

**ORBITAL BURN**

by K. A. Bedford

<b>ORBITAL BURN WHO SAID WHAT</b>
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**SFrevu**

What do you get when you cross a hard SF adventure novel with the kind of weirdness usually associated more with magic realism? *Orbital Burn*, a short trade paperback by an unknown Australian from an unknown Canadian small press publisher. Nonetheless, *Orbital Burn* is an extremely readable book, with characters who are easy to identify with, and one interesting scene following another.

"Lou" Meagher is a down-on-her-luck unlicensed PI, waiting to be evacuated from a planet threatened by an unstoppable "doomsday rock," when she takes on one last case. But Lou is clinically dead, and her client is an enhanced, talking dog, whose companion, a defective, "disposable" android boy whom he knows simply as "Kid," has been snatched away.

This book has a delightfully strange feel to it, even though the setting and plot seem normal enough, as if any science-fictional world can be considered truly "normal," in line with a reader's actual experience. But Bedford manages to mix the known with the imagined, as in the opening scene in which Lou sits drinking espresso in a rundown diner, alone except for the proprietor. An ordinary enough scene? But then they exchange comments on Lou's physical condition, dead but functioning, as long as her nanosystems can manage the maintenance. The juxtaposition of the routine and the unusual is just enough to keep the reader aware that he's definitely not in Kansas any more.

In a private communication, Bedford wrote: "I tried hard on the weird bits. I think the far future will be very weird, at least from our point of view. If anything, I'd have opted to make that book more strange and more satirical, given the chance."

My one reservation concerns the conclusion, in which everything is tied up by a sort of aliens ex machina, which neatly explains all the most puzzling events: Who kidnapped the Kid, and why? Why wasn't the planet destroyed? However, since there is a sequel coming, I can still hope that there will be further divergences from life as we know it, to restore the sense of unreality - Lucy Schmeidler

**Booklist Review**

Nanotechnology and AI underpin this grim, but humorous, story. Lou, an unlicensed private investigator who is clinically dead but functions because of tiny internal machines, is asked by Dog, the former pet of a rich family who augmented his canine brain with all kinds of gadgets, to find Kid, a defective android, or "disposable," who has disappeared. Lou's internal technology is wearing out, and she hasn't the funds to replace it. The planet she and the others are on is about to get hit by a chunk of stuff from space. Yet, even as the end approaches, there are still villains and skullduggery to be dealt with. Background, characters, and plot are all so well crafted that the matter of plausibility pops up only after the book is finished. — Frieda Murray

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## **Orbital Burn** by K. A. Bedford

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### II.

The contrast between Heinlein's story, which is aimed at young people of all ages, and K. A. Bedford's *Orbital Burn* is profound, although the plot of Bedford's book is driven by the search for a very special Disposable Boy who also saves worlds. In *Orbital Burn*, the salvation is real; the Kid uses powers given him by alien beings to rotate The Bloody Bastard, a massive asteroid, into another space-time, thus saving the planet Kestrel from obliteration. His motive is profoundly simple, to keep the Dog that has cared for him for years safe from harm. You see, the Kid, although artificial and autistic, has been chosen and transfigured by superhuman godlike beings from higher dimensions to become the bridge between humanity and themselves. Unlike Kip Russell, who must argue humanity's potential value to vastly powerful aliens, the Kid is a child, an innocent, a programmable interface who will mediate between the universes.

For most of the story, the Kid is the maguffin, since *Orbital Burn* focuses mainly on Louise Meagher, a dead private investigator who is trying to find a way to escape Kestrel before the Bastard strikes. Infected years before by a hacker virus that has destroyed her life functions, Lou is clinically dead, but her body is maintained by nanomechanisms ("nano-tink") that tend each cell, repairing decay as best they can. Louise smells, and will fall to dust unless her nanotink is refreshed regularly.

The story begins, as detective stories should, in a bar in Stalktown, where Lou is trying to smell and taste the coffee, when a Dog walks in and asks Lou to find his boy, a homeless, discarded mass-produced disposable organic android who has been kidnapped. The Dog—an electronically enhanced, augmented beagle—can hear or feel mental images and feelings projected by the boy, and so has become his best friend, companion, and caregiver. Profoundly aware of her own artificiality, Lou sympathizes with the Dog, and with Disposables; in Lou's culture, they are no more than organic mechanisms, just things—without sensibility or humanity, much less souls—to be used and discarded. With Stalktown, and all of Kestrel, about to be obliterated by the

impact of the Bastard, Lou must find the Dog's boy amidst the chaotic final days of a semi-abandoned city and then find a way up the Stalk (a ground-to-space elevator) to an orbital habitat or ship. As they make their way up and away from Kestrel, Lou and Dog discover that they're caught up in a perplexing power struggle between a mysterious entrepreneur called Etienne Tourignon and a powerful synthetic mind named Otaru, apparently for control of the Bridge between universes that Dog's Kid will become.

In its concern for spirituality and transcendence, *Orbital Burn* reminds me a great deal of Dan Simmons's *Hyperion* and *Endymion* novels, with Kid a salvatory Christ figure much like Simmons's Aenea. I liked the fact that Bedford's exploration of spiritual issues is made possible by the tech he posits as part of the *mise-en-scène*. Indeed, now-almost-traditional cyberpunk tropes—like the decayed city, the casual indifference to human suffering by totalizing governments (i.e., the cops), and bio-tech developments that "the streeer" has turned to its own uses—work very well here and never strike one as being merely trendy window-dressing. That is, Lou is dead because destructive punk hackers messed with nanotech and sort-of-alive because the nanotech allows her continuing existence and consciousness—so does she still have a soul? The urban squalor and chaos of Stalktown are a product of the impending collision of worlds. The parts fit, and propel the story, and Louise Meagher is a wonderfully drawn protagonist. Her struggles with death, her parents' horror at her undeadness, her alienation and despair, her humane love for Dog, and her fundamental helplessness in the face of mystery are very touching and persuasive, and the Dog is a good Dog.

I have to say I really liked this book, and think K. A. Bedford a writer easily capable of taking his place with better-known contemporary sf authors like Alistair Reynolds, Ken MacLeod, and Paul McAuley. The first line had me hooked, and my interest never flagged for a moment. If you can find this book, buy it and read it. ►

*David Mead lives in Corpus Christi, Texas.*

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## SF Site - A review by Victoria Strauss

*One morning, not long before the end of the world, a dead woman named Lou sat drinking espresso in Sheb's Old Earth Diner, one of the few places still open in the cheap part of Stalktown.*

Who could resist an opening sentence like that? Certainly not me. I hadn't planned to read this book, which was included as an extra in a package sent to me for review; but that opening hooked me, and I'm glad it did, because otherwise I would have missed a very entertaining novel.

Lou is the victim of an accelerated tissue necrosis nanovirus. Clinically she's dead. Some time ago, a nanogenic cure restored her to something very much like life — but since then she hasn't been able to afford another full treatment, just periodic refreshers that leave her looking (and smelling) like a week-old corpse. Shunned by most normal living people, Lou has become part of the underclass on a planet named Kestrel, eking out a living as a private investigator. Unfortunately, Kestrel is soon due to be destroyed by a giant asteroid. Except for a few stubborn holdouts, everyone is leaving, heading for the Orbital, a huge resort habitat high above the planet's surface. Lou has put off departure for as long as possible, because she knows that once she gets to the Orbital she won't be able to make a living — and without the ability to buy even the diminished treatments she's getting now, the nanovirus will destroy her once and for all.

One last case is about to fall into her lap — a very odd case, with a very odd client: an augmented beagle named Dog, who has been fitted with head-machines that make it possible for him to speak and think like a human being. Dog wants Lou to find his companion, a boy he knows only as Kid. Kid is a disposable (a kind of android, mass-produced to do humanity's dirty work), and a brain-damaged one at that, but Dog has formed a deep and inexplicable telepathic connection with Kid. For a long time, they have been each other's only friend. Kid vanished in a bizarre incident involving a pair of Martian drug-traffickers and a group of heavily-armed policemen. But Dog, who can still hear Kid's telepathic voice, is desperate to rescue him.

Lou takes the case, partly for profit (Dog offers to pay her with himself, a pretty good deal, since an augmented pet is worth a lot of money), partly because she's lonely and likes the idea of having an animal companion for a while. She soon discovers that some very surprising — and very dangerous — people also have an interest in Dog and Kid: a powerful family of Martian gangsters, a mysterious synthetic mind called Otaru, and Lou's sleazy ex-husband Tom, who has shown up out of the blue with an unconvincing story about wanting to patch things up. Obviously there's more at stake than one damaged disposable boy. But what? And can Lou figure it all out — not to mention save her and Dog's lives — before the asteroid turns Kestrel into space-debris?

Orbital Burn fits into that increasingly popular subgenre, the SF-crime hybrid, blending intriguing science fictional premises and settings with elements of hardboiled detective fiction. Lou is an unusual and appealing heroine — feisty and vulnerable, fiercely independent and dreadfully lonely, struggling gamely to make as much of a life for herself as she can manage in the face of a social ostracism, a (sometimes gruesomely) decaying body, and a load of ugly memories. Her poignant relationship with the equally abused and lonely Dog has enough sharp edges to save it from bathos (she'd like to cuddle him, but he can't stand her corpse-smell), and Dog himself, though big-eyed and lovable, has an odd melancholy dignity that keeps him from becoming one of those cutesy anthropomorphized animal characters. K.A. Bedford also does a good job of drawing a contrast between Dog's instinctively doggy behavior and the artificial personality imposed on him by his head-machines.

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The various exotic settings are nicely fleshed out with an array of smart details (such as the sheets of electronic Paper that substitute for personal computers, and Lou's electronic Friend, Jenny), and generously laced with satire. The Orbital, for instance, which is basically a Kubla Khan-ish pleasure dome, is run by a rigidly fundamentalist Christian government ("a matter of raising revenue and turning a blind eye to what the sinners did," Lou thinks sourly at one point), whose true intolerance Lou realizes only after she gets mixed up with the Office of the Holy Judiciate. Bedford also raises some serious issues, using the interplay between disposables, synthetic minds, augmented animals, and a woman artificially enabled to live beyond her death to intelligently explore questions of free will, humanity, and the existence or nonexistence of the soul.

All of this good stuff hangs upon a fast-paced but somewhat shaky plot, which in addition to the basic detective story includes time travel, aliens, alternate dimensions, gods, and the possible ontological transformation of humanity. Bedford isn't quite able to amalgamate this ambitious stew of themes, and things fall apart at the end, with an overly-swift and not very convincing deus ex machina-style conclusion. He keeps it going most of the way, though. Flawed but striking, this is a promising debut, and Bedford is a writer I'll be watching.

Copyright 2004 Victoria Strauss- Victoria Strauss is a novelist, and a lifelong reader of fantasy and science fiction. Her most recent fantasy novel, *The Burning Land*, is available from HarperCollins Eos.

## Scribesworld Review

In the future, Earth has been destroyed in some sort of disaster that no one talks about and humans have populated the galaxy. Computer viruses have become deadly. One touch can literally kill you. Thankfully, there are new technologies to help.

Louise was killed by one such virus when she was very young. Her parents opted to go for the medical treatment, which infused her body with nano-bots which repaired her decaying body and kept her "alive" though in every sense, she's legally dead.

She's fallen into hard times, with no money for another treatment, so she's falling apart-literally. The "bastard" (a huge meteor) is on a collision course with the planet she calls home, and people are scrambling to leave as quickly as possible in the few days they have left before the planet is annihilated.

When an enhanced dog approaches her for investigative help, offering himself as payment, to find a sick little boy-a disposable (clones created for the dirty jobs no one likes to do.)-who's gone missing, Lou figures she has nothing to lose. How hard can it be to find one little boy who can't even walk on his own?

ORBITAL BURN is a very complex, very imaginative piece of science fiction. Lou is a very sassy character who does what she needs to do, despite being dead, and is more emotional and caring than the living surrounding her. Her dedication to her case despite all the trouble surrounding it marvels, especially when you consider that her client is a dog-a talking dog, but canine none the less.

K. A. Bedford has put together a very interesting piece of work here, one that was entertaining to the very last page. Give this author and ORBITAL BURN a look. — Reviewed by Lisa Ramaglia

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## BOOKS

EDITED BY ROD MORAN

# Burning issues in cyber countdown

### Science Fiction

*Orbital Burn*, by K. Adrian Bedford  
(Edge Science Fiction and Fantasy Publishers, about \$20)  
Review: Dave Luckett

**T**HE subgenre is cyberpunk. The setting is, therefore, a malfunctioning metropolis in the process of terminal breakdown, where a desperate underclass struggles for survival against a corrupt and vicious plutocracy.

The technology is bewildering and pervasive, and typically based on extreme projections of nanotechnology and computing power, taking us far into the realms of virtual reality and artificial personality. A terminal event is approaching. When the countdown reaches zero, the world ends.

WA author K. Adrian Bedford's *Orbital Burn* sits squarely within this subgenre and therefore shares some elements of setting with the noir detective story. The protagonist is an unlicensed gumshoe with cyberpunk variations and one countdown is incorporated into her. The other countdown is external and familiar. A collision with an asteroid will occur next Tuesday.

Noir detectives are always hard-boiled and hard-up, but a soft touch for a sob story. That's Louise Meagher, all right. She used to be a party girl. Now she has to run a Red Queen's race against the dissolution of her body. The nanobots that keep it functioning are expensive and she's broke. She needs new ones regularly because she's technically dead. It was not her death that parted her from her vile husband, though. That happy release was through divorce.

But the sob story's a beauty.

Her client is a dog who has lost his boy. It hopes that Lou will be able to find him again. Both dog and boy are valuable property. That's Lou's pay-off, if she can deliver. The dog's enhanced; the boy is artificial, dysfunctional but still worth a lot more than your standard disposable personality.

Not that the dog could care. It just loves the kid and wants him back. Well, that's a dog for you. Other parties are looking for the kid, too, only their

**As with all literature, it's the questions that matter and in SF they are often the big ones. These are perhaps the biggest questions of all. What is life? What is intelligence? Is there a God? Is there such a thing as a soul, or a personality? Are they different? Of what do they consist? Can you manufacture emotions?**

motives are not so pure. The detective story is not so much about finding the kid as untangling those motives and finding the real story of who and what the boy is.

The noir setting and the cyberpunk trappings mark this as science fiction, but they are really only cues. As with all literature, it's the questions that matter and in SF they are often the big ones. These are perhaps the biggest questions of all.

What is life? What is intelligence? Is there a God? Is there such a thing as a soul, or a personality? Are they different? Of what do they consist? Can you manufacture emotions? If you could do that, what would, say, love be worth on the open market? How about loyalty? And if those questions could be answered in practice, what would be the result?

To a certain extent, the fact that a novel forces its readers to ask such questions of themselves makes all other considerations almost irrelevant. It has done its job. This novel does that, and more, and that alone makes it worth while.

More, the questions are made sharper by the fact that the characters are people the reader cares about, even if they are not people at all, in the strict sense.

It's in the details that you find a number of devils — minor ones, but important. The novel's first sentence is a cracker, but the pace drops away to a dawdle for a long time after that, and it remains uneven and too leisurely. There's far too much information presented as explanation, rather than through action. It needs cutting. But these are matters for an editor to address.

The problem of *deus ex machina* isn't so easy to dispose of. The plot is resolved essentially because one of the characters turns out to be more or less omnipotent. The denouement is basically that everyone dies — though that, of course, is not terminal in this world and there's a sequel coming.

Despite my quibbles, I look forward to it.

■ *Orbital Burn* is available through [www.slowglass.com.au](http://www.slowglass.com.au) and [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).

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## School Library Journal Review

Adult/High School-Clinically dead, even partially decomposed, but still able to function thanks to nanotechnology, a private eye way down on her luck is hired by a talking dog in a violent, sardonic SF yarn that harks back to Frederik Pohl's early work. The last P.I. on Kestrel, a planet only days away from annihilation, Lou caves to the pleas of Dog, a much-modified beagle who claims that his companion Kid, a mindless "disposable," or artificial human, with whom he's psychically linked, has been kidnapped. Little does Lou know that the search is going to put her up against a murderous tycoon, brutal police, her abusive ex-husband, and a powerful AI-or that Kid is far, far more than he seems. Though much of the gore is gratuitous, and the pace too frequently falters while Lou wrestles with family issues, Bedford laces his tale with credible futuristic cyber-science, moves his hard-bitten (literally, as well as figuratively) shamus through vividly realized settings both scary and satiric, then winds it all up in a wild, transcendental climax. Here's hardboiled SF at its finest. — John Peters, New York Public Library

## Asimov would be pleased

"Orbital Burn" is a quick, entertaining read. The main character Lou, while strong and humorous, struggles with an interesting sci-fi illness. While her illness isn't the core of the story, it adds an important dimension to the book. (Don't worry - this book is not depressing. Rather, it's very humorous.)

The main story line of the book is Lou working as a private detective for a talking Dog. They hope to find Kid and get off the planet before it blows up due to an asteroid. The characters of Lou and Dog are a delight to read about. And who can resist a "doomsday" story? Plus, it's brain-candy to discover the world that Bedford has created...

Bedford's word-choice in the book is trendy and fun. Additionally, his style in "Orbital Burn" mimics Isaac Asimov's theory of writing, as expressed by Asimov in 1986, "By my writing, I amuse people and make them happy. My writing style is simple, straightforward, and upbeat - nothing nasty or horrid or violent or perverse. In this sad world, I think that anyone who spreads happiness automatically justifies his existence." — Laura Robinson

## A modern take on traditional science fiction

Bedford's *Orbital Burn* is science fiction in the tradition of the space exploring age with the addition of modern science. As a scientist, I was thrilled that the science part of the book is believable. As a reader, I was even more pleased that the science adds to the story and doesn't overwhelm what is primarily a story about human interaction (or pseudo-human - dog interaction in this case). It's a highly recommended read for a rainy day and cup of coffee, and don't be surprised if what seems like a light and fluffy novel stays with you in your head for a while afterwards. A strong debut novel from a new Australian writer. — Trish Amundrud

## Australian SF award nominee

This book is like a cross between some serious science-fiction and vintage detective noir stories. The characters are the driving force in this story, with Dog as the most lovable creature-machine ever to exist, and the barely-held together, clinically-dead private eye, Lou, is equally compelling. Put in a bit of mystery and some inventive scientific ideas, and you have a literary winner. And I'm not the only one to think so, *Orbital Burn* was nominated for Australia's 2003 SF (Ditmar) Award. — riverselkie

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BOOKS

# Author adds character

Personalities key to good fiction, says Bedford

LEANNE DOHY  
CALGARY HERALD

**A**uthor K.A. Bedford says that if there are only so many plots in existence, it is the infinite number of possible characters that make fiction worth the ink.

A case in point: the heroine of his debut novel, *Orbital Burn*, whom he introduces in the book's opening sentence.



K.A. Bedford

"One morning, not long before the end of the world, a dead woman named Lou sat drinking espresso in Sheb's Old Earth Diner," the book begins.

Lou — a clinically dead, actively decomposing, down-on-her-luck private detective stuck on a doomed planet — faces circumstances familiar to science fiction readers, but from a unique perspective and saddled with decidedly unique challenges.

"The decisions characters face, the actions they choose, the ways they respond to stimulus — that's what makes a story original," says Bedford, 41, a native of Ballajura, Western Australia.

*Orbital Burn* is published by Edge Science Fiction and Fantasy Publishing, a Calgary company, which signed Bedford after first making contact through the Internet.

For Bedford, who today makes his Calgary stop on a cross-Canada tour, the second word in his chosen genre's label is at least as important as the first.

"If you just want to explore ideas or technologies, write for *Wired* or *Popular Science*," he says. "In fiction, you need to read about characters; to be engaged by them."

He cites Robert Heinlein and British author Connie Willis as masters of characterization, and as influences. Isaac Asimov, while also an influence, placed greater emphasis on ideas than actors, he says.

The characters in *Orbital Burn* — Lou is hired by Dog, a sad-eyed telepathic beagle in a quest to find Kid, a kidnapped child android — came to life in Bedford's mind long before the storyline did.

"Lou was the last piece to come in," he says. "For years and years, I'd had Dog and Kid trying to fit into some sort of story, waiting around as if to say 'Is it time for you to write us yet?'"

The detective, who was killed as a teenager by a biological hacker attack, is kept "alive" by expensive nanobots which fight the creeping necrosis. Without the cash for a nano infusion, Lou's flesh begins to rot, such that a chewed lip yields chunks of flesh and stiff extremities snap off.

Her undead (often nauseating) state raises the classic questions of sci-fi: what defines alive? Who has, and hasn't, a soul? Is one life form (or stage) intrinsically more valuable than another?

"Lou's illness is a metaphor for problems in my own life with illness," says Bedford, who struggles with bipolar disorder.

Illness, he says, can take over your life, affecting every aspect — sometimes with unexpected benefits. If it weren't for his health problems — if he worked at a "day job" — he wouldn't have had the same blocks of time to write and think, to develop and explore ideas.

Still, he wonders if the pharmaceuticals clarify or distort who he is. Is he still himself, medicated?

"I have come to believe, now that it's been with me most of my life, that it makes me normal," he says reflectively.

Many of the broader questions he explores were fed by philosophy courses, taken by correspondence. It's a tough topic to pursue long distance, he says, but worth the effort.

"When I first studied philosophy, my brain expanded. It was amazing to find out that all these things I wondered about — other people had been wondering about them for a very long time," Bedford says.

The more he learned, the more questions he had, and he explored them through writing.

"It was good to have fiction to fall back on, to ask the questions, to go over the ideas through story," he says.

That the stories explore space and technology can be attributed largely to a single event in Bedford's childhood.

"I saw the first moon landing when I was six-years-old," he says. "It was exactly the right age, and left an amazing imprint."

To think that people weren't confined to this one planet, that their destiny might lie on Mars or further, was "extremely stimulating," Bedford says.

At the moment, his own path stretches from Down Under to a string of promotional stops across North America. For the solitary Bedford, hitting the author circuit is an interesting challenge.

"I'm so far out of my comfort zone, its light won't arrive for thousands of years," he says with a wry laugh.

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## What else would they speak on French Mars?

From the first sentence, you know this book will be different. By the end of the first chapter, you're certain of it. You've just met the dead PI, Lou, and her new client, a highly enhanced, very polite, talking beagle.

I don't read much SF, and the nearest recent comparison I have is J.K. Rowling, of whom this book put me in mind several times. *Stalktown* and the *Orbital* inhabit a richly imagined part of the galaxy, with strange things happening according to rules that Bedford creates and sustains in deft narrative and action.

He tackles some large themes here—the human/machine interface, genetic modification, death, immortality, the soul—and handles them impressively, with much heart. At times, the reminders of Lou's condition and how unpleasant her unlife is caused the action to drag for me just a bit. But not enough to allow me to put the book down. I couldn't wait to see what would happen, and I was sorry to see it end. Lou and Dog, Jen and Kid, and the ideas of the book, all stayed with me for several days, and are with me still. More people need to read this, so we can make jokes like, "is that Martian French you're speaking?" and "I need nano-tink!" — Leslie P. Grohe

## An entertaining read!

I normally don't have much inclination toward SF and was very worried that I wouldn't like this book just because of the genre. I ended up loving it, because the characters were genuine and engaging... a difficult stunt in any genre! Amazingly, my favourite character was Dog (a bionically enhanced character), and I'm wondering if this wasn't because a person trying hard to think like a dog would put extra effort into writing the part to get it just right. Regardless of the reason, this non-human character supplies one of the most moving moments in the novel.

There were some first novel weak spots, but none that undermine the general solidity of the book. The some scenes labour slightly under the weight of exposition. On the flip side, certain characters (such as the enigmatic Kid) remain clouded. The hint of SF cliché found in the story's climax is overridden by the fact that this end for the heroine seems perfectly fitting, and not laboured.

This first-time author is one to watch - his style is perfectly suited to briskly-paced, snappy prose well used as a good summer read. Let's hope he keeps them coming. — Treena Fenniak

## A future bestseller!

*Orbital Burn* by Australia's K. A. Bedford is an excellent treat. Not only does he weave a good tale, create excellent compelling characters, and leave you to wonder what does being dead and being alive REALLY means - he captures your imagination on the first page and never lets it go until the last thought provoking sentence.

I have heard that K. A. Bedford will be coming to World Con in Boston via Vancouver BC- I hope that World Con gives him the opportunity to do a reading from the book, as it will be well enjoyed by all...if you have not read this book - read it - even the *New York Review of Science Fiction* just loved it! It is nice to see a Canadian publishing company such as EDGE doing so well to bring excellent authors from around the world to the science fiction scene. Thanks! — a reader, amazon.com

**Orbital Burn** by K. A. Bedford

EDGE Science Fiction and Fantasy Publishing / Available Now

Trade paperback / ISBN: 1-894063-10-4 / 305 PAGES / 14.95 USA / 19.95 CDN

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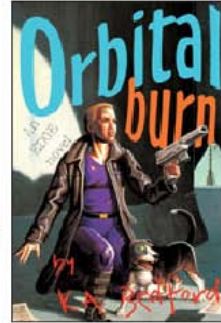
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Reviews > **Orbital Burn**

**Orbital Burn**  
KA Bedford  
Edge Publishing

Any novel that has a zombie private investigator, a dog for a client and manages to be funny, engaging and thought provoking has got my vote. Lou (Louise) Meagher is amateur PI to the downtrodden of Kestrel, a planet on a collision course with a large asteroid. Lou's been afflicted by an accelerated tissue necrosis nanovirus, and can't quite afford a full cure. Anyone who has the means has already fled to Kestrel's off-world Orbital but Lou lingers downside, one foot in the grave, scraping cash together. Shortly before Armageddon a talking dog (well, a dog with a lot of gadgetry) hires her to look for his lost master, a young android boy. Lou becomes embroiled in the machinations of some French Martian gangster capitalists and a powerful AI called Otaru.



**Orbital Burn** is a genre hybrid - science fiction/crime - and it manages to dance the line between the two with flair. Feisty Lou and the strangely dignified Dog are appealing protagonists and their dramas are compelling, while never melodramatic. At times, the plot has an everything-but-the-kitchen-sink quality - AIs, time travel, other dimensions, deities, souls - but it manages not to totter too badly. A very enjoyable first novel. Looking forward to Bedford's next offering.

Reviewed by Wendy Waring 3/5 stars  
Available through Galaxy Bookshop [www.galaxybooks.com.au](http://www.galaxybooks.com.au)

[Return to Reviews index.](#)

## Voice of Youth Advocates (VOYA)

Louise Meagher—former child of privilege, former abused wife, former living human—was long ago infected with a virus that left her clinically dead. She is still walking, talking, and complaining thanks to nanotechnology. She has billions of microscopic machines in her body keeping her cells from decaying too much. She has been working as an unlicensed private investigator on the planet Kestrel, but it is about to be destroyed by a giant hunk of space debris known affectionately as "the bloody bastard." Most sentients have left or are planning to leave, but Lou is not looking forward to being labeled "untouchable" elsewhere in the galaxy. She is so low on funds that she accepts a case offered to her by an augmented beagle with the power of speech. Dog wants her to help him find Kid, a "disposable" cyborg with whom Dog is psychically connected. On the hunt they run afoul of nasty henchmen, evil corporations, vile ex-husbands, and of course aliens.

First-time Australian novelist Bedford does an admirable job of world building and moving the at-times gory story along. If the one-liners are often stale and the SF occasionally less than plausible, most readers will not mind. Lou's journey to transcendence is, if a bit long, an enjoyable ride.—Timothy Capehart. VOYA June 2004, p. 139.

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## Rambles.com Review

**What happens when you combine science fiction, mystery,  
a dead woman, a talking dog and the end of the world?  
You get K.A. Bedford's *Orbital Burn*.**

When Louise "Lou" Meagher woke up after her transition from living person to animated corpse, she made her way to the planet Kestrel where she established a reputation as an unlicensed private investigator among the Kestrel Dead. Like the rest of the Dead, Lou is a victim of a necrosis nanovirus and is technically dead, being kept "alive" by millions of nanobots that repair and renew her dead tissues. The only problem is that the "tink" doesn't last forever and Lou really needs to have hers refreshed.

Unfortunately for Lou and the rest of Kestrel, the Bloody Bastard, an asteroid the size of Mars, is due to plow into Kestrel next week. Everyone is being evacuated from the planet's surface to the expensive space station orbiting Kestrel, which will itself be moving away from the planet soon to avoid any debris. With nothing to do until it's her turn for evacuation, Lou takes on one last client, a talking dog named Dog who wants her to find his boy.

*Orbital Burn* is a very entertaining book with one of the best opening lines I've read in a long time: One morning, not long before the end of the world, a dead woman named Lou sat drinking espresso in Sheb's Old Earth Diner, one of the few places still open in the cheap part of Stalktown. It's not one of those sci-fi books that dumps you into the author's invented world and leaves you to flounder in a sea of unpronounceable invented words and concepts. Instead, Lou's life is fairly self-explanatory and what the reader might not be able to figure out is explained.

Lou, despite her rather unappetizing condition, is an engaging character; an underdog (so to speak) to root for. Dog is a delight; a cybernetically enhanced beagle, who even though he talks and seems to have a psychic link to Kid (his boy), still acts like a dog - embarrassing Lou by licking himself in public, for instance.

*Orbital Burn* is a page-turner, no doubt about it. It appears to be a stand-alone novel, but I could really wish for a sequel that relates Lou's further adventures.

by Laurie Thayer, published 5 February 2005 on rambles.net

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## Great ripping yarn

Author K. A. Bedford wisely chooses to let the reader ride along on clinically dead P.I. Louise Meagher's shoulder as she tries to unravel a mystery brought to her attention by - a dog. Dog's friend Kid is missing and Lou is the only one who can help. She and Dog struggle through the final days of the world Kestrel, and (as every good mystery should) each answer they obtain only brings up more questions.

This is a book that starts slowly and can be a tad confusing at first, but then when you think about it, we are with Lou, and darn it all, she's confused! What keeps the reader going is the growing relationship between her and Dog, and of course, that's what keeps Lou going as well. By the half way point, the book really ramps up and brings us to an ending that is as satisfying as any I have read recently. ... — Charlie Stuart

## An excellent debut

This is a very good story full of neat SF ideas and some involving characters combined with an interesting plot. A very good first novel that shows this author has great promise.

Lou the unlicensed PI whose main problem is that she is technically dead and living on a planet that's about to be obliterated by an approaching rock the size of Mars is well drawn and likeable, Dog the augmented pooch she takes on as her client is also a great idea and a companion you feel a bond with. The combination of high tech future world and old fashioned detective story is pretty well done and gets the reader in.

The second half of the story is more iffy however, too many convenient aliens and AIs with super powers and not enough explanation towards the end. I feel Lou should have struggled along more on her own on Kestrel to solve the case instead of action transferring to the orbital colony (though the courtroom stuff was quite entertaining). The mysterious woman (and later male) visitors from the future are never really explained properly and could really have been omitted with no loss. Right at the end why the extra-dimensional aliens can't cure Lou is not explained (heck, they can do so many other amazing god-like things!) The Kid's background is never really explained either, why is he the chosen one to bridge with the aliens, etc.? Still, these are relatively minor gripes with an otherwise good story. 4 stars as it's a first novel, if it wasn't I'd probably say 3 or 3 1/2. — A reader from Sydney, Australia

## Book Reviews in Crime, Science Fiction and Art

Appropriate for both the Adult and High School markets. This is a highly intelligent, amusing crime drama set in the far future. It is also the first novel by Australian born K. A. Bedford. We are certain to see many more. The hero is clinically dead, even partially decomposed detective on a planet named Kestrel. She doesn't have a license and her planet is about to be destroyed by a rock, well named as Bloody Bastard. Yet still she tries for another job to help a cybernetically enhanced dog (named Dog) to find its owner, an android named Kid. Our hero, though nearly over the final frontier, functions thanks to nanotechnology and off she goes to help her new beagle friend. Turns out the dog is psychically linked to the owner, known as a disposable, who has been kidnapped. This is a grand book, very different from the norm. Not only is it a great yarn. It also explores the definition of life; but it does so in a fresh way that is relevant to today's audience. Highly recommended. - Larry Winter Roeder, Jr., Chief reviewer

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## A rare novel

It's rare to find a first novel which grips from the outset, but this is one of them. The characters draw you into their world effortlessly, and for some odd reason you don't want to leave again. I was singularly drawn by Dog the cyberbeagle, who seemed at times more human than the humans around him. Lou, the vitally-challenged PI with the hard-nosed exterior and the soul of a frightened girl, was particularly well-conceived. The author clearly has a love of words, and certainly knows how to use them; the prose displays flashes of a superb lyrical quality which brings scenes vividly to life, and which seems lacking in a lot of modern science-fiction.

Whilst the plot suffers from one or two pacing problems (racing through the final elements rather too quickly), and some of the characters could have done with more depth (e.g. Kid), these are only a matter of detail, and aren't that significant beside the story itself, which drags you along on a relentlessly entertaining adventure which you will have considerable difficulty putting down. I know I did. If the author's next book is half as enjoyable as this one, I'll be snapping it up. — haruman from Warwickshire, United Kingdom

## It's what you put into it

Mr. Bedford has pulled off a nice little trick here. He has written a good story with well developed characters, put them on the stage, but forces the reader to create a bit of the background and scenery. Some are not going to like this approach: there are those who like to have every moment of the past present and future spelled out for them, like the Robert Jordan junkies, (I was one for half of the series, I know.)

Some (amazon) reviewers have perceived the ending as incongruous. There is some validity in the statement, but I found myself adding details as I went along. I think a lot of the better authors do similar things. I never full feel that I understand Michael Swanwick's stuff, but I think if I did it would lose some of it's potency. In fact, I am fairly sure that at times, Swanwick is intentionally vague, or more appropriately, abstract, so that the reader imbues the text with his own meaning. That happened to me, here, and in my book that deserves high praise. — Luke P. Hannafin

## It's all there

What're you looking for in a book? Do you want techno-talk with micro-widgets? Perhaps some dark and shadowy places with tense, quick walks from here to there? Violence? Walking dead? Really big guns? Dirty cops? Elevators that go from the planet's surface to space and beyond? Slimeball ex-spouses talking pretty for some untold reason? I could go one forever, but there's a word limit to this thing. The point I'm making is that ORBITAL BURN truly can be something to all people and everything to some people. Let's melt that down and call it "most things to many people". Alright?

Enough reviews introduce the characters and the story...I'll not belabor any past sketches too much. In short - on a distant planet, one doomed from a dire intersection with a major space rock, a dead girl made mostly good with nanotechnological thingamabobbies studies the finer points of playing the broke, hungry (metaphorically speaking), and unemployed private investigator. She gets a gig from a dog, also technologically enhanced and smart as all get-out, who a) can't pay (a hard-boiled standard), and b) is looking for a disposable human so brainless that the dog walks him like a marionette without strings (this one's a bit less common). As they

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search they run across the usual street thugs, the previously-mentioned slimy ex-husband, and dirty cops...and things don't get better from there. Will the PI (her name is Lou) help the dog (whose name is Dog) find the missing kid? Before the big rock hits? Before she dies...again? Tension!!

Where the story is great, the characters are one tick behind. Some, such as Lou the dead PI, are quite mature. Some minor characters are as developed as they need be, such as Lou's ex-husband. Other's could use some fleshing out. It's a minor nit, really, but since characterization carries so many novels these days it's a wit worth bringing up. Robots, partial peap;we, and people with robotic parts would be included here for further consideration.

Mr. Bedford puts most of his effort into Lou, so she makes for a deep and empathetic character. You learn to almost hate her ex-husband. Some others might have benefited from more backing, but then when one writes one has to judge just how much the reader needs to know and how much they should figure out on their own.

I would, and do, emphatically recommended ORBITAL BURN to readers of science fiction. The only reason I'm not tossing 5 big stars is that I'm generally not a science fiction reader. I'm a horror reader who found dark bits hidden throughout ORBITAL BURN that kept me turning pages. Now you buy it and go find your bits, eh? — Michael T. Huyck

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