

REVIEW: Hidden Empire & A Forest of Stars by Kevin J Anderson

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Hidden Empire (Saga of Seven Suns #1) – Kevin J Anderson

Simon & Schuster Pocket Books, 2005

662 pages

RRP: AU\$18.95

ISBN: 978-0-7434-3065-4

A Forest of Stars (Saga of Seven Suns #2) – Kevin J. Anderson

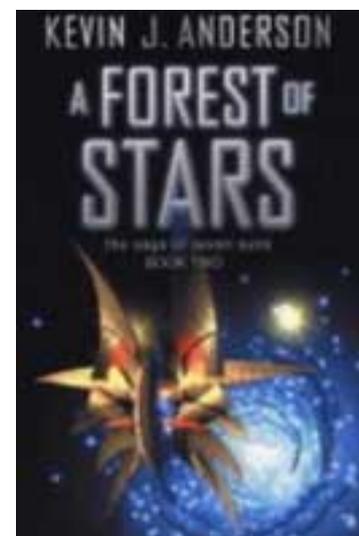
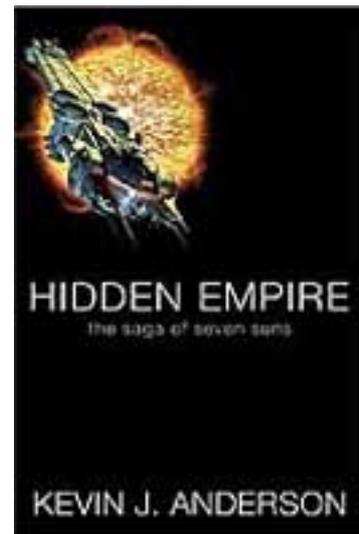
Simon & Schuster Pocket Books, 2004

696 pages

RRP: AU\$19.95

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Reviewed by Lev Lafayette



To say the least, Kevin J. Anderson is an extremely prolific author. With dozens of published novels, his tales include works for *Star Wars*, *Dune*, *The X-Files* and even a co-authored piece with L. Ron Hubbard. His biggest claim to fame to date was *The X-Files* novel *Ground Zero*, which was voted Best SF Novel of the Year by SFX Magazine. He has also written several novels with original settings, including the *Gamearth* Trilogy. *The Saga of the Seven Suns* series is perhaps his most ambitious work to date, spanning seven novels, each several hundred pages long, along with a graphic novel prequel. To date, *The Saga of the Seven Suns* consists of *Veiled Alliances* (prequel, 2004), *Hidden Empire* (2002), *A Forest of Stars* (2003), *Horizon Suns* (2005), *Of Fire and Night* (2006), *Metal Swarm* (2007) and *The Ashes of Worlds* (2008). This review covers the first two novels which have been recently re-released by Simon and Schuster under the Pocket Books imprint.

The first thing that has to be said is that it's space opera. Anderson follows the much-used formula to the letter and any reader of science fiction of the last sixty years or so will recognise the strict adherence to the conventions. Humanity, essentially unchanged both physically and culturally, is largely centred on the Terran Hanseatic League, who rule with a monarchy, necessitated, one presumes, by the prevalence of slower-than-light travel and communications. Because space opera demands that the only political structure that can form under such conditions is a monarchy, even if this is just an ineffectual titular position, a public relations arm for state-regulated bureaucratic capitalism. On the fringes are the wild and independent and free-market Roamers, who make a good living selling etki fuel from gas giants. Also on the vaguely humanoid level are the Ildirans, an ancient declining starfaring people, rigid and conservative, who are, incidentally, an absolute monarchy. Amazingly, they've also somehow managed to delete nearly all records of a serious interstellar war from their past. Throw into the mix some telepathic green-skinned priests (the Therons) who talk to trees, the remains of an absent insectoid alien civilisation (the Klikiss) and robots faithfully modelled on Asimov's laws and the result is a path so well-trod that one struggles to find any evidence of the wilds of imagination whatsoever.

Despite the length of the two novels plot development is rather slight at best. Much effort is taken in establishing the setting and the general orientation of more than a dozen major protagonists. There are of course a couple of major plot incidents as the story ambles along, however the real excitement doesn't begin until the appearance of the Hydrogues, an apparently genocidal alien force with vastly superior technology who launch devastating attacks on both the Hanseatic League, the Roamers, the Ildirans and anyone else within range of their alien blue rays. All a terrible mistake, mind, but the wheels are in motion and the alien ultimatum brings the League, the Roamers and the Ildiran Empire to a stand-still.

The second novel, set five years after Earth's humiliating defeat, the Hydrogues largely fall into the background although it is discovered the worldforest trees are their ancient enemy. Much of the novel is initially taken up with the results of a secret camp established by the Ildirans who cross-breed with humans with telepathic abilities in an secret attempt to shore up their species. Yes, that's right – a rape camp. The psychological effects of such an institution on the individual characters are insufficiently dealt with. Even more oddly, the second novel includes political marriages of convenience between the Hanseatics and the Therons. If there was the possibility of cleverness I would suggest that the juxtaposition was possibly a crypto-feminist statement, however the arranged marriage becomes a romantic one as well.

As suggested, characterisation and development is likewise relatively underdeveloped, although just enough to avoid accusations of total flatness and one-dimensionality. There are some memorable personages, such as the

no-nonsense and scheming Mage-Imperator of the Ildrians, his political and psychological equivalent on the Hanseatic League, the duty-bound Chairman Basil Wencelas, the plain humanity of King Peter, the rugged Roamer fighter pilot Tasia Tamblyn, and even (while they were alive) the xeno-archaeologists Margaret and Louis Colicos, but overall the characters are largely forgettable. Needless to say, the Hydrogues are presented as utterly unemotional, utterly demanding and robotic.

Anderson's writing style in the novels is extremely light and inoffensive, designed to be read with ease and speed. Paragraphs and chapters are short and descriptive and extremely temporal concentrating on immediate single scenes. There are 115 chapters in the first book from 662 pages and 135 in the second from 696 pages. The simple arithmetic elucidates the reading phenomenology; these are not books which one can say are particularly demanding of the reader's attention or focus. Despite their size, a competent reader will find themselves setting new personal records of pages per hour without losing track of the plot.

It is difficult to find reasons to strongly recommend the novels of *The Saga of the Seven Suns*, as they lack the aesthetic merits that encourage an involved and interested reader. Whilst there is nothing terribly wrong about the substance or the style, it is somewhat below average in both these respects. The plot, setting and characterisation are quite hackneyed and the style is sufficiently fluffy that whilst a moderately dim ten-year old will have no problems, a moderately bright thirteen-year old will probably become bored. For even if one enjoys the occasional taste of white bread, after some thirteen hundred pages of it one can feel rather tired and even slightly nauseous.