

Fairhope Public Library

Donna Riley-Lein's Book Review

Great fun for science nerds, but not so everyone else

*Project Hail Mary*

By Andy Weir

2021, Ballantine Books. *Several copies in Baldwin County Library System, but numerous holds.*

Andy Weir is an unabashed space fan. He has apparently crawled through most, if not all the NASA databases. That shows in every page of *Project Hail Mary*. And he is trying, really trying as a writer.

That pays off in *Project Hail Mary*. Ryland Grace, a molecular biologist turned middle school science teacher, is recruited by the head of a United Nations task force to learn about microorganisms that are reducing the light from the sun coming to Earth.

The dimming is bad for life on Earth, as even a few percentages less light from the sun will plunge us into an Ice Age.

While in academia, Grace authored a paper speculating on how life might be possible off Earth. The laughing response drove Grace to teaching. The task force wants to know if he was right.

Other scientists learn how to make use of the single-celled organisms that are dimming the sun to drive a spacecraft at just-under-light speed. In a nod to citizen scientists, amateur observers here on Earth have an important clue – the bugs, dubbed Astrophage by Grace, are infecting nearby stars, but not Tau Ceti.

Using Astrophage, a small spaceship is assembled to go and see how or why Tau Ceti is resisting the plague. The results will be sent back by several drone craft with the hope that the information will save Earth.

The *Hail Mary* will not have the supplies to return home; this is a suicide mission. Worse, it is discovered that people with the genes to withstand the four-year cold sleep needed for the journey are rare.

Upon waking, Grace discovers the rest of the crew didn't survive, and there is an alien ship nearby. What happens from there is part science experiment, buddy movie and survival tale.

Weir's enthusiasm for science and technology is infectious, but he cannot resist bad puns. Terrible puns. If the reader is science literate, she or he will get them. Prepare to groan.

The first, and worst, is name of the ship and the name of the protagonist. Does anyone think a world-wide project would be named for a primarily Roman Catholic prayer? Second, would the craft named *Hail Mary* have a passenger named Grace? Possible, but how likely? "Hail Mary, full of grace," indeed.

This will be too much for some. Science fiction fans and science lovers will enjoy the "hard" science in the story, leavened with sly, if not mature wit. And the salute to the everyday heroes that are teachers is inspiring.

While not for all, this is an entertaining, thought-provoking story.

Three and a half out of five stars.

Donna Riley-Lein lives in Fairhope