



Orion Lost

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Editorial Choice:

off

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Book

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25 pages in, and thirteen-year-old Beth has already faced up to a bully ? a kid called Arnold several inches taller than herself - in what almost ended in a punch-up in the cafeteria. She?s met a geeky girl whose non-stop chatter travels the familiar route from awesome to totally to dude and back again to awesome. There?s a quiet lad who?s into studying foreign languages. Beth finds an older boy, Vihaan, irritatingly cool, even contemptuous towards other young people. It could be one of those YA stories starting with the first day at a new school, where readers of Alastair Chisholm?s debut novel might feel very much at home; except they?ve also learned that they?re aboard Orion, a transport spaceship embarked on a pioneering mission. As she explored the vessel, Beth has encountered the ubiquitous ?Ship, the Orion?s central interface?, a kind of Super-Alexa, which materialises as an oval blue head with ?very lifelike eyes?, floating into view when summoned by crew or passengers to provide advice, information, or answers to queries. In those early chapters, we have also met five of the novel?s six young protagonists and glimpsed their main characteristics in action. Beth herself is interestingly complicated; she?s uncertain about her own strengths, but in the way she handled Arnold we?ve already seen she lacks nothing in courage or empathy.

Orion?s occupants are colonists, leaving Earth behind en route for a new life on the distant dwarf star, Eos Five. The young people?s skills include high level computing, practical engineering and training in Command techniques. They?ll need such resources in the coming days, for there are ruthless enemies out there in space, such as the piratical Scrapers who live by plundering ships like Orion. At least the Scrapers are human ? the voyagers are far more wary of the Videshi, aliens whose intentions remain opaque. What?s more, it seems there may also be an enemy within.

The world of Orion is convincingly ?other? without Chisholm overwhelming us with technology. One of his most ingenious inventions is ?Jumping?, a manoeuvre whereby ships can slip swiftly through ?folds? in space, clipping light years off a journey. It?s during an emergency Jump that major problems arise, leaving the young people in control of the ship, far from Earth while the adults lie locked in a state of suspended sleep, unable to be woken. Orion is seriously damaged; everything depends on the six young people, their skills, their native wits and daring ? an echo of fictions reaching back to the likes of *Coral Island* by way of **Swallows and Amazons**, where the pressures of the plot test young people to their limits in an adult-free world.

Beth has the responsibilities of Acting Captain thrust upon her by Ship ? on the grounds that she scored 0.5% higher in a

recent Command Training exam than Vihaan, the more experienced candidate and, as it happens, the son of the sleeping Captain of the Orion. He resents her authority, even as his training requires him to obey her. Her other challenges include not only marauding Scrapers and Videshi, but also carrying out essential repairs to Orion without experienced technicians or fully functioning tools. There are betrayals and double dealings to be confronted along the way, as the Orion races towards a finale which finds a surprising touch of comedy ? at the expense of adults ? in the concluding pages.

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