Pirate Sun: Book Three of Virga by Karl Schroeder

Return to Virga, a bubble universe artificially separated from our own future universe, and the setting of Sun of Suns and Queen of Candesce.

Chaison Fanning, the admiral of a fleet of warships, has been captured and imprisoned by his enemies, but is suddenly rescued and set free. He flees through the sky to his home city to confront the ruler who betrayed him. And perhaps even to regain his lovely, powerful, and subversive wife, Venera, who he has not seen since she fled with the key to the artificial sun at the center of Virga, Candesce.

Schroeder sets a whole new standard for hard SF space opera.

My Personal Review:
Over the years, many writers have featured sword fights in space. Some have even featured pirates ships, pre-industrial cities, and so on. But typically, this involves either ignoring the illogic of the situation or hand-waving about levels of shield, etc. Karl Schroeder took a third path, one with an explanation that makes sense. Virga is a planet-size balloon in space. Its filled with air, and various nations and cities float within. The only gravity is produced by rotation. Travel between worlds can be by wooden ship or bicycles of sorts (or motor bike). And technology is kept at a pre-electronics level by a field generated by the central sun, Candesce. Virga took this step at its creation to keep our artificial nature, the AI and nanotechnology swarm that is transforming the rest of inhabited space into an ever-changing virtual reality.

In the first book of the series, Sun of Suns, Admiral Chaison Fanning and his wife Venera (brilliant and often ruthless). They captured the key to Candesce, which enabled them to temporarily shut down the suppression field and thus use radar in a military action. The second book followed Venera as she fled the aftermath. The latest book, Pirate Sun, follows Chaison.
As the novel begins, Chaison is a prisoner of the rival nation of Falcon Formation, whose fleet he had severely damaged in his radar-enabled attack. Someone breaks Chaison out of the prison, and, with two companions who are also freed, and with a young woman, Antae Argyre, who seems to be helping him to escape, Chaison tries to make his way home.

The book is filled with wonders: a flood in low/zero gravity, two cities literally going to war, a space battle involving wooden ships and a free-fall city. It reminds me in parts of Jack Vance, with its brilliant inventiveness and rich societies.

But Schroeder also has a talent for characterization, and Chaison and Venera Fanning are a brilliantly drawn, interesting, and likeable pair of characters. Part of what makes them this is that they grow as the series goes on. In the first book, Venera is ruthless and not very likeable. The second books is not only the story of how she escapes and re-establishes herself but one of her own growth as a person. Likewise, Chaison grows over the course of the novels.

Schroeder has become one of our best current SF writers. Pirate Sun should be on the Hugo ballot next year.

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