



The Songs of Distant Earth

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In A.D. 3863 (or 3827, according to the Chronology), the Magellan arrives at Thalassa, about 250 years after the sun's transformation into a supernova has destroyed Earth. Bound for Sagan Two, about 300 years farther on, the starship, with raw materials and 900,000 people aboard, will remain for two years, reconstructing the ice shield it needs for interstellar travel.

The novel deals mainly with adventures arising out of the contact between the two civilizations which have been out of contact for centuries. Representatives of the two cultures work, quarrel, play, mate, teach, learn, and discover together.

The Thalassan civilization was an experiment to produce a completely rational society. People and necessities were sent to the planet as "seeds" which were reared and educated mechanically by the mother ship. Though they are not exempt from human weakness, they live in almost complete peace, free of the economic, political, and religious prejudices which their creators believe were so destructive on Earth.

The Magellan colonists understand the depths of evil to which humanity can descend, having experienced the upheaval of Earth's last days. As they come to know the Thalassans, the Magellan colonists begin to see them not as "primitive natives," but as sophisticated enough to deal with complex difficulties, one of which is the emergence of intelligent life in the Thalassan ocean. Based on Clarke's 1957 short story of the same name, this novel raises interesting issues and problems but does so with a light touch, putting more emphasis on story than on ideas. While it is perhaps more entertaining than similar works such as Ursula K. Le Guin's *EYE OF THE HERON*, it is less provocative because Clarke's characters are less fully developed and because the novel's conflicting cultures are not explored in detail.

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