

My Mother, Dancing by Nancy Kress

Nancy Kress's most recent book, Nothing Human, came out last fall from Golden Gryphon Press. It has been called "a Childhood's End for the biotech millennium."

Fermi's Paradox, California, 1950: Since planet formation appears to be common, and since the processes that lead to the development of life are a continuation of those that develop planets, and since the development of life leads to intelligence and intelligence to technology—then why hasn't a single alien civilization contacted Earth?

Where is everybody?

They had agreed, laughing, on a form of the millennium contact, what Micah called “human standard,” although Kabil had insisted on keeping his konfol and Deb had not dissolved his crest, which waved three inches above his head and hummed. But, then, Deb! Ling had designed floating baktors for the entire ship, red and yellow mostly, that combined and recombined in kaleidoscopic loveliness that only Ling could have programmed. The viewport was set to magnify, the air mixture just slightly intoxicating, the tinglies carefully balanced by Cal, that master. Ling had wanted “natural” sleep cycles, but Cal’s arguments had been more persuasive, and the tinglies massaged the limbic so pleasantly. Even the child had some. It was a party.

The ship slipped into orbit around the planet, a massive subJovian far from its sun, streaked with muted color. “Lovely,” breathed Deb, who lived for beauty.

Cal, the biologist, was more practical: “I ran the equations; by now there should be around two hundred thousand of them in the rift, if the replication rate stayed constant.”

“Why wouldn’t it?” said Ling, the challenger, and the others laughed. The tinglies really were a good idea.

The child, Harrah, pressed his face to the window. “When can we land?”

The adults smiled at each other. They were so proud of Harrah, and so careful. His was the first gene-donate of all of them except Micah, and probably the only one for the rest of them except Cal, who was a certified intellect donor. Kabil knelt beside Harrah, bringing his face close to the child’s height.

“Little love, we can’t land. Not here. We must see the creations in holo.”

“Oh,” Harrah said, with the universal acceptance of childhood. It had not changed in five thousand years, Ling was fond of remarking, that child idea that whatever it lived was the norm. But, then . . . *Ling*.

“Access the data,” Cal said, and Harrah obeyed, reciting it aloud as his parents had all taught him. Ling smiled to see that Harrah still closed his eyes to access, but opened them to recite.

“The creations were dropped on this planet 273 E-years ago. They were the one-hundred-fortieth drop in the Great Holy Mission that gives us our life. The creations were left in a closed-system rift . . . what does that mean?”

“The air in the creations’ valley doesn’t get out to the rest of the planet, because the valley is so deep and the gravity so great. They have their own air.”

“Oh. The creations are cyborged replicators, programmed for self-awareness. They are also programmed to expect human contact at the millennium. They . . .”

“Enough,” said Kabil, still kneeling beside Harrah. His stroked his hair, black

