

# Moving Mars Short Guide

## Moving Mars by Greg Bear

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# Contents

<a href="#">Moving Mars Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Social Concerns.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Techniques.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Adaptations.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Key Questions.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Literary Precedents.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Related Titles.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>



# Characters

Moving Mars has two characters of major importance to the novel's plot and themes, although one is dominant as narrator. She is Casseia Majumdar, first cast in a role of student protester at a Mars university in the year 2171.

Casseia's family is conservative; her third uncle founded Majumdar Binding Multiple, one of the extended-family syndicates that direct the resources of Mars in this era. In spite of family disdain for political activism — the Binding Multiples rule in disorganized fashion — Casseia clings to a study of Martian state theory and "govmanagement." Themes of maturation and identity emerge through the character of Casseia, whose personal story parallels the political coming-of-age of Mars.

Casseia soon casts off her student opposition to the 2171 "Statists," proponents of Martian unification. After participating in a diplomatic mission to Earth, she begins to rise in government until she is Vice-President, then President of the fledgling Federal Republic of Mars. Her position of power requires tough decision-making, for which she qualifies as a strong and capable woman. Casseia is nonetheless an appealing, vulnerable character. At a middle stage in Casseia's maturation, her mother dies, leading her to conclude that "losing a parent is perhaps the most final declaration of lone responsibility."

Casseia is uprooted from family connections, then rebuilds her life. She loves, marries, is torn between spousal and political responsibilities. She is in her early thirties when her husband is killed because of the war called the Freeze, in which the Earth employs destructive robots on Mars. In the destruction, the president of Mars, a woman named Ti Sandra Erzul, is seriously injured and later dies. Casseia must assume presidential responsibilities. Her political problems reinforce themes of change, alienation, and adaptation. In her rise to power, Casseia loses her innocence and grieves at the questionable ways of politics.

The conflict with Earth has arisen because a group of Mars's theoretical physicists, called the "Olympians," has discovered processes for moving huge masses — even the Red Planet itself.

After Earth's remote attack by means of nano-sabotage, Casseia makes her momentous decision to let Mars be moved from harm's way to another solar system. The act represents her final stand for self-determination, illuminating themes of revolution and the nature of authority. The command to the Olympians to move Mars symbolizes a relationship between politics and science that is crucial in the novel. The relationship is seen through Casseia's ties to the second major character, the brilliant physicist and leader of the Olympians, Charles Franklin.

Although periodically absent from the narration, Charles always returns.



He is known to Casseia during their student days, and he becomes her first lover and the suitor she rejects. Charles is courageous, reliable, attentive, but is as bored by politics as Casseia is by science. Casseia identifies with human interaction, he with "the wide-open territories of nature without humanity." When Earth becomes interested in Charles's discoveries, she cannot ignore them. Bear's genius lies in having the contrasting viewpoints of Casseia and Charles develop and clarify the novel's rich tapestry of themes.

The pair clashes over social responsibility and the immorality of war. "We could fry Earth's cities," Casseia angrily says, feeling the weight of her office. "You've brought back the horror of the twentieth century." Charles regrets his part in burdening Casseia's moral sense, but dismisses God and the question of implications. He states: "It's irrelevant because the knowledge is here and it won't go away." Selfworth and identity, for Charles, belong to science. "I can't stop thinking just to become responsible and put a halt to change."

Especially developed through the character of Charles are themes of change, of time and the nature of reality, humankind's identity and destiny.

Charles thinks of the universe in terms of a computational system, of the human brain as a computer. From this basis he reasons that change is inevitable, history is unpredictable and usually unpleasantly so. "There is no peace, no end to the new and frightening in this life." His leaps in logic and intuition can baffle Casseia. "If we played for an eternity," he tells her when the final planet-moving is under way, "we might learn how to put together a universe." She replies, "But you say there's no time passing."

Late in the novel the pair share an intimacy "beyond that of man and wife: the intimacy of two young gods."

Casseia's eventual coming-to-grips with Charles and science reinforces Bear's message that technology and leadership go hand in hand, a concept reinforced in the novel's "Afterview" when the aging pair are found to have become longtime housemates. By then Charles is "burned out," living in another reality as he feared he would, the stock, pure character of science fiction who pioneers while knowing his work can consume him.

Bear's characters resonate among each other; lesser characters serve to enhance major ones, themes, or plot.

Casseia's husband, Ilya Rabinovitch, is a foil for Charles as the less "pure" scientist who is socially inclined and interested in life forms. Ti Sandra Erzul, Ilya's syndic and first President of united Mars, bolsters Casseia's role by voicing the enlightened political ideas that brought colonial America to revolution in 1776. Ti Sandra speaks to the theme of political struggle, as a symbol of "just and caring power placed in a killing squeeze." Casseia's uncle, syndic Bithras Majumdar, represents the Martian political past and, because of his sexual activity, the persistence of gender strife.



Achmed Crown Niger is the stock double-dealing political rogue, ready to squelch a student protest or sell out Mars to Earth. Sean Dickinson is another unsavory character, first seen as the leader of student dissent who provokes Casseia's maturing view: "I had a sudden insight into people and revolutions, and did not like what I saw."

Later Sean reappears as a self-serving negotiator for Earth.

Several characters illumine themes of identity and the nature of reality by reflecting technological effects on the basic fabric of human life. Orianna is a symbol of jaded youth and Earth's decadence. She is enamored of biotechnological enhancements, and "sims," entertainments that feed the brain artificial experiences. Another character is the mega-powerful, self-aware computer or "thinker" named Alice, who accompanies Casseia and Bithras to Earth. Alice and her counterpart Jill on Earth are Bear's extrapolations from cybernetics, information theory. Along with the novel's nanotechnological and bioengineered human characters, and Charles's brain-link with Quantum Logic thinkers, Alice and Jill reinforce Bear's vision of a material rather than a spiritual future for humankind.

## Social Concerns

Moving Mars, Bear raises serious Inquestions about the positive effect upon human values of science and technology by describing a future Martian society. Casseia Majumdar, the young woman who narrates, is forced to ponder the moral implications of technological development as she rises ever higher in the movement to unify Mars politically. At the opening of the novel, the planet has been settled by humans for some time and belongs to a loose Triple Alliance with Earth and its Moon. All three populations benefit from the same great technological advances in communications, travel, medical practice, and almost all other physical areas.

Yet in Casseia's world, student dissent, business dirty-dealing, gender strife, political intrigue and interplanetary struggles for hegemony go unabated. In fact, as Casseia learns as she rises politically in the fledgling Federal Republic of Mars, the most advanced scientific discoveries serve to exacerbate interplanetary power plays and internal tensions. The scientists shun ethical considerations and foist upon Casseia the responsibility to deal with social implications of the worst sort.

The novel implies that war, immoral though it is, can be avoided only by drastic measures.

At one point in the novel Casseia takes part in a diplomatic mission to Earth, which offers numerous comparisons between societies. Earth, the homeland from which Mars and the Moon were populated, still has vastly more people, many grouped in highly sophisticated cultures. Martians have managed to retain more of the oldfashioned human values partly because of a general resistance to the computer-implant enhancements employed by people on Earth, although that attitude is changing. On Earth Casseia finds bewildering diversity: political corruption, ethnic and gender exclusivity, repression, class division, and disagreement of all kinds. There is a marked deterioration in the cultural values of the young, who have substituted self-indulgent, frivolous fashions and entertainment for substantial reallife experiences.

## Techniques

In *Moving Mars* Bear employs a firstperson narrator, Casseia. The novel traces the maturation of Casseia, paralleled by that of a politically united Mars. The identities of both converge, at the end, in a final stand for self-determination. Woven in also is a telling of the gradual and essential unification of science with politics, embodied in the characters of Casseia and Charles.

Bear manages to create a believable future Mars by accompanying dialogue and action with physical descriptions extrapolated from current scientific knowledge of the planet, and by lacing the plot by recognizable political concepts and intrigues. Important to believability, as well, are such inventions of Bear as the slang used by Orianna and her young companions, the characteristic moral observations attributed to Casseia. Bear is noted for his stunning extrapolations from current scientific theories, his intricate plots and broad, sweeping visions. As a science fiction writer, he employs the usual motifs of life on remote planets, alien contact, spaceships and space battles, but he uses them in unique and intriguing ways.

# Themes

Casseia is engaged in a maturation process that is inseparable from the political coming-of-age of Mars, and thus she represents themes tied to human values, identity and destiny.

Responses to and uses of technology by individuals and societies on both Mars and Earth are important aspects of Casseia's story. Human adaptability in the face of alienation and change is illustrated by the fairly comfortable lifestyle on Mars, despite a natural outdoor environment characterized by low temperatures, thin atmosphere, and high radiation levels. Martians spend most of their lives in pressurized underground warrens, emerging only when clothed in protective outfits.

Martians have embraced other technology besides that of artificial habitats. Genetic engineering produces physical attractiveness in people. Robots, called *arbeiters*, perform most chores. "LitVids" provide information and communication. Scheduled spaceships travel between Mars, Earth and Earth's Moon. Self-aware artificial intelligences exist to augment humankind's thinking power — addressing the theme of the nature of thought and reality. People obtain implants for entertainment or for various professional purposes. Advanced nanotechnology is used in healing the sick or injured, growing food, even constructing buildings.

But Casseia's experiences, both on Mars and Earth, call into question the results of unbridled technology. In the astonishingly "advanced" United States, for example, the people have become decadent, confused, and increasingly diverse and disputatious.

There are even class divisions between the "therapied" and "untherapied." If Martians fare better, it is because they remain somewhat members of a frontier society, moderate in reliance on biotechnology. And when there is threat of war, which is bound to be catastrophic due to advanced weaponry, a related theme arises, the immorality of widespread deadly conflict.

Bear argues that technology is inadequate to handle humankind's problems in the ethical and social realms.

Related to this is the idea of revolution, which pervades the novel. The plot develops from an incident of student dissent to a final planetary rebellion, based on the need to discard evils of the past, one of Bear's recurring themes. In *Moving Mars*, the implication is that the only way to positive social and political rebirth is complete abandonment of the known solar system. Only then might humankind not be plagued by strife and change, which the novel shows is an inevitable feature of the historical process.



# Adaptations

Both abridged and unabridged editions of *Moving Mars* are available on audiocassettes, read by Sharon Williams and published by Brilliance Corporation in 1993.



## Key Questions

Moving Mars treats highly topical questions of genetic engineering and biotechnological intrusion into human life which should provoke very stimulating discussions. The novel describes a proliferation, especially on Earth, of such technological and bioengineered aids as arbeiter, sims, the self-aware computers called thinkers; also nano medicine, nano architecture and various forms of personal enhancement. In this light, discussion might focus on comparisons between Earth's young people in the novel and today's youth.

Another aspect of the novel worth attention is the kind of political structure Martian Statists choose. There is an obvious resemblance in Bear's depictions to the colonial period in American history, when a relatively new, frontier society developed a constitutional government patterned on reason and enlightened democratic thought.

Consideration of Martian choices of government and morals can stimulate discussion about American values, whether they have been lost.

1. How effective is Bear in portraying Mars as a credible place for human life?
2. Do other characters in Moving Mars come close to being as fully realized as Casseia Majumdar? If not, explain Bear's intention in letting one character dominate.
3. Discuss Charles Franklin, with attention to Bear's effectiveness in conveying the essential scientific ideas.
4. Is Ilya Rabinovitch a better choice of husband for Casseia than Charles is?

Why or why not?

5. Compare and contrast morals and politics on Earth and on Mars. Is Mars really the backward and old-fashioned society Orianna and Earth's people like to believe? What is Bear's opinion about the potential for technology to improve human life?
6. How does Casseia change in the course of the novel?
7. What do you think of Casseia's firm commitment to self-determination and democratic government, considering her authoritarian resolution of the problem of Martian independence?

Does the message seem to be that tensions between society and the individual are irreconcilable?

8. Discuss the characters Bithras Majumdar, Orianna, Achmed Crown Niger, Ti Sandra Erzul. How are they involved in the themes and plot lines in the novel?



9. Consider the situation of Casseia, Charles and the young narrator Dane Johansen at the end of *Moving Mars*.

Have Martians managed to achieve a utopia, that is, a state which requires no further progress?

10. Is there a good balance between the scientific and political interests in *Moving Mars*?

## Literary Precedents

Moving Mars lies within both the familiar, realistic tradition of literature, and the tradition of hard science fiction. Bear acknowledges a general indebtedness to the hard science fiction pioneers Robert A. Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, Theodore Sturgeon, as well as Ray Bradbury, Olaf Stapledon and the earlier English writer, H. G. Wells. Bear's naming of immigrants on Mars "the Eloi" honors Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895), in which beings called Eloi figure. Bear's naming of the "locusts" honors a story by Ray Bradbury, to whom *Moving Mars* is dedicated. Bear also has said that *Moving Mars* was conceived with great respect for the kinds of questions asked by Heinlein.

Casseia's space journey to Earth and her dismay at conditions on the homeland bear some resemblance to Heinlein's theme in "It's Great to be Back" (1947). Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* of 1950 contains the concept that settlers from Earth bring with them old troubles. Stories about Mars belong to a long tradition, including Clarke's *The Sands of Mars* of 1951 and Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Mars* series, the first in 1917. Wells's still earlier *War of the Worlds* (1898) considered Mars in the light of human evolution, cautioning about an overly optimistic view of technology.

Wells's novel also involved the first "alien invasion," an idea Bear employs with the twist of Earth's humans attacking their kind on Mars. The robot locust-warbeiter and arbeiter of *Moving Mars* come from a long line of manmade beings, traceable to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* of 1818 and the "robots" in Karel Capek's *R. U. R.* (1920).

Bear's depiction of helpful arbeiter derives from Asimov's sympathetic-robot stories. Bear's powerful "thinkers" reflect the recent, typical use of computers in science fiction and, as selfaware mechanisms, they descend from John W. Campbell's 1935 story "The Machine."

In addition, Casseia's travails of spaceship travel convey a vast sweep of the universe akin to Stapledon's depictions in *Last and First Men* (1930) and *Star Maker* (1937). Yet Bear's use of the ideas, his intricate blend of characters with philosophical concepts, his careful technological extrapolations including the speculative nanotechnology employed in *Moving Mars*, constitute unique contributions. While the novel displays stock themes of alienation and human destiny, Casseia's ultimate revolt in ordering Mars moved is Bear's amazing and special twist.

## Related Titles

Moving Mars is a loose sequel to the novels *Heads* (1990) and *Queen of Angels* (1990). Both depict a twenty-second century, with *Heads* set on a Moon settled by extended-family economic entities. *Queen of Angels* is a detective story set on Earth, but it too involves nanotechnology and depicts bioengineered humans and class divisions between the "therapied" and "untherapied."

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