimes. Jedao's over-the-top desperation has some of its roots in my own gender dysphoria.

While I'm at it, I don't condone mass murder! Jedao gets away with it because he's a fictional character—and even then, I created him to be the *antagonist*. In a sense, I think of Jedao as someone who wants to be a revolutionary but who doesn't have a lot of imagination. War is the world he knows, so war is the method he uses, even when it leads him to paraglide past the moral event horizon of things that people should never do.

My favourite part of *Ninefox*... was when Jedao was 'going mad' around Cheris in chapter 9. How much fun was this to write (if it was fun?!) after such a thoroughly regimented and military-esque series of chapters up until then?

It was a lot of fun! Writing Jedao was entertaining because of all the head games, if also exhausting at times. Anytime he had a line of dialogue, I had to be aware whether he was telling the truth, what the actual truth was, and what his purposes (usually more than one) were.

Is food something you are very passionate about? When you mention it in *Ninefox Gambit* it is always very detailed... and very mouth-watering!

If someone else is cooking it, yes! I have a mixed relationship with food. I'm perfectly happy to get by on sandwiches and I grew up eating Spam and Lipton tea from the Commissary. It always cracks me up when people think I'm some kind of tea connoisseur because I'm Korean because, seriously, my introduction to tea was Lipton! My parents and their families didn't really do fancy teas at all; I'm not even sure if it's a Korean thing or not, or whether maybe other families do.

I hate cooking, but I like eating food from different cuisines and cultures, and I get especially homesick for Korean food and my mother's cooking. I live in Baton Rouge and the nearest Korean restaurant that I'm aware of is an hour out, practically in New Orleans. And I don't know about you, but Cajun/Creole food is fabulous—I refuse to go to New Orleans to eat *Korean*, it just seems wrong!

When can we expect the sequel to your '*Machineries of Empire*' trilogy?

The sequel, *Raven Stratagem*, has already been turned in, so now it's up to Solaris! My guess is that it'll be out in the summer of 2017. I'm currently at work on the third book, *Revenant Gun*.

Thank you for your time and your words. Burn brightly, Yoon.

Thank you for having me!

Interview by Jody Neil Ruth – SFFWorld.com © 2016

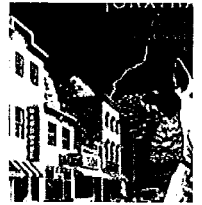
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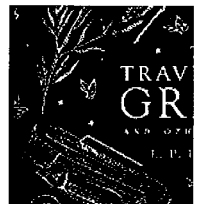
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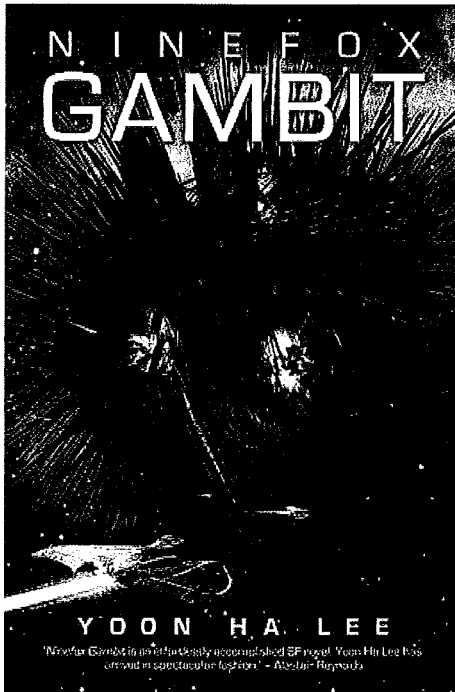


REVIEW BOOK REVIEWS

Beautifully Alien 'Ninefox Gambit' Mixes Math And Magic

June 25, 2016 · 7:00 AM ET

JASON SHEEHAN



Ninefox Gambit

by Yoon Ha Lee

Paperback, 317 pages

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I like the cold drop. The hard plunge. The fast and reckless descent into alienness that can only be pulled off by a world-builder who inhabits their make-believe universe so completely that a first page entry, *mise en scene*, reads as natural and as jarring as waking up in someone else's body, upon a shore so distant and strange that no map for it yet exists.

"At Kel Academy, an instructor had explained to Cheris's class that the threshold winnower was a weapon of last resort, and not just for its notorious connotations. Said instructor had once witnessed a winnower in use. The detail that stuck in Cheris's head wasn't the part where every door in the besieged city exhaled radiation that baked the inhabitants dead. It wasn't the weapon's governing equations, or even the instructor's left eye, damaged during the attack, from which ghostlight glimmered.

"What Cheris remembered most was the instructor's aside: that returning to corpses that were only corpses, rather than radiation gates contorted against black-blasted walls and glassy rubble, eyes ruptured open, was one of the best moments of her life."

That's how Yoon Ha Lee's novel, *Ninefox Gambit*, opens. All death and horror and words that are slippery — not meaning precisely to us what they do to the characters in whose mouths and minds they live.

And nothing gets easier from there. Lee's is a universe that operates under different laws than does ours, where science and technology are based not around the manipulation of atoms (necessarily), but the interface of numbers and observance of a calendar, where power derives from the order given unto things by acceptance and belief in them.

So how much can you screw with a world before you take it completely to pieces? How much fundamental similarity to our own must an author's imaginary place possess in order to hang together for a reader? With *Ninefox*, Lee has turned this elementary concern into a game of chicken he plays with himself, pushing hard to see how many of the essential, structural underpinnings of the universe can be removed before the fabric of stars unravels. And then twisting himself in the opposite direction, asking (and answering) how, in a place so alien, can you root the experience in something that gives it the roundness of an internal humanity?

Here's the plot, presented as simply as I can make it: In the Fortress of Scattered Needles, a "calendrical rot" has begun altering the fabric of reality. It is the result of heretical forces allied against this world's rulers, and someone is going to have to go in there and purge the non-conformist thought from the system. Two someones, actually. A living soldier named Cheris with an unlikely facility for mathematics, and Jedao, the centuries-old ghost of a brilliant general and known mass-murderer who lives in her shadow and in her head.

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I know, right? But stick with me here a minute, because here's where it gets cool.

In *Ninefox*, Lee is playing with the idea of consensus reality — of a techno-political system that relies on rigid belief in order to function. Which, more specifically, requires near-religious (actually *super*-religious) adherence to a calendar: A numerical system which can be manipulated to alter reality.

It is technology so dissimilar to our own that it seems like magic; math transmuted into religion. It's overwhelming and jarringly bizarre, this world where light storms lash the land and a change in battlefield formation can create shields or tornadoes or magical laser rays that melt people's faces off. But it is also beautiful, vast and rooted in the real by Lee's balanced focus on those things that are more common than alien: On shared meals and loss and dreams and regret. On the relationships between characters existing in this universe (*their* universe, where none of this is strange at all), and the clashes between systems of belief.

And it is precisely the unforgiving immersion in Lee's fully realized world of high science, faith and numerology (presented with no hand-holding, no info-dump, only context) that makes the smaller, character-driven moments pay. Which makes Cheris's observation of a tree in flower, Jedao's clipped remembrances of his family's shame, or the two of them watching soap operas together in a quiet moment before war gleam brighter in their recognizable humanity.

There is, of course, battle. This is a war story after all, and it proceeds with a war story's plodding inevitability. Fleets assemble, ships clash, soldiers die. It is also a novel of games. Of betrayals within betrayals. Rather than aping the generic clipped-and-grim style so often employed by other, less talented writers, Lee leans in the other direction, finding a sumptuous beauty in physical moments and complexity in thought and motivation.

Ninefox is a book with math in its heart, but also one which understands that even numbers can lie. That it's what you *see* in the numbers that matters most. And that something — maybe all things — begun with the best, truest of intentions can go terribly wrong once the gears of reality begin to churn.

"I'll be glad to get underway," Cheris said.

"Everyone says that," Jedao said, "but then the killing begins."

Jason Sheehan is an ex-chef, a former restaurant critic and the current food editor of Philadelphia magazine. But when no one is looking, he spends his time writing books about spaceships, aliens, giant robots and ray guns. Tales From the Radiation Age is his latest book.

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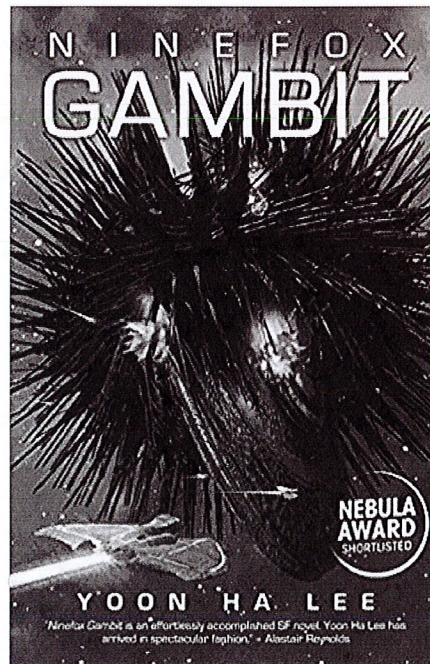
Epic Space Battles, Deadly Equations: An Interview with Yoon Ha Lee, Author of “NineFox Gambit” and “Raven Strategem”

08/29/2017 04:41 pm ET | Updated Aug 29, 2017

A meeting of brilliant minds and their battle strategies—in tandem, and against each other—lie at the heart of *Ninefox Gambit*, the Locus Award-winning debut novel of Yoon Ha Lee. When Captain Kel Cheris, a soldier and brilliant mathematician, decides to link her fate with a long-dead general to win against overwhelming odds, she faces not only a monstrous war. There is also the fact that her ally, General Jedao, is a traitor.

An adrenaline-packed tale of space battles and carnage, *Ninefox Gambit* is also intricate with intrigue, shot through with glittering humor, and raw with emotional intensity. Lee explores a multiplicity of questions and dilemmas with a light touch, never preaching or heavy-handed. Scenes of devastation are all the more powerful for their restraint, and the sly wit simply delightful. The gut-punch of a conclusion resonates on multiple levels—intellectual and emotional—and signifies a thrilling emergent talent in science fiction.

I caught up with Yoon Ha Lee to talk about the series, which continues with *Raven Strategem* and *Revenant Gun*.



Your book is noteworthy for dropping the reader in the middle of an unfamiliar world order without explanation and trusting them to be smart. What are your thoughts about this approach?

A couple things—first, sometimes I really enjoy books that do it this way, which is why I wanted to give it a try. One of my favorite examples in written sf is C.J. Cherryh's Faded Sun books, where we learn about alien (mri) culture as we go, and there's a lot of terminology whose rules you can figure out if you pay attention—it's not explained explicitly.

The other thing is that I tried to give the reader cues in the names themselves. *Ninefox Gambit* has a one-time mention of something called a "weather-eater"—I don't explicitly explain what this does, but it's mentioned in the context of, well, local weather conditions, and you can probably guess that it has something to do with artificially controlling weather. I didn't feel the need to waste words spelling that out. That was my policy throughout. Another example is the amputation gun. It has that name, and when it shows up, people literally suffer amputations when it's fired. Saying anything more would be redundant—it would be like explaining that a fantasy fireball is a ball of fire.

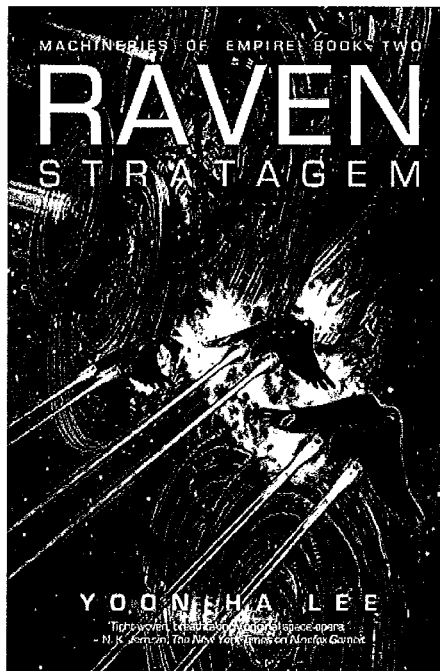
The incredibly compelling character of Jedao seems to me to be at the heart of the novel. Does that sound fair to say?

Yes, that's pretty accurate. Jedao was the first character I came up with, and the one who ended up being the driving force. When I was brainstorming for the novel, I wanted to create a traitor figure who used his betrayal as a massive manipulative gamble. I was inspired by the TV Tropes pages on Chessmasters, but I missed the mark—Jedao's game isn't chess, it's poker. Cheris came about as a complement, sort of a yin-yang dynamic—in a novel where the main interpersonal conflict is a battle of wits, I felt it would be really dull to have two scheming, manipulative characters going up against each other, so Cheris is pretty much Jedao's opposite in almost every way.

Jedao ends up being the central figure of the trilogy, but Cheris definitely has contributions to make. I'll leave it at that!

The colorful, personality-driven hexarchate structure with its devoted Kels, scheming Shuos, and luxurious Andan feels so fully realized. How did this world take shape?

The short version is that once upon a time I was writing a space opera alternate universe fanfic of the samurai fantasy roleplaying game and collectible card game Legend of the Five Rings. I had to scupper that when I joined the official Story Team for L5R for a year, but I still wanted to write space opera. After I left, I decided to take the plunge. There are some nods to the world of L5R, especially the factions. I saw how people really loved to sort themselves into Clans and stayed loyal to them (like how people sort themselves into Hogwarts Houses, same phenomenon) and I thought it would work well with a dystopian police state.



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Without getting into spoilers, Ninefox raises fascinating questions about AI and ethics, such as have been explored in popular media like Battlestar Galactica, Westworld, and many more. I'm interested in your angle on that conversation.

I regret that I haven't seen Westworld and never finished Battlestar Galactica, although I was liking it! (I am behind on TV as well as books as well as...you get the idea.) My probably unpopular stance on AI is that creating actual sentient artificial intelligence and then enslaving it is morally wrong. I'm not sure this is a practical issue; I can't remember which AI/computer scientist made this observation but someone said that there's no reason for computers to inherently *want* to conquer the world unless we program it into them, in which case we have other problems.

It's not explicitly stated, but the servitors are the slave underclass of the hexarchate. They do the scut work. If they all swanned off somewhere or did a strike, the hexarchate's economy would collapse.

The servitors (sentient robots) do have a role to play in *Raven Strategem*, and we'll get a servitor POV character in the third book, *Revenant Gun*.

Ninefox feels like a cross between military SF and Greek tragedy, especially given the intensity of its moral dilemmas and central relationship. What is some of the literature that has inspired you?

I do not agree with his political views, but when I was in high school, I read Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*, and it was the book that convinced me to switch from writing high fantasy to military-flavored sf (or science fantasy, as the case may be). Specifically, I was interested in military ethics, and I wanted to know why Ender's instructors weren't court-martialed.

If you count a computer roleplaying game as literature, there's also *Planescape: Torment*, which introduced me to how consensus reality can play out in worldbuilding, and has a fabulously realized plot centered around an amnesiac immortal and the question, "What can change the nature of a man?"

And finally, while I don't actually recommend these books, there's Jack L. Chalker's *Soul Rider* series. The caveat is that there are a lot of magical body transformations, including really skeevey objectifying portrayals of people being turned into gorgeous submissive bimbos, but along with the hinky sex-related stuff are some interesting magical tactics and an obsessive interest in historical processes and how they relate to the rise and fall of tyranny.

What's next for you?

I'm currently working on *Dragon Pearl*, a middle grade space opera based on Korean mythology! I figured when I pitched it that Korean mythology space opera was an underserved niche. I was right. I would have been happy to be wrong, though! My heroine is a fox girl who goes hunting for her brother, whose desertion may be connected to the reappearance of the *Dragon Pearl*, an artifact that can terraform worlds.

After that, I'll be working on a collection of short stories set in the world of *Ninefox Gambit*. I'm hoping to include a mini-gamebook in which YOU can play Jedao flailing around meeting his very first anchor!



Yoon Ha Lee's first novel, *Ninefox Gambit*, won the Locus Award for Best First Novel and was shortlisted for the Hugo, Nebula, and Clarke Awards. His short fiction has appeared in [Tor.com](#), *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Lightspeed Magazine*, *Clarkesworld Magazine*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, and other venues. He lives in Louisiana with his family and an extremely lazy cat, and has not yet been eaten by gators.

*

Ilana Teitelbaum has written about books for the *Globe and Mail*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Salon*, and other places. Her epic fantasy debut, *Last Song Before Night*, was released by Tor/Macmillan in 2015 under the pen name Ilana C. Myer. The sequel, *Fire Dance*, is forthcoming in 2018.

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