

Dreams of the Sea

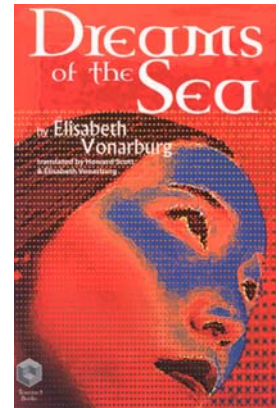
Élisabeth Vonarburg

Dreams of the Sea
WHO SAID
WHAT

A Review

by William Thompson (www.sfsite.com)

Dreams of the Sea is the opening chapter to the five volume *Tyranaël* cycle, translated here for the first time into English, and written by one of Canada's most respected authors, Élisabeth Vonarburg. Long a prominent figure in Canadian science fiction and academia, Vonarburg's other novels — **The Silent City**, **Reluctant Voyagers** and **In the Mother's Land** (published also as **The Maerlande Chronicles**) — have, in a broad sense, concerned themes of dying cultures, dead civilizations, survivors, planetary colonization and speculative social constructs. **Dreams of the Sea**, in certain respects, continues this. But to categorize or relegate this novel, or the author's other work, as simply more soft science or anthropological imaginings à la Le Guin is to miss deeper currents and investigations into the human condition and our creations.



As its title may suggest, this novel is constructed around dreams, those of a civilization that has disappeared, and those of colonists fleeing a dying Earth. The two overlap through the visions of an *aimâdzi*, a quasi-spiritual (to say religious implies too much) order of Dreamers who are part of the original inhabitants of Altair. Eilai Liannon Klaidaru experiences the dreams of others, not only of her own people, but of *Strangers* who will come in the future, long after her own people and civilization have disappeared. They will encounter a planet dominated by a luminous and ethereal blue *Sea*, which like a fog will periodically blanket and recede from portions of the planet, based upon the twin cycles of a solar and lunar eclipse. This phenomenon is a mystery, for it covers the planet to a universal height of a thousand metres, disrupting all electromagnetic activity for a thousand metres more. When the *Strangers* — future colonists from Earth — arrive, they will discover that the *Sea* resists all attempts at scientific study, that aside from its cyclical and mysterious presence, its only identifiable characteristic is that it causes all living matter it comes in contact with to disappear. But its presence has not always been a factor on the planet, for the intact, abandoned cities of the previous inhabitants can be found below a thousand metres, and great dams have been built around those portions of the continents that lie above the *Sea's* level, suggesting that the original natives lived part of the time below during the *Sea's* ecliptic recession. What created this phenomenon, its composition and purpose, or what happened to the planet's original inhabitants, remains unknown: when the colonists from Earth arrive, all that is left are intact houses and cities of an earlier, alien and vanished race, and the omnipresent cycles of the *Sea*.

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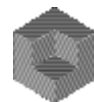
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The novel is presented as a series of stories within stories, past, present and far future, dreams within dreams that narrate the experiences and histories of differing cultures and races that inherit the same landscape, suggesting possible parallels while at the same time implying, as in actual dreams, that certain visions may reflect the desires or attraction of the dreamer, whereas visions of the future may not necessarily be true. A sense of deeper mysteries haunts the novel throughout, often glimpsed but never fully revealed, mirroring both the existence of the Sea as well as the actual character of dreams. Explanations that evolve, secrets later revealed, tend only to stir further speculation.

This is a complex novel, consisting of multiple layers. The manner of its composition can at times present challenges, especially at the opening, with its constant temporal and locational shifting. Information is withheld, and as suggested above, once gained is as likely to raise further questions as to dispel earlier doubts. And yet the novel's very mystery, the haunted nature of its characters and events, tantalizes and carries the reader forward, always and adroitly waiting for what will next appear. And the fictional realm the author has created is as unforgettable as the memories and half-understood wonders of her alien world, which nevertheless speaks to a deeper, partially gleaned reservoir of shared experience whose contours are consonant with the landscape of dream.

A feat of storytelling which represents much more than mere imagination, in the exploration of its own narrative and the process of its creation, as well as our shared experience of it, the novel becomes in some ways a paean, a celebration and examination of the very urge that spurs speculation, and the manifold dreams that drive humanity, whether to the stars or some more inner imagining. However this is but the first of a pentarch, whose shape is suggested during the novel by the exploration of the pentagonal ruins of Ekrlitan. Similar metaphors and symmetries are laid, and while they remain so far incipient, their gestation for the future appears protean. Easily one of the best books I'll read this year, written with singular vision, I look forward to the sequels with great anticipation, and strongly urge you to make the effort to seek this work out.

Dreams of the Sea Reviewed

by Matt Hughes (www.sfreeder.com)

This is a book of dreams, in both a literary and a literal sense. Its creation began back in 1966 when a teenaged Frenchwoman who was just beginning to write science fiction recorded a Big Meaningful Dream. She wrote only two lines in her diary: "A huge planet, entirely covered twice a year by a universal tide, during a universal eclipse, but nobody dies."

Thirty years later, the young Frenchwoman had long since transplanted herself to Québec and become one of Canada's most revered science fiction writers, with over thirty awards in France, Canada and the US, including the 1993 Philip K. Dick Special Award. And the Big Meaningful Dream had become the Tyranaël Saga, a five-volume epic published in French whose first installment is now appearing in English.

It is a multi-generational tale about the human colonization of one of the twin planets orbiting Altair. The first colonists, fleeing an Earth devastated by man-made disasters, establish their bases and begin to explore the empty and abandoned — yet completely intact — cities of the world's vanished inhabitants.

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Then comes the eclipse. During the violet tinged darkness a vast, glowing Sea rises up along the world's coastlines, submerging the land under a blue tide that dissolves living tissue and cancels all electromagnetic energies. The bases are drowned, the shuttles crash, the survivors regroup and struggle on, awaiting the next shipment of frozen pioneers from Earth.

Thus summarized, *Dreams of the Sea* might sound like your typical planetary colonization yarn, out of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* by way of *Forbidden Planet*. But as the Bard said, there's a rub, and it's an intriguing one: the story is told in fragments that capture episodes in the lives of the colonists as the generations pile up and they adjust to the regular inundations. The fragments themselves are not chosen for recounting by an anonymous narrator; instead they are the Dreams of Eilai Liannon Klaidaru, one of Tyranaël's vanished inhabitants, a cat-eyed species, some of whom are chosen for training in recondite psychic arts.

Of all Tyranaël's Dreamers, only Eilai Dreams of the Strangers, as the Earthers are called: of Timmi, the little boy who sees the Sea coming; of Ti-Jean Carigan, the adventurer who changed his name to put a teenage murder behind him; of Shandaar the eminent archaeologist, confined to a madhouse by the colonial authorities lest he disturb the comfortable consensus about the nature of the Sea.

The Sea is the elephant in the living room, the great unavoidable fact of life on Tyranaël that the colonists nonetheless elect not to notice. For it is not actually a sea; that is merely the word they have affixed to it, although it's true that you can sail a boat on it, sometimes. Yet after generations on the world, with the Sea regularly coming and going, no one knows what it is, nor where it comes from, nor where it goes. Is it a kind of energy that no instrument can register? Is it an entity, sentient or not? Is it even **there** at all, or merely an illusory effect on human senses?

There may come answers to these and other questions as the five-volume saga rolls on; indeed, I would be surprised if there weren't. But perhaps only mildly surprised. For this is not a linear narrative, progressing stolidly from beginning to middle to end. It is a series of trips into the Dreamtime. As Eilai calls up Dreams of the Strangers and of her own folks, events and characters emerge as if in a literal dream, rising up out of the unconscious to act their parts and speak their lines, then fading as another series of players arrive to strut and fret.

The over-all effect is dreamlike. It lends to the story an aura of **mystery** in the old sense of the word, of deeper realities that can only be guessed at in the shapes of what we see and hear and touch. The writing, too, helps create and sustain the dreaming mood; it is both lush and distant, rich and cool at the same time. I often felt I was hearing echoes of Ursula K. LeGuin's felicitous touch with a descriptive phrase.

One minor irritant: in places the translation fails. For example, the French word "comme" translates into English as either "like" or "as" and the two are not interchangeable in usage. But in this translation, it's always "like." I wouldn't ordinarily make this quibble, but the author herself is listed on the cover as one of the translators.

Still, such small glitches aside, *Dreams of the Sea* is a powerful rendering of story as dream and of dream as story. I will be most interested to see where it goes.

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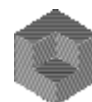
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Writer as Dreamer, Reader as Dreamed

Reviewed by Kathleen Ann Goonan (New York Review of Science Fiction)

The best fiction does not explain. It tantalizes. Such is the case with DREAMS OF THE SEA, by Elisabeth Vonarburg.

Vonarburg's Tyranael series, which spans five novels, was originally published in French. DREAMS OF THE SEA and the following novel, A GAME OF PERFECTION (now in the process of being published in English), won the Grand Prix de la science-fiction et du fantastique quebécois in 1997 as well as the prestigious Grand Prix de la SF Française. In fact, all of Vonarburg's novels have been honored with prizes, including the Aurora, a Special Philip K. Dick Award, a Tiptree Award, the Foire du Livre de Saint-Etienne, and others. We are in the hands of a very accomplished author, whose philosophical, social, and political muses are always intimately intertwined with an overarching concern about the nature of perception and consciousness. Vonarburg's oeuvre is intellectually challenging, yet it is anything but dry; it shines with her strong emphasis on character.

In DREAMS OF THE SEA we encounter a world—or, perhaps many worlds—which are paradoxically transparent and opaque at the same time. For DREAMS introduces more mysteries than it resolves.

The book is narrated, and filtered, by Eilai Liannon Klaidaru. She tells us at the outset that she is an old woman. We learn that she is an acolyte of a religion, the members of which are called the ailmadzi, with its own tests, paranormal Gifts, and pilgrimages. A state of enlightenment is mentioned in conjunction with the Sea, a blue, foglike entity which rises in response to celestial events and absorbs living tissue, but leaves non-living objects intact.

Eilai, at the outset, speaks of neighboring universes—universes of consciousness, if you will, where perhaps the essence of the characters inhabiting several are identical, or at least quite similar. Event, that concrete convergence of infinite variables, takes place, whereupon time, with its cargo of consciousness, diverges into the multiverse. However, the events Eilai Dreams—an experience during which the Dreamer sees through the eyes of the person experiencing the event via memory plates—have the concrete weight of reality. In this way, Vonarburg strikes a balance between the episodic and effervescent nature of the book, which is a vast query into our dance with reality, and the shattered narratives of characters and places to which we will no doubt return in ensuing volumes.

Put briefly, three planets are involved, several timeframes (some which may still be in the future of the Eilai and perhaps even influenced by the process of Dreaming, much as observation changes an event), and two distinct waves of population from Earth: Eilai calls those who come from Earth the Strangers.

The first from Earth to encounter this planet are explorers, some of whom vanish tragically and mysteriously during the initial landing. The landing takes place during an eclipse involving two of the planets which circle one another in this newly discovered solar system. The Sea rises, and encompasses the explorers, leaving their stunned companions alive, but forever after carrying the memory of this tragedy as they establish their settlements, having lost communication with Earth. These explorers, archaeologists and scientists, call the planet Prime. They respect the vanished inhabitants, regard them with wonder, and wish to discover their secret of the ancient, deserted (but beautifully intact), cities. The cities appear to have been technologically advanced, and there are suggestions that the

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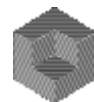
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builders were able to find a balance between technology and livability, unlike those who are fleeing Earth. And they wish to understand the Sea.

The third planet, seen only in glimpses, is a ruined, ravaged Earth, from which colonists to the new planet are carefully culled after communication is reestablished, after several generations. This second wave of inhabitants from Earth, who call the planet Virginia, are pioneers determined to make a go of it, to live within the mystery, mine its mineral riches, and build a viable habitat for humanity. Their pragmatic mission precludes wondering too much about the strange properties of the Sea, as long as they can coexist with it.

But even this solid information is difficult to pin down; it takes a long time for it to come into focus. To step into this book is to be submerged in successive waves of event and character. Taking the long view, it is a disquisition, perhaps, on what it means to be an author, to pick and choose among points of view and points in time and assemble a narrative. But in the short run, as a reader, I found it at first hard to keep my feet. Early on in this adventure, I had to forsake my readerly urge to know and allow myself to experience. I gradually learned that I was in a world of twisted time, of mirrors that reflect at strange angles. Eilai Dreams, through the eyes of the Strangers, the mysteries of her own lost culture, for she and the cities and friezes and technologies they left behind are the Strangers of the settlers. Nothing becomes clear until the book is almost two-thirds over, but if you like Vonarburg's writing, as I do, this is to be expected and welcomed. Vonarburg always takes on great themes, planetwide, culturewide, cosmoswide. Deserted cities and vanished civilizations are some of her recurring tropes and, in a sense, a finished novel is a city deserted by the living author, an artifact awaiting rediscovery and re-habitation by a new Dreamer.

I was taught to never write in books; to do so was to invoke the same powers which would cause the flag to burst into flames if it touched the ground. Therefore, I make notes in my books with great transgressive pleasure. As I reread DREAMS for this review, I found myself circling each new name, each new phrase. I was almost compelled to begin a compendium in order to keep track of the context in which they were mentioned. Rereading and thought are definitely rewarded; this is not a book that you can down casually. I came to the conclusion that the best approach is akin to that used when immersing oneself in epic poetry.

As in a poem, you can count on the fact that every word and scene is a viable clue; one hopes for the focussing vantage point much as Eilai hopes for explanations to be gleaned from the memory plates which she accesses. These memory plates are like transparent overlays which variously color Event, depending on who has accessed them and thereby added their own weight of observation. Vonarburg's beautiful, precise writing does not exist merely for its own sake, but throws further light on the mystery: What is the Sea? Is it time? Is it mind?

It is a very real substance with a very real effect, but it defies analysis because it paralyses scientific instruments. It is the very essence, perhaps, of non-rationality, an effect which confounds linearity and plays with time and space. The Sea resembles the collective unconscious; it is an ocean of images perceived by Eilai. She chooses the order, and says "I hold to my arrangement." Each fragment is conveyed with the intimacy of our own dreams, utterly familiar and at the same time foreign and unknowable. The difference between Dreams and dreams is that Dreams are the close point of view of the person who originally experienced the event, re-experienced through the memory plates.

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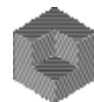
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One reaches the end of the book with a novelish sense of settledness. Eilai's elegiac tone gives the book the kind of emotional closure that a novel requires, and beautifully links beginning and end. We finish where we began—but changed, having experienced the Eilai's sequence of Dreams. If DREAMS OF THE SEA were the only novel to consider in this story, it would be incomplete—unsettling and haunting, yet more than compelling enough to read for its own sake. Certainly, the text contains enough clues to assemble a viable and deeply satisfying experience, but hints at depths to still be revealed. We are only at the shore of this particular sea, where the people and events are imbued with that palpable sense of being which makes them real.

All novels, of course, are Dreams. Immersing oneself in Vonarburg's longer Dream, in the form of the entire cycle which is yet to come, will be the only way to satisfy.

Dreams of the Real

Reviewed by John Garrison (Strange Horizons, 28 June 2004)

Labeling a novel as "science fiction" immediately creates certain expectations among readers and critics. These expectations, while useful in preparing readers to expect unexpected settings and situations, can often lead us to focus too much on genre-specific elements and not notice other important elements of the novel.

While Élisabeth Vonarburg's Dreams of the Sea is firmly a "science fiction" novel, it is truly a unique work that strikes new ground within the genre and also reaches heights that few other contemporary novels strive for, let alone achieve.

First off, a bit of background for those not familiar with Vonarburg's work. Élisabeth Vonarburg is a widely known science fiction writer in Canada and is actively involved in the speculative fiction community as a translator, convention organizer, literary editor, and writer. She has also received the Philip K. Dick Special Award in 1993 and the 1998 "Prix du Conseil québécois de la Femme en Littérature," a one-time literary award given by the québécois Council for Women's Affairs on its twentieth anniversary. Dreams of the Sea is the English translation of the first book in her five-book Tyranaël series.

Like few other recent novels (both within and outside the genre), Dreams of the Sea elegantly interweaves the philosophical with the deeply personal. Profound questions of perception, personal identity, and the extent to which our world is knowable are investigated through the moving experiences of the characters—losing a loved one, choosing one's path in life, reconciling childhood experiences with one's adult life. In fact, addressing core problems of philosophy is intrinsic to these characters reconciling their own conflicts, unresolved feelings, and interpersonal relationships.

Dreams of the Sea traces the efforts of a small group of survivors of a party of Earth explorers, who are stranded on the planet Tyranaël. The majority of their party and their technology have been wiped out by the onset of an enigmatic blue Sea that sweeps unexpectedly across whole sections of the planet. The survivors are left to make a life for themselves amongst the ruins of the ancient civilization they had come to study.

But this tale is not told from the perspective of the human colonists. Rather, their experiences are told through the eyes of Tyranaël's native Dreamers, who are viewing the survivors' experiences from a time several millennia earlier.

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And so these native Dreamers envision bits and parts of the surviving colonists' experiences, observing how they deal with loss, new love, and the discovery of Tyranaël. At the same time, the Dreamers are living out their own lives, reconciling their own hopes, fears, and conflicts.

What emerges is a carefully written, delightfully complex story. The parallel storylines—those of the humans and the Dreamers—allow the book to explore how both species address similar situations in vastly different cultural contexts.

These dual timeframes allow the book to look closely at the process of understanding. The culture of natives is described first-hand, interleaved with the humans hypothesizing the native culture through the study of relics and decaying temples.

The novel's narrative structure, as well as the title of the novel itself, might imply that the text has a dream-like, perhaps muddled quality. However, the book is actually filled with very concrete details and possesses a clear teleology that one can follow if one reads carefully. Indeed, the novel's climax is depicted with dazzling clarity as the humans and the natives explore the same site on the planet, yet thousands of years apart. Each party arrives there to question the same mystery of the planet's origins.

One of the most compelling elements of the story is that each native Dreamer only views a small part of each human's lifetime. The stranded explorers' experiences are pieced together by Dreamers tapping into the various memory plates onto which their visions have been stored. As Eilai (the primary Dreamer through which most of the story is told) taps one of these plates, she remarks "I have always liked Arethai's Joris . . . and perhaps her Joris is not actually the same as mine." Joris, one of the colonists from Earth, is perceived differently depending on which Dreamer has Dreamed her. Joris' attempt to find community and love on this new world is particularly meaningful to Eilai, who herself longs to feel less isolated and also deals with issues of loss.

Later in the novel, Eilai taps memory plates of the older generations of natives who had precognitive visions of her before she was born. Unable to remember the childhood events depicted, she questions whether these fragments are real scenes from her youth or not. She cannot know. As if to underscore this point, the narrative here de-stabilizes notions of an essential self by seamlessly transitioning from the "I" who is the narrator and the "her" who is "perhaps me."

This trope of questioning the validity of memory and illuminating the different ways in which several people can view a single person is found throughout the novel. When invoked, this theme is reminiscent Roland Barthes' description of photography as "the impossible science of the unique being," referring to the inherent conflict between the fact that each individual is constantly growing and changing, yet is considered the same person as their younger self depicted in photographs.

The novel elegantly poses the problem of perception: how each individual perceives the world differently and what impact this may have on the notion of objective truth. In this way, *Dreams of the Sea* is much like Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, where perspectives shift throughout the story in order to invoke the philosophical question of how perception affects each person's understanding of the external world and the individuals who populate it. Yet, like Woolf, Vonarburg manages to address these questions and simultaneously have a direct emotional impact on the reader. In their acts of making the world strange to us, both authors somehow connect more directly with our deeper emotions and values.

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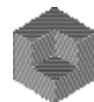
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Dreams of the Sea is a novel that merits re-reading, as scenes and conversations play multiple roles within the novel: advancing the plot, revealing characters, expressing positions on philosophical debates. Indeed, fireside conversations begin with "What is truth?" and ponder the nature of language's relationship to "Objects that the eye can label quite readily as 'table,' 'chair,' 'couch'." But these dalliances into profound quandary do not impede the casual reader's enjoyment of the novel; the story itself is highly engaging and expertly paced. These kinds of conversations reveal important character traits and slow the pace of the story at the right time—and for the right amount of time—between major nodes of action. The reader can look for these—or not. They do not disrupt the action of the story, but rather offer a depth into which one can choose to plunge.

It should be said that Dreams of the Sea is not an easy read. The shifting perspectives, multiple plot lines, non-chronological storytelling and measured unraveling of the world's central mysteries require close attention. Further, the sheer beauty of the prose is a bit lulling. It's easy to get caught up in the beauty of the language and the originality of the situations, only to miss important revelations.

Having said all this, one can simply read this book for the beauty of the prose and not concern oneself with its deeper meanings. After all, one can read Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* simply as a good detective story or Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* series as simply an engaging adventure story. And, in fact, sometimes one wants to.

The Book Watch

by the staff of The Midwest Book Review

Elisabeth Vonarburg's *Dreams Of The Sea* presents the first of five books in the acclaimed *Tyranael* series. The eclipse of twin planets over planet *Tyranael* kills most of its Earth colonist settlers, forcing the few survivors to make a new life in the cities of a long-vanished alien population. The strange dreams of *Eilai* are forecasting more challenges, however, and it's up to the colonists to unravel the truth beyond her dream's dangerous predictions.

Book Review

by R.F. Briggs (www.yetanotherbookreview.com)

Fascinating, character driven, examination of humanity's settling of the planet *Tyranael*, revealed through the eyes of a native "Dreamer", *Eilai*, one of the long-vanished natives of the planet.

Ms. Vonarburg deserves the highest marks for pulling off this ambitious attempt at telling a dual time-line, highly detailed, sensitive, SF character study of two societies: one set in distant past, a gentle verisimilitude of mankind but with a vivid, detailed, alien culture; the other, a more familiar rendering of man, struggling to understand and tame a foreign world. Toss in an enigmatic, fog-like sea, that comes and goes at regular intervals, claiming any living being it touches; respected and an integral aspect of the former society, feared and a source of mystery by the latter and *DREAMS OF THE SEA*, is a winner. - Ralph Briggs

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