



### OUR CHILD OF THE STARS

**Stephen Cox**

Jo Fletcher Books hb, 483pp, £14.99

**Juliet McKenna**

The story opens with Molly making a Halloween costume for her son, Cory. So far, so domestic and reassuring. We soon realise this is small town America (Amber Grove, population 18053) and readers can quickly find their bearings, from personal experience or popular culture. Just as quickly, we pick up odd, discordant notes, that keep those initial pages turning. When trick or treaters come to the door, Molly tells them there are no kids in the house. Strictly speaking, that's sort of true. With lavender skin, a tail and long pointed ears, Cory's no human child.

The action shifts to the story of Cory's arrival, some years earlier. Hints in the first chapter are built upon, to reveal this is 1960s America, when even small towns like Amber Grove feel the tensions of the Vietnam War, the Cold War, and the arms race. This gives the book added layers and depth. Those familiar with 50s and 60s SF will also find distinct echoes of writers like John Wyndham whose

novels explore human character, ethics and morality when ordinary people in ordinary places suffer the upheavals of extraordinary events. Not that such prior reading is essential. The book more than succeeds on its own merits.

Molly and her husband Gene are very ordinary. She's a nurse and he's a librarian who was raised on a small farm. At first glance, they're familiar characters that would fit into any 60s TV show where families live behind white picket fences enjoying the American dream. Except as we rapidly learn, these are convincingly complicated people with hopes and dreams and losses, trying to cope with the stresses that result. We see the dark side of that small town idyll. It's impossible to avoid neighbourhood scrutiny, as well as stifling 1960s attitudes, not merely with regard to race, but to women's roles, expectations of marriage, and the demands of being a manly man. So much for the Golden Age. We live in a very different world and we can be grateful for that.

And yet, we also see that the more things change, the more they stay the same. When there's a meteor strike that would fit right into any 60s SF movie, Molly and the local hospital's staff are called on to treat the casualties. All of them. Ethics demand that they treat every patient, regardless of appearance, and Cory comes into their lives. Now the 1960s setting works with the story in interesting and effective ways, well thought through. The characters' actions are wholly plausible in the context of a decade with simpler views of life on other planets, when so many things still seemed possible as men prepared to walk on the moon (though that plays out very differently here). The practicalities of a world without cell phones and surveillance work to Molly and Gene's advantage, as well as working against them.

At the same time, this is far more than some period piece. Governments notice meteors and pay close attention to what happens next. When Molly, Gene and Cory come up against that harsh reality, the story explores many of the questions that drive the best contemporary SF. What do we do when governments overstep their bounds, trampling individual rights in the name of national security? Where's the tipping point between sensible caution, and paranoia that makes everything worse? When does an open mind become naivety that's going to get people killed, especially when it comes to the unexpected consequences of technology? How do we guarantee freedom of the press for the common good, when the unscrupulous are always ready to manipulate the media for their own, ideological ends? This book is very much about the world we live in now.

Cox does all this with fluid, accessible prose that draws the reader deep into the story. The pace and emotional distance shifts subtly and effectively, and the skill that takes should be applauded. At times, we're observing Molly, Gene and Cory, with the benefit of knowledge they lack. When readers can foresee trouble that they don't, the tension builds. At other points we're seeing events through their eyes, deeply invested in their emotions, and sharing their uncertainty over what might happen next. Cory's viewpoint in particular challenges us to examine things that we may well take for granted. Other viewpoints round out the story, and warn us against making assumptions, even about 'the bad guys' whom SF, then and now, so often reduces to cliché.

In summary, Cox takes a classic SF idea and turns it into something wholly fresh and intensely gripping. Highly recommended reading.