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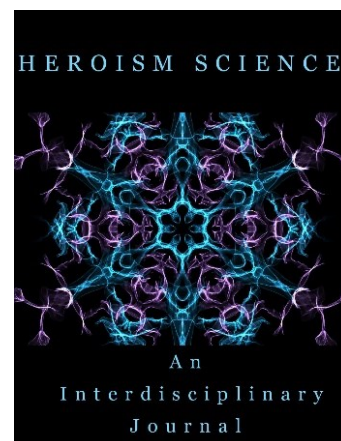
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# Everyday Heroism and the Journey of the Community in *The Long Way to a Small, Angry Planet* by Becky Chambers



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**ABSTRACT:** This article examines the impact of everyday heroism on community in the science fiction novel *The Long Way to a Small, Angry Planet* (2014) by Becky Chambers. While science fiction often features superhuman action or scientist heroes and technocratic dystopian futures, Chambers's novel represents the recent trend of hopepunk, which sets stories within mundane social interactions to imagine gradual positive change. Instead of its action-adventure potential, the narrative in Chambers's novel focuses on the relationships between a multi-species crew of a spaceship, creating a heightened sense of the crew as a found family where individuals come to accept and support each other – and in this way, the story centers around the journey of the community towards equality, inclusion, and hope. I argue that the everyday heroism in the novel is transparent but highly prosocial, overall resulting in a representation of everyday heroism as a way to imagine more hopeful futures.

**KEYWORDS:** *heroism in communities, everyday heroism, inclusion, equality, prosocial behavior science fiction, hopepunk, space opera*

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

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Dystopian takes on the future have been in vogue with science fiction for the past few decades. These stories often feature almost superhuman action or scientist heroes that navigate unforgiving futures in technocratic societies – and their heroism takes place on a world-encompassing scale where the future of humankind frequently hangs in balance. Science fiction has traditionally often favored large (scientific) ideas over representations of psychologically fully-rounded individuals. As a result, the genre has tended to reproduce stereotypical heroes and operate on a rather Carlylean “Great Man Theory” conception of history (Carlyle 2007, 4), merely changing the focus from kings and emperors to scientists and businessmen who steer the society. While characterization has become a more central element since the genre’s early days, the often technocratic and dystopian futures have been challenged through recent trends such as hopepunk, which often imagines positive change through a smaller scale and everyday characters. In this article, I examine the science fiction novel *The Long Way to a Small, Angry Planet* (2014) by Becky Chambers and argue that as it aligns with this hopeful strand of science fiction, despite some ethical tensions, it emphasizes the impact of everyday heroism on individuals and community in a way that models a hopeful heroic activity for everyday existence.

On the surface, Chambers’s novel includes typical science fiction elements: the story centers around a wormhole-building ship, the *Wayfarer*, and its crew that take on a dangerous governmental job, and in addition to humans who are a minority in the galaxy, it features various alien species with their extrahuman capabilities. However, as the story unfolds, its action-adventure potential is left in the background and the narrative focuses on the sometimes dysfunctional but ultimately benevolent relationships between the multi-species crew. This approach creates a heightened sense of the crew as a found family where individuals come to accept and support each other – and in this way the story centers around

the journey of the community towards equality, inclusion, and hope. Instead of a single protagonist, the narration shifts focalization between different crew members, providing a variety of cultural and gender-related perspectives. While the novel is not as such structured as episodes, this results in an episodic approach to storytelling where each crewmember's story is told partly through their perspective, highlighting their character. In this, the novel is not unlike a television series, such as Joss Whedon's science fiction TV series *Firefly* (2002-2003) to which it has been compared (see, e.g., Dina 2016). As a result, the novel's narrative tension lies mostly within these episodes, some of them more action-oriented, some leaning more towards family drama, and there are frequent returns to equilibrium in between as the crew gathers in the ship's canteen. As I argue, the everyday heroism of Chambers's characters is often rather transparent but highly prosocial, and the narration frequently demonstrates how it is key in maintaining the community inside the crew's small community. Through this focus, I explore how Chambers underlines the small acts of everyday heroism and shows the small community on both a literal and a metaphorical journey through the wilderness of space towards a better society. Furthermore, I posit that this kind of emphasis, emblematic of hopepunk, works to shift focus from large-scale heroic tales to smaller, perhaps more effective, models for a better world.

Hopepunk, as it imagines solidarity and positive collective identity, is essentially a response to the genre's long-standing dystopian impulse, providing personal and social renewal outside commercialized and surveilled capitalist spaces of the mainstream. As Aja Romano (2018) sees it in her subgenre-defining popular article:

*hopepunk isn't ever about submission or acceptance: It's about standing up and fighting for what you believe in. It's about standing up for other people. It's about DEMANDING a better, kinder world, and truly believing that we can get there if we*

*care about each other as hard as we possibly can, with every drop of power in our little hearts.*

Similarly, in Chambers's own view, "There's no point to surviving if you're not aiming for something better" (Favreau 2012), and resistance to stories of desperate survival at grim futures indeed seems key to her work. For example, Armirand (2021) notes the optimism of her work as "offering a blueprint of sorts for a world where diversity is truly welcomed and disputes can be discussed" (134). Refusal to lapse into dystopian narratives of desperate survival, together with a drive for prosocial action, suggests a heroic progression even in Campbell's (1949) terms of "a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return" (35), but although hopepunk centralizes stories of hope, it seems to reject messianic Campbellian heroes as the agents of turning such hope into action. This results in stories of more human proportion, imagining communal solutions (Scheier 2021) that can spread equality and inclusion out to the society at large. Chambers sees challenging the genre's common character types as key to imagining something better, preferring characters who are "ordinary people living within an intergalactic society, the people who walk through the spaceport behind the heroes, who are normally not at the forefront of the story" (Favreau 2016; Kehe 2021). This focus on imagining the lives of people who are usually mere background or collateral damage in world-changing galactic hero stories, allows for an examination of everyday heroism. This is in contrast to the often rather pessimistic approach that classic science fiction often takes when employing ordinary people as central characters. That is, especially earlier science fiction tends to use such characters to demonstrate the insignificance of individuals at the face of large historical events. In classic science fiction, the more optimistic takes on heroism seem to be more common with typically Campbellian heroes of galaxy-spanning impact. However, keeping the heroes on this everyday level seems an overarching quality of hopepunk: rather than

foregrounding messianic heroes who demolish unjust structures but leave building for others, these heroes are, through gradual everyday action, building something better.<sup>2</sup>

Conceptualizing everyday heroism, Franco et al. (2018) point out that “acts of everyday heroism can be carried out by all and are not reserved to an elite minority” (386, see also Farley 2012). Keczer et al. (2016) note that in contrast to large-scale heroism where “doing something extraordinary” is often a rather abstract conception, “everyday heroism implies just doing the right thing and it points out the ordinary roles, occupations and contexts in which the heroic values can be exhibited” (14). Thus, in contrast to “Big H heroism [which] refers to outstanding acts that display prototypical heroism” that require exceptional skill, moral courage, or competence (Keczer et al. 2016, 2; see also Atkinson et al. 2022, 10-11; Franco et al. 2018, 387; Kinsella et al. 2015, 124), “Small h Heroism refers to small but challenging good deeds” which take place “in everyday circumstances” and in essence often amount to “doing the right thing” in everyday situations that depend on being helpful, selfless and mindful of others (Keczer et al. 2016, 2, 11; see also Allison et al. 2016, 11). As I argue, such everyday heroism plays a significant role in Chambers’s depiction of the *Wayfarer* crew as an inclusive community where empathy and caring are understood as crucial in fostering the familial community and directing its positive effect outwards. As Ramos (2020) argues in her examination of hopepunk, such “hopefulness is not empty optimism or a feel-good narrative, as it demands action and awareness” and it is “a form of creating and reclaiming symbolic spaces where marginalized narratives can be finally voiced in order to subvert and challenge the systems of inequality” (31-32). Chambers frequently

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<sup>2</sup> Hopepunk overlaps with the subgenre of solarpunk which according to Ulibarri (2018) tells “stories that depict adaptation and compromise rather than destruction and conquest, stories that value empathy and cooperation over greed and competition” (1). This manifesto-like approach is visible in the prefaces to many of the recent solarpunk anthologies, such as *Multispecies Cities: Solarpunk Urban Futures*, presented as aiming to “question progress-based narratives, stories of the individual, the lone hero” and instead provide “templates for a hopeful and inclusive multispecies future” (Rupprecht et al. 2021, 7, 10), or *Afterglow: Climate Fiction for Future Ancestors* (2023) with a focus on stories “to literally rewire our brains to be interested in our creation and continuation, more than our destruction” (Brown).

depicts the behavior of the *Wayfarer* crew in her novel as prosocial action which benefits everyone on the ship, one episode at a time, forging a tight social bond and a sense of mutual understanding and care.

## 2 “TRYING TO BE SOMEONE GOOD”: ESTABLISHING INCLUSIVE SPACE, POLITENESS AND RESPECT

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While Chambers’s novel consistently advocates for understanding and empathizing with others, her story does draw much of its narrative tension from exploring the social dynamic of the crew, displaying a gradually heightened sense of found family among them. The narration presents this as helping both the newcomer and the seasoned crewmembers that initially seem too cynical or withdrawn to allow themselves to be included in the family – in the process creating space for difference and depicting a community’s journey towards inclusion and hope.

The examples of this kind of prosocial behavior, caring, and support start early on. The novel opens with tense conversations between the captain of *Wayfarer*, Ashby Santoso, and Artis Corbin, a grumpy algae fuel scientist, over the competence of the newly-hired clerk Rosemary Harper. Already this exchange establishes a sense of maintaining an inclusive community as Ashby tells Corbin that “Regardless of how you feel about her, I expect you to make her feel welcome” (Chambers 2015, 10), the narration thus priming reader focus on considerate personal interactions. The focus on kindness is apparent also when Rosemary, nervous about her new job, first encounters Lovey, the ship’s friendly chatting AI on her arrival to the ship. At this exchange, Rosemary becomes aware of having treated the AI like a person with whom she wants to be polite, but she is also somewhat baffled by the experience where “She paused, realizing that she was trying to make an AI feel better” (18). Although the first organic being Rosemary meets is Corbin, his curt tour of the ship is quickly followed by the “enormous hug” and a greeting of “Welcome home” (21) from Kizzy and Jenks, the

ship's quirky and kindly bantering technicians. As this is followed by the pilot, Sissix, taking over from Corbin, telling Rosemary that "coming to a new home deserves a better welcome" (26-27), the familial and welcoming atmosphere is established as the norm on board *Wayfarer*.

Rosemary herself is depicted as making a highly conscious effort to not let her own cultural bias affect her interactions. For example, the pilot Sissix is of an Aandrisk species that Rosemary has never encountered in person. Aandrisk are, in Rosemary's perception, a reptile-like species who have a tail, body covered by "[m]oss green scales," and "a smooth face, no nose or lips or ears to speak of, just holes for breathing and holes for hearing and a small slit of a mouth" and feathers covering their heads (25). As the narration is here focalized through Rosemary, we see her at this first encounter with Sissix constantly aware of how her initial ideas of the Aandrisk – as having "*Virtually no concept of personal space*" or being "*Promiscuous*" – "smacked of ethnocentrism" and "stemmed from cultural bias" (24-25, original italics). She also recollects how her old university professor on interspecies relations warned to "*not judge other species by your own social norms*" (24, original italics), and reminds herself that "She was part of a multispecies crew now, and she was going to be graceful about it, dammit" (25), further emphasizing this constant awareness and drive to counter cultural bias. Such constant emphasis on the characters' awareness of how they treat others reflects an almost pedagogical prerogative in the narration, demonstrating desired positive behavior at unfamiliar cultural interactions.

As most of the characters are depicted, similarly to Rosemary, as either actively striving to be accepting towards others or apologizing for lapses in such behavior, this emphasizes the portrayal of acceptance and inclusion as a constant process where self-awareness is key to building an inclusive community. At the same time, most of the crew are also depicted as actively holding each other to such standards. At the start, Corbin is depicted



as outright racist, and while this sets up a potential narrative for his change, it also prompts a display of captain Ashby's quick intervention into such behavior:

*Corbin was indignant. . . . "If that selfish lizard can't –*

*"Hey" Ashby sat up straight. "Not okay. I don't want to hear that word come out of your mouth again." As far as racial insults went, lizard was hardly the worst, but it was bad enough.*

*. . . "I will talk to Sissix, but you have got to be more civil to people. And I don't care how mad you get, that kind of language does not belong on my ship." (9)*

Such occasions of everyday heroism, calling out unacceptable behavior, are represented as actively promoting safety and maintaining cooperation among the crew. As toward the end also Corbin starts to strive towards acceptance, the novel's representation of these interactions creates a space where people are allowed to make mistakes and learn from them.

This behavior is emphasized at several points in the story, and later on Rosemary even directly thanks Sissix for "the kindness you've shown – not just to me, but to everyone," saying "You go out of your way to make everyone aboard this ship comfortable, to show us affection in the way *we* expect it" (274-275, original italics). While the crew is depicted as something of a model community of inclusion and intercultural understanding, they are also portrayed as politely curious about other species and their cultures. For example, Dr Chef – the ship's doctor and cook, of a Grum species that have six limbs and for whom "biological sex is a transitional state of being" (35) – asks "what's the point of talking to different species if you don't take the time to learn their words?" (36) although the human language is difficult for him because of anatomical differences. Dr Chef also sums up what seems to be the novel's larger message: After having explained the genocidal past of his species to Rosemary

– who in turn has explained her own background as a daughter of a powerful man who was disgraced in illegal arms deals – Dr Chef tells Rosemary:

*“All you can to, Rosemary – all any of us can do – is work to be something positive instead. That is a choice that every sapient must make every day of their life. The universe is what we make of it. It’s up to you to decide what part you will play. And what I see in you is a woman who has a clear idea of what she wants to be. . . . You’re trying to be someone good” (213).*

This act of “trying to be someone good” drives much of Chambers’s hopepunk. In terms of theoretical conceptualizations of science fiction, Darko Suvin (1979) famously discussed the “novum,” a novelty or an innovation through which a work of science fiction presents its effect of cognitive estrangement, the conceptual challenge to the world as we know it (63). For Chambers, then, the novum seems located in the inclusive kindness of the *Wayfarer* crew, rather than in any technological innovation.

### 3 “THE POINT OF A FAMILY”: NORMALIZING KINDNESS AND PROSOCIAL ACTION

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*The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet* has indeed already been discussed in terms of the affective solidarity of the society that it depicts, a found family<sup>3</sup> that “prioritizes emotional bonds over legal or biological ones,” becoming the central affective unit where “the politics of intimacy and vulnerability soon become a pivotal element in the story’s narrative” (Ramos 2020, 41, 38). Bolstered by prosocial everyday heroism, the crew’s consistent drive for such solidarity suggests considering the story through “the values underlying the ‘story itself’” in narrative ethics (Phelan & Rabinowitz 2013, 154-155).

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<sup>3</sup> Found families are also termed as “families of choice” that include “the intimate relationships that are characterized by voluntary association, and are actively maintained through certain family practices” (Jones-Wild 2012, 151).

Chambers herself has said that her aim is to make readers question what “they think are just hard and fast rules about what life is, what society is” (Chambers 2019, 24:55), and her narration models for behavior that counters cynical vistas of the cruelty of the world. In the novel, the found family promotes such prosocial behavior which creates a sense of belonging. For example, for captain Ashby,

*The point of a family, he'd always thought, was to enjoy the experience of bringing something new into the universe, passing on your knowledge, and seeing part of yourself live on. . . . He had a crew that relied on him, and a ship that continued to grow, and tunnels that would last for generations. To him, that was enough.*

*(Chambers 2015, 50)*

This is directly aligning the crew as a found family, and the sense of building something becomes an act of establishing that affective solidarity, the hopepunk act of building a kinder world. Indeed, also Sissix is shown as directly considering the familial nature of their existence when she talks about Ashby, and by extension the entire crew as being “the family I need, Ashby. I wouldn't have chosen you otherwise” (329). Although also Sissix's own cultural point of reference is based on the structure of chosen families, such prosocial behavior is depicted as shaping the entire multispecies crew.

Further emphasizing their familial existence, the characters frequently get together around a dinner table. Indeed, Chambers's novel has been considered as depicting food and shared dinners as representing both the individual crewmembers' connections to their home worlds and as enhancing cultural understanding that further strengthens the crew's solidarity, also drawing in the more reclusive crewmembers (George 2022, 624-631). This connection is emphasized through the character of navigator Ohan who never eats with the rest of the crew. This is because Ohan is of a Sianat species who are in childhood deliberately infected with a neurovirus that becomes a part of their consciousness and gives them the ability to

“conceptualise multidimensional space as easily as a Human could do algebra” (Chambers 2015, 43). As a result, they perceive themselves as a plural entity, a “Sianat pair,” but this also makes them extremely wary of their health, eating in their own quarters (43). However, Dr Chef always sets a table also for Ohan so they “know that they’re always welcome” (44), adding yet another gesture of inclusive space early on in the novel.

Axelrod (2018) argues that, also more generally, Chambers’s novel “reinserts the domestic, emotionally centered dynamic into the core of the wandering ship framework” where “the small, everyday dramas of encountering folks beyond one’s own familiar circle for the first time and gradually coming to see them as a new family” become key to the narration (318-319). While welcoming on the social level, the found family of the crew is also presented as inclusive in terms of sexuality. In addition to physical properties such as the transitional gender of Dr Chef and the “sexual dimorphism” of Ohan (Chambers 2015, 321), they are also treating the story’s several interspecies and LGBTQ+ relations as a non-issue, such as Rosemary and Sissix, the female Aandrisk, becoming lovers during the story, and the loving relationship between the tech Jenks and Lovey, the ship’s AI. As Ramos (2020) further notes, imagining subaltern communities with various sexualities helps to “address the fact that the LGBT+ community has been systematically deprived of canonical stories that portray queerness in a way that imply that noncisheterosexual individuals and communities can find places of belonging, and can aspire to do more than just surviving” (36; see also Collier & Prince 2023). Since telling stories that are about more than just surviving is key to hopepunk, in Ramos’s view, this can be addressed through representation of how “queer communities and ‘found families’ make use of affective resources such as vulnerability and empathy in order to resist their subaltern position” (36). This subaltern position of the crewmembers – from Rosemary as an exile from a disgraced family, to the genocidal past of Dr Chef’s species, to Ohan’s mystical pluralist consciousness, even to Corbin who is revealed

as an illegal clone threatened with a life of imprisonment because of his mere existence – work as metaphors for queer and subaltern narratives. While Ramos sees this as challenging “the cisheteronormative model of family” and presenting “many options of social organization” instead of the normative hegemony (40), such bonding together also highlights the prosocial everyday heroism that maintaining such group requires.

The narrative demonstrates how this prosocial, familial existence is beneficial when even Big H heroic deeds are filtered through support for each other. In one of the few more action-oriented scenes, the tech Kizzy disables explosives planted on a ship. After an initial scare, knowing that she has the required skills, she is nervous “no more than, like working on the outer hull or putting out a circuit fire” because she knows she can manage the situation (Chambers 2015, 241). This becomes a representation of the type of activity that in heroism studies has been classified as “Professional” heroism (Keczer et al. 2016, 2), and the other crewmembers can only nervously root for her. When the crew welcome Kizzy back after her successful mission, the whole familial community literally envelops her:

*Everybody had jumped all over her when she came through the airlock. Sissix nuzzled her head so hard that her hairdo came loose, and Rosemary got all misty-eyed, and Jenks gave her the best hug ever. Lovey was rambling about how worried she'd been, and even Ohan came down, limping on their weak legs, to give her a respectful bow. She felt like a hero. (246)<sup>4</sup>*

As the others make Kizzy feel “like a hero,” they signal communal appreciation for her professional heroism but above all again emphasize the supportive community.

Perhaps the clearest example of small h everyday heroism comes through the events where a routine search by law enforcement reveals Corbin as an illegal clone of his father,

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<sup>4</sup> Toward the end of the story, there is also a moment of emergency heroism where Kizzy talks Rosemary out of shock by telling her that they are all scared, but “Scared means we want to live. . . . But I need you to keep working” (355).

and as a result he is threatened with spending the rest of his life in a penal colony. The rest of the crew agrees that although none of them have liked working with Corbin, “he’s part of our crew, and we have to help him” (289). For complex legal reasons, the only way they can get Corbin released is to assign him a legal guardian “who comes from a species without cloning laws” (293). In addition to Rosamary’s heroic bureaucratic maneuverings, the narrative provides another occasion for presenting Sissix’s everyday heroism as the Aandrisk happens to be the only species without cloning laws, and the story has consistently emphasized the aggravated relations between Sissix and Corbin. As Sissix now unquestioningly agrees to save Corbin because she is “not going to leave him to rot in some teracite mine,” she is depicted as able to rise above their animosity (293, 295). For Corbin, this is narrated as a moment of personal growth, finally understanding how he has alienated the rest of the crew, saying how he “wasn’t sure anyone would come for me” (296). For Sissix, on the other hand, within the found family “it was the right thing to do” (296), standing up even for the crewmember she does not like, making this another representation of the prosocial heroism within family that the *Wayfarer* crew have chosen as their own.

#### **4 “THE RIGHT THING TO DO”: EVERYDAY HEROISM DIRECTED FROM THE ENCLOSED COMMUNITY OUTWARDS**

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Everyday heroism is often perceived as having a mainly local effect (Keczer et al. 2016, 12), but while normalizing the inclusivity, kindness, and acceptance that can bring out the best in people in Chambers’s novel takes place mostly in the enclosed local community of the *Wayfarer* crew, this behavior is also depicted as radiating outwards. This helps to create a sense, common in hopepunk, that a better world is possible also outside isolated utopian

enclaves.<sup>5</sup> As they visit Sissix's home planet, Rosemary observes how she treats a neurodiverse member of her own species:

*"You were comforting her. That's all it was. You just wanted to her to know that someone cared."*

*"Nobody should be alone," Sissix said. "Being alone and untouched . . . there's no punishment worse than that. And she's done nothing wrong. She's just different." (127-128, original emphasis)*

As the person Sissix comforts in this scene is shunned by her own community because she deviates from the norm, Sissix is showing empathy beyond her cultural baseline, as opposed to the locals who "can't be bothered with her. She's an inconvenience" (128). Sissix's act of everyday heroism, going against the norm of her culture even on her own homeworld, not only when she is removed from it, becomes an example of how the inclusion and caring within the crew fosters everyday heroism that promotes similar behavior also outside their ship (see also Ramos 2020, 38).

Another occasion of directing prosociality outwards is depicted as Akarak pirates forcibly board the *Wayfarer*. The Akarak are presented as a people brutally marginalized as a result of colonialism that stripped their planet of resources until "Their homeworld had nothing for them, but neither did anywhere else" forcing them to become beggars or pirates (Chambers 2015, 159). In this scene, Rosemary exhibits professional heroism through

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<sup>5</sup> The enclosed existence of the *Wayfarer* crew seems to include elements of the utopian enclave that fosters prosocial everyday heroism. Parallel to dystopian tendencies, science fiction has been considered as intrinsically linked with the utopian tradition – exhibiting a utopian desire, a drive to imagine ways towards an ideal world (Jameson 2007, 84; Moylan 1986, 10; Rogan 2011, 314). As critical utopian narratives frequently explore the issues within the imagined societies, such stories have been considered as a way of testing out the Blochian "hope principle" (Freedman 2000, 69). In Jameson's argument, such utopian aspirations are often depicted through a "utopian enclave" that can "offer a space in which new wish images of the social can be elaborated and experimented on" in a way that is not hampered by the pressures of the outside society (2007, 15-17). While such utopian enclaves tend to be only momentary in their nature, the surrounding society may adapt elements from these imagined better societies – and to an extent this is what happens in Chambers's novel where the small, enclosed community of the *Wayfarer* is presented as directed outwards.

compassionate negotiating that avoids violence and leads to the Akarak only taking resources that they can use to buy food suitable for their species. As Armirand (2021) notes on Chambers's novel, Rosemary's commitment to nonviolence works to "defend the rights and dignity of the marginalized" (127). This respect and dignity as the novel's general principle is highlighted by depicting the Akarak, once they are addressed with dignity instead of hatred, as polite and leaving the crew enough to survive until they can replenish their resources.

Toward the end, there is a brief episode further suggesting that the crew's prosocial action radiates outward. The *Wayfarer* is fired at by the warring Toremi people, who were in negotiations to gain access to the Galactic Commons space, resulting in the eventual demise of the ship's AI. After this, Ashby is called to a GC committee hearing, and when they seem to dismiss him after brief questions over whether his crew did anything to provoke the attack at a reception, Ashby speaks out:

*"You sent us somewhere we shouldn't have gone, and you're still thinking about sending other people back. You put all of our lives at risk, without saying as much, and now you want to sit around and talk about policies. . . ."*

*"I'm not a politician, I'm not on a committee. I don't know the things you know. I don't even know if my crew said anything to offend the Toremi. . . . But what if they did? Someone says something stupid at a cocktail party, and that's enough to go to war over? . . . You want people like that, who start killing that fast, walking around spaceports, flying through cargo lane traffic?" (Chambers 2015, 387-388, original italics)*

This moment of directing the found family's prosocial principles outwards mirrors the earlier scene where Sissix has extended her kindness to the neurodivergent, shunned member of her own species. Ashby's account also borders on the heroism of whistleblowers who act as moral agents in political narratives (Atkinson et al. 2022, 7), and this is depicted as tilting



the committee towards excluding the Toremi from GC. After Ashby's heartfelt address over needing to keep GC space safe by excluding the elements that would destroy the peaceful inclusion, the GC Parliament decides to abandon negotiations with the Toremi because "The well-being of our citizens must be the number one priority in all Parliamentary activities," echoing Ashby at the hearing, even noting that "To bring violence into our space in the name of material gain, and at the expense of civilian lives, would be grossly negligent" (Chambers 2015, 389). While the connection to Ashby's hearing is only implicit, it works to suggest that principles of communal coexistence and safe space can radiate from the *Wayfarer* crew outwards and encourage such principles even in larger-scale political deliberations.

What results from this prosocial heroism is not just a feelgood narrative but a modeling for behavior where small acts of heroism are connected with a transformative sense of hope for a better world. Indeed, the dynamic of a positive enclosed community extending outwards seems a relatively frequent element in hopepunk. As Ramos (2020) notes, when stories like this go against the grimdark visions of future, they convey "the transformative spirit of hopepunk as well as the ideological commitment of the notions of educated and radical hope" by telling stories of marginalized people "in order to create affective systems that foster true intimacy, vulnerability and empathy" (41). The extension outwards is inherent in these stories, as Ramos notes, "they do not seek to be the exception in a system that deliberately attempts to fragment and dehumanize the margins, but to establish one that uses emotions as a political and philosophical weapon" (39). In other words, they are not just a way to survive in utopian enclaves secluded from the dystopian future, but to imagine ways to change that future. In Chambers's novel, however, the consistent values of inclusivity and cultural understanding are also tested and complicated by the final crisis point of the story.

## 5 “YOU’LL HAVE TO FORGIVE ME”: CRISIS, TRANSFORMATION, AND AMBIVALENT HEROISM

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The end of *The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet* becomes a potential stress test for its transformative hope and familial community. One of the relationships that the narrative has touched on is that of the technician Jenks and the sentient AI, Lovey, who have been lovers. As a result of the Toremi attack on the *Wayfarer* towards the end of the story, Lovey is seriously damaged and when the crew makes a desperate attempt to restore her through a “hard reset” (Chambers 2015, 365-366), she effectively dies when the AI reverts to a factory installation that deletes all of Lovey’s accumulated memory, wiping out the individual personality she has become over the years. When this happens, Jenks is devastated, providing a moment for the final, and potentially problematic plot twist. At the same time, it also results in integrating Corbin, the most antagonistic of the crewmembers, with the found family. Corbin has earlier scoffed at Jenks’s and Lovey’s relationship, but he is now depicted as influenced by having been rescued from his imprisonment, realizing that:

*“To Jenks, this is the worst day of his life. . . . he loved the AI. . . . I find the whole notion absurd. But you know what I realized? It doesn’t matter what I think. Jenks thinks something different, and his pain is very real right now. Me knowing how stupid this whole thing is doesn’t make him hurt any less” (375).*

While Corbin comes to some kind understanding of empathy, this also leads to his problematic act when Ohan’s health has seriously deteriorated as a result of his neurovirus starting to kill its host. Ohan’s condition was revealed to the whole crew earlier when the Akarak boarded the ship and were about to abduct and sell Ohan for navigation skills but were averted by Dr Chef’s explanation that Ohan is dying. After the Akarak leave them, the crew notices that the usually withdrawn “Ohan don’t want to be alone right now” (167), and while Ohan’s deterioration leads to the larger moral dilemma, this also hints at Ohan starting

to recognize the prosocial benefit of the inclusive community, foreshadowing Ohan's desire for something else than the restrictive Sianat culture. After discovering that Ohan is dying, but that also a cure to the condition does exist, the rest of the crew argue over what to do. Sissix wants to cure Ohan even against their will, but Ashby holds to the principle of consent:

*“Sissix, this is not my call. What do you want me to do? Tie them down and force it on them?”*

*“If that's what it takes. . . . You're his friend, and you're letting him die.”*

*“I gave them the option, Sissix! They know it's there! What the hell else am I supposed to do? . . . This is not a matter of someone refusing medical treatment. This is their entire culture we're talking about. This is their religion. . . . What is it you people say? . . . Let each follow xyr<sup>6</sup> own path”*

*Sissix's eyes flashed. “That's different. . . . There is harm being done here, Ashby. Ohan is dying” (327, italics in original)*

The narrative thus sets up an ethical dilemma that results directly from the crew's consistent respect for other cultures and their belief systems – highlighted especially as Sissix would now be ready to violate consent to avoid what she perceives as bigger harm. For Ashby, however, the ethical code surpasses what he personally wants to do. In a sense, the reader is made complicit in this ethical dilemma because the narration consistently evokes a wish to save Ohan from their own belief system by emphasizing a sense of unfairness inherent in the Sianat culture where everyone has to submit to a virus that kills them at a relatively young age or alternatively go into exile. This culture of exclusion is contrasted with the welcoming found family of the crew that Ohan cannot fully join while holding on to their native culture. Empathy is evoked even through Rosemary's perceptions of Ohan's

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<sup>6</sup> In Chamber's fictional universe, “xyr” is the non-gender and non-species-specific personal pronoun that the characters use for nonbinary characters, or when they are not certain of how to address others.

appearance as “cuddly, like a stuffed toy” that is “covered from scalp to toenails with dense, ice blue fur” with “enormous, long-lashed, and visibly wet” eyes (317, 73). Ohan’s behavior is “relaxed, almost drugged” and they wear robes that give “the impression of a stoned college student, showing up late to class in nothing by a bathrobe” (73). As this is combined with Rosemary reminding herself that “this stoned college student could outmatch an AI when it came to interdimensional physics” (73), the narration provides incentives to want to see such a character saved and evokes a sense of unfairness that Ohan should die of what is essentially religious fundamentalism amid a crew that would be happy to fully include him.

After Lovey’s demise, because “they are all hurting” and Corbin wants to save them from hurting even more, he administers the cure against Ohan’s will, saying “you’ll have to forgive me, Ohan, but this crew isn’t going to lose anyone else. Not today” (375). This is the moment most ambiguous in terms of heroism, especially since the community has so far been depicted as highly focused on respecting different cultural practices. Even as Corbin knows he seriously violates Ohan’s consent, he remains calm, feeling that “He’d done the right thing” (376). When the recuperating Ohan then embraces the change, chooses to spend time with Corbin, and finally becomes a more involved member of the subaltern crew, having gone against the principle of cultural respect seems sanctioned, and Corbin’s major violation of consent receives an aura of heroism rather than betrayal or bigotry.

While this does reinforce the novel’s inclusive message as the narration shifts quickly from curing Ohan against his will to the welcoming community, it does also appear as audience gratification because of evoking the wish to see Ohan saved. As the novel comes to a quick end after this, Ohan seems to move past their entire cultural belief system rather quickly to be quite plausible – and Corbin’s act does also contain the potential ethical quagmire of implying that religion is a virus from which a person needs to be cured. Nevertheless, the cured Ohan, no longer a plural entity, wants to stay with the crew and is

depicted as discovering his individual personhood. In the story, this is an implied return to emphasizing the value of diversity; following the Sianat culture Ohan was “expected to do things” unquestioningly, but these things no longer make sense to him and he is portrayed to benefit from the diversity and inclusion, unlike other Sianats who “never saw other ways to be” (398). Instead of questioning the implied need to abandon one’s native culture, Ohan’s newly-found freedom is presented as a highly emotional solution where he says “I want to stay. . . . And I want to have dinner. With my crew” (398), which makes Dr Chef burst out crying and his offer to cook a meal for Ohan makes Ohan “smile” which the others “had never seen before” (399).

Hence, the outcome is happy, but by positioning the character of Corbin as the one to carry out the ethically ambiguous act, the narration seems to take the easy way out by having the least-liked member of the crew be the one to save the others from having to violate their principles. Because Corbin’s character has been consistently built as “a complete asshole” who “hated people” (4-5), his refusal to adhere to principles of cultural respect enables him to give us what we want. Paradoxically, this act of violating the crew’s principles also redeems him because it shows that he is not beyond empathy. As the ethical dilemma is rather quickly bypassed and the crew seems to rather easily accept Corbin’s act, this creates the impression of having received the outcome that everyone wanted – not dissimilar to an antihero getting their hands dirty so that everyone else can hold on to their morals. At the end, Ashby welcomes Corbin back to the dinner table, although “He still wasn’t happy, but what was done was done” and Ashby comes to acknowledge that “if Ohan could move forward, so could he” (399). This is thus depicted as the story’s closing moment of everyday heroism, Ashby easing up on his principles in service of reinforcing the unity of their community after traumatic events. Hence, the right thing to do at the specific instance seems to become letting go of the principle of cultural respect. After Ashby has welcomed Corbin back to the shared,

familial dinner table, this is paralleled with Ashby's thoughts on family earlier on, with the same phrase of "It was enough" (399), signaling his acceptance and connection, now to the entire crew as fully part of the found and chosen family.

The question of ethics suggests itself so strongly at this final turn of the novel because the hopepunk element of cultural understanding and respect are presented as key to inclusion in the found family. The narration seems to somewhat inadvertently direct readers to accept violation of consent, an act that has up to now been established by the narration as very much against the crew's principles. As this is not problematized, it essentially makes readers complicit in Corbin's violation of consent, ending in unresolved tension between respecting different cultures – even when they are based on exclusionist, fundamentalist religion – and the widely established ethos of inclusion and avoiding harm.<sup>7</sup>

## 6 "SHE WAS EXACTLY WHERE SHE WAS SUPPOSED TO BE"

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The idea of an inclusive crew is not a new occurrence in science fiction as such, but a crucial difference in Chambers's novel to that of *Star Trek*, for example, is that the U.S.S. Enterprise crew are agents of power and members of an ethically superior organization. Also the trope of rag-rag groups of misfits banding together for heroic action is common in a variety of blockbuster action adventure genres. However, for example, in the Marvel Cinematic Universe such action depends on individual, messianic superheroes, and within such works, non-normative sexualities and other subaltern positions are only recently and tentatively represented in the mainstream. In contrast, Chambers's hopepunk eschews Big H

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<sup>7</sup> In terms of narrative ethics, Corbin's action seems at an odd parallel, for example, with what Phelan and Rabinowitz (2013) detect in Huckleberry Finn's decision to act against what the slaveholding state holds as the right thing to do, instead doing what "we recognize [as] the ethically superior choice, and our ethical approval increases our positive affective response" (163). In Chambers's novel the situation is more ambiguous because Corbin acts against the principles of the inclusive community, but in a way that the community is represented as having wanted all along.

Heroism and focuses on everyday characters working their construction job. Instead of messianic superheroes or political maneuverings, their power is the inclusive community which the narration shows as gradually radiating from margins of society outwards, normalizing prosocial behavior and everyday heroism. Despite contradictions at the novel's resolution, it seems that it is prosocial everyday heroism that consistently helps to power Chambers's take on representations of hope that the characters act on, becoming a sort of test on models of kinder communal existence.

At the same time, it must be remembered that "everyman" protagonists – heroes whose actions do not impact the large sweeps of history – can also be found in a number classic works of science fiction. For example, Robert A. Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* (1959), Joe Haldeman's *The Forever War* (1965) and even Harry Harrison's *Bill, the Galactic Hero* (1965) focus on war from the perspectives of lower-rank soldier characters whose individual actions have no heroic impact on the course of history. These types of stories frequently question the fantasy of action by a single soldier deciding the course of a war, and overall criticize or satirize war. Outside military contexts, similar examples of the insignificance (and dispensability) of the rank-and-file worker can be found amid the everyday worker crews such as with the ship in the film *Alien* (1979). Common to these stories seems to be that they use the everyday character as a representation of a rather pessimistic outlook on the insignificance of individuals in coping with dystopian worlds.

Moreover, many of the classic, Big H heroes, in epic science fiction such as George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977), begin their journey as mundane characters and in this sense link with the everyday thematic. In *Star Wars*, this is the case especially with the farm boy Luke Skywalker who grows from an everyman into a classic hero whose actions help to free the whole galaxy, assisted by Han Solo who redeems himself from his initially dubious small-time mercenary-smuggler position through his action. In such works, the hero may start as an

everyman, like Luke and Han, or already be a member of nobility like Paul Atreides in Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965), but common to them is that as they find themselves in bigger shoes than they were prepared for, but rise to the occasion. These types of characters end up becoming Big H heroes, whether the story ends up being more optimistic on the impact of the hero, as in Lucas's very deliberately Campbellian take in *Star Wars*, or whether it is the pessimistic warning of the lure of messiahs and a criticism of superhero mystique in Herbert's *Dune*.

As I have argued, however, with Chambers's work and with hopepunk also more generally, the focus frequently seems to be on small h heroic action and an optimistic approach. That is, the stories remain within the characters' mundane reality in a way that, even when they are affected by the larger societal events and they rise to the challenges in their lives, they do not become significantly entangled in those larger movements. Even as they are in this sense small h heroes, unlike classic science fiction's pessimistic and dystopian takes on everyday characters, these hopepunk heroes are not emblems of the insignificance of individuals at a dystopian world. Rather, they rather illustrate the power of small action in everyday life which can foster hope and help to make the world a better place.<sup>8</sup> Reflecting the fragile nature of initially enclosed manifestations of hope, the novel ends with a scene of Sissix and Rosemary on a leisurely spacewalk, floating free in a way that is presented as symbolic of the inclusive community:

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<sup>8</sup> This kind of tendency to imagine small actions by everyday people in hopepunk seems parallel to real-world social concepts such as the Heroic Imagination Project which is rooted in research by Philip G. Zimbardo and others, and aims to "equip ordinary people with the knowledge, skills, and strategies necessary to choose wise and effective acts of heroism during challenging moments in their lives" (Heroic Imagination Project, "About Us"). As I have discussed, Chambers's novel imagines a number of situations where her characters take responsibility and act to foster inclusion in situations where it is psychologically much more typical for people to remain as bystanders instead of engaging in prosocial action. This seems a parallel that exists also more widely within hopepunk, imagining prosocial action and facing a variety of social challenges in ways that generates hope for a better world through the small but significant actions by ordinary people in everyday situations.



*Rosemary looked back to the Wayfarer. Through the windows, she could see the familiar rooms and corridors, but it was all so different from out here, like watching a vid, or looking into a dollhouse. The ship looked so small, so fragile. (Chambers 2015, 402)*

This appearance of fragility of their safe, homey space, has throughout the story been juxtaposed with the demonstrated resilience of the found family that exists through everyday heroism and inclusive action. As Rosemary's reflections during this closing scene, she finally becomes fully part of this space, "floating free" with a sense of having "returned home," concluding the novel at her realization that "She was exactly where she was supposed to be" (402).

Altogether, through this heightened sense of the crew as a found family where individuals accept and support each other, the novel creates space for difference and depicts a community's journey towards equality, inclusion and hope that can radiate from the local to the global scale. More generally, hopepunk seems to offer different ways of thinking about structures of heroic activity, creating stories where everyday heroism works to push toward gradual improvement. Regular action heroes rarely build anything; the moral components of their stories tend to be more about dismantling criminal, unjust, or oppressive structures, but they frequently stop short of building anything better in their place. Chambers, on the other hand, imagines building structures for inclusion and a more welcoming society through prosocial everyday heroism – and it could perhaps be said that hopepunk, also more generally, is about building better structures instead of merely dismantling old ones. In *The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet*, this is presented through the inclusive kindness of the *Wayfarer* crew who, via their work of building wormhole highways, build also literal connections to the Galactic Commons space. At the same time, the novel suggests potential tensions in such inclusive principles, as the ethics of life seem to surpass ethics of cultural

respect in the resolution of Ohan's plotline. Overall, it seems that Chambers uses the everyday heroism as a vehicle for hopepunk – and even as the novel leaves some aspects of its ethics only tentatively explored, it imagines how a small community can work on both a literal and a metaphorical journey towards a better society.

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## 8 CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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*The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.*