



The Collapsium

Wil McCarthy

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In this stunningly original tale, acclaimed author Wil McCarthy imagines a wondrous future in which the secrets of matter have been unlocked and death itself is but a memory. But it is also a future imperiled by a bitter rivalry between two brilliant scientists--one perhaps the greatest genius in the history of humankind; the other, its greatest monster.

The Collapsium

In a world of awesome technology, the deadly substance called collapsium has given humans all the powers and caprices--including immortality--of the gods they once worshiped. Composed of miniature black holes, collapsium allows the instantaneous transmission of information and matter--as well as humans--throughout the solar system. But while its reclusive inventor, Bruno de Towaji, next dreams of probing the farthest reaches of spacetime, Marlon Sykes, his ambitious rival in science--and in love--has built an awesome telecommunications network by constructing a ring of collapsium around the sun. It appears Sykes may be the victor--until a ruthless saboteur attacks the ring and sends it falling toward the sun. Now the two scientists must put aside personal animosity to prevent the destruction of the solar system--and every living thing within it.

The Collapsium Details

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Author : Wil McCarthy

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From Reader Review The Collapsium for online ebook

Mike says

This book took some getting used to. It reminded me of John C. Wright's The Golden Age trilogy. I think it was partly the style and partly that it was set in the "far" future where mankind hasn't traveled beyond the solar system.

The book is written in 3 parts and it seemed to me like they were originally 3 separate stories combined into a novel. At the start of parts 2 and 3 there was a recap of the previous part. Not that that's a bad thing, but some editing to remove this may have helped.

I found I had difficulty getting into the book, by the time I reached the third part (which is over half the book), I was off and running and it didn't take long to finish.

The Collapsium is about 400 pages long but the last 40 or so pages are appendices so if you like the type of book where there are lots of extras then this has some extra gems, but I would rather it's all in the story than having to keep referencing the back of the book.

Overall I liked it, however if I had been able to get into it sooner I would have liked it more. I'm going to read The Wellstone soon so I hope that having read this I will get into it quicker.

Ryan says

A lot of science fiction literature takes a somewhat negative view of scientific progress, 'cautionary tales' that point out the problems with scientific inquiry. I enjoy a lot of stories like that, but, when that type of story becomes too dominant within the genre, you end up with a very pessimistic view of things - I once heard an author refer to Michael Crichton's entire publishing history as "Here's a great scientific idea - AND HERE'S HOW IT WILL KILL US ALL."

Fortunately, there are also books like The Collapsium, which take the view that the ultimate problem isn't science; if anything, it's people, who are going to be the ones to use science to evil ends. Fortunately for us, people are also the solution to all of our problems, because they're capable of incalculable acts of greatness and determination. Hanging between the two is the act of being human, the definition of which has been a driving force throughout all artistic endeavours since the dawn of humanity.

This was my first exposure to McCarthy's writing style, and I fell in love with it right away. At first it seems kind of flat and workmanlike, but then he has these brilliant little moments of wonderfully crafted literature in the middle of it, like the stars themselves punctuating the vacuum of space. The more I get into it, though, the more I realized that it isn't flat at all, but that there's a lot more subtlety going throughout it. I found myself rereading several passages mid-paragraph to make sure I got all of the nuance within it.

I enjoyed this book so much that I feel kind of bad that I only got it out of the library; I'll have to get a copy for my bookshelf some day.

Juan Arellano says

Ciencia ficción hard envuelta en un ropaje fantasioso, no fantasía de guerreros y magia, si no la de los cuentos de hadas. La fórmula funciona, no al 100% pero funciona. Pero por ejemplo a pesar que las explicaciones de los elementos más hard han sido sacadas a un apéndice, sigue habiendo partes sobre física gravitacional y cuántica bastante densas. No que me moleste, pero no se si será digerible para todo tipo de lector.

En cuanto a la historia propiamente dicha, pues las 3 partes en q se divide la historia son un poco autoconclusivas en si mismas, lo q le quita (ligeramente) continuidad a la lectura. Pero bueno, me gustó el concepto y la parte hard, lo encontré bastante lejos de los ya reiterativos libros sobre naves espaciales con "salto warp" y viajes temporales del tipo q no explican mucho cómo realmente se producirían. Claro que acá el avance tecnológico es tan diferente de lo q conocemos que más parece magia q otra cosa.

Shhhhh Ahhhhh says

Fantastic sci fi. Really high quality work. I didn't see any of it coming from beginning all the way to the end. Fantastic use of unreliable narrator and really masterful melding of what I view as archetypes in different genres (the bumbling genius, the problem-solving sleuth, the reluctant hero all rolled into one). I will happily read every other book in this series.

nathaniel says

A lot of ideas, but they are only partially explored. And the ideas to not make up for the bad structure, almost non-existent characters, and weak plot.

Dan says

Barely 5 stars, and I can't think of anyone I'd recommend this to. It had just the right amount of faux, plausible-ish science for this faux, wannabe theoretical physicist. I enjoyed the appendices and the end notes. A few times characters devolved into monologues exploring different ideas (e.g. love in the face of immortality), which usually seems like bad writing, but here I liked the explorations so didn't mind so much. The characters and plot and big ideas almost read more like a comic book than a novel. Just a really fun read for me, even if it might not be a "good book", whatever that means. (book 1 was hard to get through, books 2 and 3 much more engaging)

Andreas says

Humanity has discovered Collapsium and Wellstone, substances that have made possible immensely powerful computers, teleportation and even immortality. "Faxes" allow the creation of any conceivable thing, from food to servitor robots to spaceship components. "Fax gates" allow teleportation and even duplication of people. The inventor of said substances, Bruno de Tovaji, is now living in self-imposed exile

on his own asteroid in the Oort Cloud. Here he conducts experiments aimed at “seeing” the end of time. One day he receives a visitor, the Queen of the Solar System, who is also his former lover. Apparently there is trouble in paradise. A grandiose ring around the sun, aimed at reducing communication lag among disparate locations, is under construction. But it is slowly falling into the sun. This starts a long series of adventures aimed at putting an end to what turns out to be the scheming of a mad saboteur.

I had high hopes for this book after the first fifty or a hundred pages. Interesting universe, grand designs, all the stuff you could find in a good Larry Niven yarn. Unfortunately it all became very tedious as the story went on. And on. And on. I kept waiting for the really interesting stuff to start but it was all a bit petty and small. Yawn.

This is hard science fiction. Very hard. The science content is all in there. And yet I often felt as if the author was plucking solutions to his problems out of thin air. One of the basic principles of science fiction is that author must stay within constraints that he creates within his universe. Unfortunately, McCarthy keeps coming up with new ideas that neatly solved the posed problems. McCarthy also completely misses the opportunity to explain his society or give a decent guided tour of something apart from deep space structures. What is London like nowadays anyway? Surely a page or two exploring these things would have served the story well, and made it a bit less sterile. And that’s the main gripe I have with this book. It is all a bit sterile and bland. Mankind’s achievements are falling apart around him and de Towaji is pondering his love life. Seriously...

<http://www.books.rosboch.net/?p=952>

Chak says

I loved this book for many reasons. The plot was strong (didn't seem to be going anywhere at first, but my patience was rewarded), the science was "hard" (I love hard scif, especially with explanatory appendices, glossaries, equations and backstory, as this one had!), and the antagonist was particularly interesting. In addition, McCarthy could have gone down some gratuitous paths when the book made a very, very dark turn about half way through, but he chose not to be gratuitous, and that really made me love the book, and it kept the story fresh. I don't usually write re-caps of books in my reviews because there's one right on the book's page, AND almost every other reviewer usually re-caps, but I must say that I love referring to this book as a book about "black hole-facilitated faster-than-light telecomm." Because effectively, that's what it is, and what all of that could actually mean to a society.

My husband found book 4 of this series on a 25¢ shelf at The Strand in Manhattan and picked it out for me based on the cover alone. So glad he judged the book by its cover! After reading some reviews of the series, I picked up books 1 and 2. *Collapsium* is the first book in the *Queendom of Sol* books, and now that I've read books 1 and 2, I can't wait to read the rest!

J.R. Barker says

The first half was a bit of a merry go-round of a story. It seemed to go round in circles going nowhere.

Problem occurs, help sought, problem fixed.

The problem- the Collapsium, a highly dangerous project that will put a ring of crystals, composed of tiny

black holes, around the sun that would increase the efficiency of transferring data and people.

The Collapsium comes into danger of falling into the sun a handful of times, and seems to be fixed by ideas that come from the brain of one Bruno de Towaji.

Sounds exciting, but it's not. He fixes it largely by staring into space, grumbling a bit, making a fool of himself at parties, and then coming up with a brilliant this'll fix it speech before disappearing off to his own little planet to work.

That's the first half of the book, poss more.

If you can get beyond that that's where things get good.

The Collapsium's problems are not an accident at all, but an act of malicious intent, but who could possibly benefit from destroying the Queendom and everything in it?

Well, those would be called spoilers.

There are some intriguing little concepts in this book, such as the fax machine, that can make anything you want, from food to clothes, and as an added benefit it can transport you to other fax machines across the Queendom. Not only this but you can clone yourself and program those clones, or even save copies. Thus death has been eradicated.

If I were judging this book on the first half I'd give it a two, maybe a three, cups of tea.

Taking the second half into account I'd give it a 4, which is cemented in place by the list of terms and descriptions of how plausible each of the seemingly impossible sounding technologies actually are.

There were a few interesting characters, and you get to see a hear LOT about the high society, but the everyday is only vaguely mentioned here and there. I wonder what a world of immortals would be like. Alas, you never find out.

Roddy Williams says

'In the eighth decade of the Queendom of Sol, three things form the backbone of civilisation:

WELLSTONE: programmable matter of almost magical properties

COLLAPSIUM: a deadly crystal composed of miniature black holes, indispensable for the transmission of matter and information through the solar system.

And...

RIVALRY: a bitter competition between Her Majesty's two most brilliant scientists. It is a rivalry that will threaten everything.

Combining rigorous hard science with the lyrical beauty of Michael Moorcock's Dancer's at the End of Time novels, Wil McCarthy takes us into a mythical realm of physics, court intrigue and stellar catastrophe.'

Blurb from the Gollancz 2001 paperback edition.

Wil McCarthy's stylish and baroque tale of laconic scientist Bruno de Towaji is both original and refreshing, set in a Solar System where Tamra, immortal Queen of Tonga has been elevated (due to – it would appear – popular demand) to the position of Queen of the Solar System, attended by a court of Declarants and a royal guard of robots.

This novel could also be considered as the 21st Century version of Gernsback's 'Ralph 124C 41+' since it features the most brilliant scientist in society as the hero, a dastardly foe, women to be rescued and problems to be solved by power of the scientific mind.

Bruno is the inventor of Collapsium, a material constructed of interlocked neutron sized black holes. It is a substance which has many varied uses, the royalties from which have made him inestimably rich.

Because of the dangerous nature of his further experiments, Bruno has been 'banished' to an tiny artificial world in the Outer System which orbits a just-as-artificial miniature sun. One day his solitude is interrupted by the arrival of the Queen who demands that he return to court to work on a scientific problem. A rival of Bruno's, Marlon Sykes, has begun the construction of a Ringworld-style band of Collapsium around the Sun, a construction which will vastly increase the speed of human and data transmission across the system. The partly constructed ring however, has lost its position and is beginning to fall into the Sun. It goes without saying that the consequences of millions of tiny black holes falling into the Sun would be disastrous.

It is up to Bruno to find a solution and save the Solar System from Stellar collapse.

The joy of this book is both in its preposterously believable neo-Elizabethan social structure and the way McCarthy seamlessly welds it to the complex scientific theories around which the substance of Collapsium is based. It is also laced with a dry wit and a degree of characterisation absent from the work of many of McCarthy's contemporaries.

Bruno travels from outrageous setting to outrageous setting – a banquet in a domed enclave atop a mountain on a partly transformed Venus; Marlon's cylindrical space-habitat whose inner surface is dotted with Athenian architecture, and there is the Collapsiter Ring itself. These journeys are achieved by the use of the Fax, essentially a matter-transmitting device which destroys the original and reassembles a duplicate at the destination.

With the fax of course, one can make copies of oneself in order to work on several projects at once, and later conflate the copies back into one individual, complete with the memories of all the copies.

It's a fascinating notion and one which McCarthy explores but perhaps doesn't exploit as much as he could have, although the basic concept is important to the plot.

Having stabilised the Collapsiter, Bruno is called back again when the Ring is sabotaged, following which copies of Marlon Sykes are murdered at their various stations along its circumference. A solution to the crisis and the identity of the apparent saboteur are discovered, but four years later Bruno is visited by a dishevelled and psychologically damaged copy of himself who has been imprisoned and tortured for years by the real saboteur, Marlon Sykes. Once again, Bruno is called upon to save the Solar System from destruction. McCarthy's retro writing style of course helps to add a certain verisimilitude to the baroque nature of the Queendom's social structure which, in other hands, might appear a trifle ludicrous but here seems perversely a natural and inevitable political development. It has hints of Moorcock, of PG Wodehouse and of Gernsback but is nonetheless a unique voice.

Woodge says

A few weeks ago I was flipping through the New York Times Book Review when I came across a brief, favorable review for this science fiction tale. This one was pretty wild too. The author is a former rocket scientist who now works in the field of commercial robotics so the science within *The Collapsium* is both informed and a little dizzying. But you don't need to be a rocket scientist to enjoy this book (or even a super genius like me). The hero of the story is the brilliant scientist Bruno de Towaji, the inventor of collapsium,

and a royal consort of Queen Tamra Lutui of Tonga, the figurehead queen of the solar system. Collapsium is collapsed matter in the form of egg-sized black holes which allow virtually instantaneous transmission of information and matter — including humans — throughout the solar system. Basically collapsium allows people to fax themselves to various fax ports set up throughout the solar system via a collapsium network. You can also create copies of yourself! While Bruno has been enjoying a self-imposed exile conducting experiments on his own manufactured planet, rival scientist Marlon Sykes has been busy building a ring of collapsium around the sun to improve the current collapsium network. But then a saboteur causes this Ring Collapsiter to fall toward the sun, imperiling the entire solar system, and Queen Tamra calls on Bruno de Towaji for help. I found this book to be as entertaining as it is bizarre. Not only does the author do wildly fun things with the element collapsium, but another element called wellstone is thrown in as well. Wellstone is programmable matter capable of emulating almost any substance whether it be natural, artificial, or even hypothetical. McCarthy spins this improbable tale with wit, verve and humor and the result is a thrill-ride of wild science and adventure.

Vincent Stoessel says

A gem from the dark age of Science Fiction of the "00s"

It seemed that during period of 2000-2009, we had lot of SF that attempted to really push the envelope of possibility in the realm of physics. You have some notable authors that really excelled at it and some that published works that little more than a physics lecture with a spaceship on the cover. There are authors that did blend entertainment with science to fashion great stories. This is one of them. The concept of Programmable Matter might be one of those civilization changing ideas if it ever comes to fruition and this novel serves at it's showcase. The story appealed to both a a hard SF fan and as a programmer. This story is much lighter than a Hamilton or Reynolds novel but the idea are no less mind-blowing. This book is a fable, a fable that blew. my. mind. I have not been able to get into the rest of the series but I thoroughly enjoyed this book.

Nolan says

Although, personally, I did not enjoy reading any part of this story, The Collapsium by Wil McCarthy is a detailed story that puts science before the fiction. Former NASA rocket science, Wil McCarthy has all the elements of a hardcore science fiction story at least on the scientific side of things. He incorporates incredible yet believable futuristic ideas that would make for an interesting story despite his bland style of writing. Personally, I'm not a big science fanatic and I quickly lost interest in the complicated sci-fi terms and ideas and without an interesting story, this book proved difficult to read. Despite, my dislike of the book, I recognize the time and effort of Wil McCarthy and applaud him. I also understand that this book and other books like it weren't made for me, it's made for the people with heavy interests in science and futuristic ideas. Although The Collapsium by Wil McCarthy was not for me, I highly recommend it and the rest of the books in the series to anyone who has a strong interest in science and the genre of hardcore science fiction.

Jerico says

This book is a solid 4.5 stars; it's imaginative, complex, original, evokes humor and pathos in equal measures and has footnotes that inform and entertain.

Capsule review: In a solar empire based on a figurehead monarchy, a genius is interrupted from his research by a series of accidents related to a mega-engineering project that threatens the sun. The writing style is that faux-victorian pastiche that's been kicking around since steampunk got rolling, but it's fully subverted here by a setting that's just inside the hard-sf envelope. The Queendom of Sol is a post-scarcity society that isn't post-capitalist, populated by well drawn characters and animated by plot that moves with authority from slow travelogue to cracking adventure while maintaining its voice the entire way.

The beginning is a bit thick, especially since a lot of work goes in to establishing the setting and technology, which is based around the manipulation of tiny black holes and gets rather involved in the nuances. This, coupled with a very effective examination of the social impacts of other technology like the fax (the Star Trek replicator/transporter freed from story constraints and philosophical squeamishness of that setting) or Wellstone (programmable matter that uses electron traps to configure the physical properties of itself). Things are surreal, but the arrow connecting this setting to our own is clear enough that the path seems understandable.

Prose ranges from the lightly ornate to the stripped back, characters are drawn large but with enough detail to convince and the setting is obviously intended for a lot more despite the conclusive and satisfying ending. Excellent book, novel in every sense of the word, and highly recommended for people interested in imaginative and compelling mid-far future drama that isn't space opera.

Peter Tillman says

The Collapsium opens with a wonderful novella, "Once Upon a Matter Crushed" (first published in SF Age 5/99). In the late 25th century, in the 8th decade of the Queendom of Sol, gravitation and the zero-point field are pretty well understood. "Neubles," diamond-clad neutronium spheres, are in everyday use -- a standard industrial neuble masses a billion tonnes, and has a radius of 2.67 cm. Our hero, wealthy super-scientist Bruno de Towaji, is experimenting with collapsium, a dangerous, metastable material made of proton-size black holes, when he receives a Royal Summons: the new near-solar collapsiter ring is unstable, and will fall into the sun (and eat it) unless something is done...

The story is written in an engaging neo-Victorian style -- McCarthy's first experiment with literary style versus his previous 'transparent' prose. I liked it. Witty repartee, amusing pratfalls and shrewd insights abound. Bruno meets a well-married couple at a celebrity fund-raiser on Maxwell Montes, Venus:

"The love, shyness and exasperation between them radiated out in invisible rays, like infrared. Warming."

Befuddled by a bottomless beer mug, Bruno warms to the pitch:

"Would, ah, would a hundred trillion dollars be enough?"

McCarthy's sci-tech extrapolation is exotic, fun and reasonably plausible. He's clearly done his homework -- the book includes 30 pages of appendices, a glossary, technical notes (including the working equations to synthesize neubles), and respectable references. Fun stuff (really!) -- one of the highlights of the book.

The range and depth of McCarthy's imagined technologies are dazzling -- I'm reminded of Eric Drexler's pioneering "Engines of Creation," and I hope McCarthy (or someone) does a speculative science article on the technological implications, if the zero-point field explanation for gravity turns out to be correct. (If you've seen one, I'd appreciate hearing about it.) Lots more neat SF ideas where these came from...

So I was really pumped, reading the first hundred pages -- cool science, nice style, nifty characters, a big-screen space-opera storyline. What's not to like?

Well, the rest of the book? The first thud comes when Bruno is recalled to the inner system -- to fix the same problem again! Then he has to fix it a third time, with even sillier, pulpier results. His scientific competitor, and rival for the Queen's affection, turns out to be a really horrid villain... And the characters are hard to kill, because they have backups, except when they don't -- but wait, maybe they do, after all... And characters start acting, well, out of character. And there's a pointless, dangling subplot, among other loose ends. I suppose McCarthy intended to write a good old-fashioned super-science melodrama, except with real science -- but the last two-thirds of the book just didn't work, for me anyway.

Which is a pity, because "Crushed" is brilliant, and the science is so cool. Oh well -- I'd rather read an ambitious failure than a potboiler. If you're already a McCarthy fan, or crave bleeding-edge hard SF, you won't want to miss *The Collapsium* -- the good parts anyway. And who knows, your tolerance for melodrama may be higher than mine; other reviewers have been more generous.

But if you're new to McCarthy, I'd start with *Bloom* or another, earlier book -- and you should try him, he's very good. Usually. Both the *Bloom* and *The Collapsium* universes have plenty of room for more stories; maybe next time he should coast a little on the science and work harder on the fiction.
