

The Chinese Bestselling Sci-Fi Hits the U.S. Market:

The Three-Body Problem

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Three Body is a Chinese bestselling science fiction trilogy written by Liu Cixin. The first book, *The Three-Body Problem*, is translated into English by Ken Liu and was published in the U.S. in November 2014. Since then, there have been an increasing number of discussions about the book. Over 200 book reviews have been posted on the Amazon website for this book, and most of them are complimentary. A month after the publication, Tom Jackson, a journalist of Sandusky Register, interviewed the translator, Ken Liu, and published the written interview online. It mainly tells the behind-the-scene stories about the book and the author. Both the reviews and the interview contain interesting information about the same topic, but each focuses on different aspects and uses different writing conventions because they face different audiences, serve different purposes, and appear in different contexts.

Suppose you are interested in *The Three-Body Problem* and hesitating to buy it online, you will probably want more information about the book and wonder how other people like it—the amazon.com book review is now the genre particularly designed for readers like you. As you scroll down the page of the book on amazon.com, the book reviews appear. Your attention will be drawn by the bold titles like “[Science Fiction that Relies Heavily on Physics](#)” (Famolari), “[Completely spectacular and engaging](#)” (Stokes), “[Wow. Amazing. Profound](#)” (Jim) and so on. Through these titles, you get a rough understanding of what the book about and how good it is. As you look through the reviews, you will discover that personal opinions appear frequently, mostly with surprises and praises like “[best, fascinating, expansive, enthralling, well footnoted](#)”

(Blake; Famolari; Stokes), “[with great intelligence, wisdom, heart, insight into the human condition, and humor](#)” (Jim), and “[translation... flows so smoothly](#)” (Jim). These compliments represent reader’s first impressions of the book, and there are too many to be listed. Some reviews provide a brief introduction to the novel, but most reviewers explicitly express their admiration for the book. For example, one reviewer, Nancy Famolari wrote, “[I highly recommend this book... If you like reading really good science fiction, you'll love this book.](#)” All these writing conventions indicate that the reviewers love the book, want to share their enjoyable reading experience, and persuade other costumers, like you, to buy the book.

If you read the reviews in detail, you will also notice that the language is informal and the tone is conversational. For example, reviewer Kilgore Gagarin writes, “[Please, please, please read at least to the halfway point... I loved the entire book, but one fellow reader was going ‘meh’ until she read enough to tell me SHE wants to read the entire series now.](#)” This straightforward everyday language, written in the first person, directly expresses the reviewer’s emotion as though he is chatting with you face-to-face.

At the moment you are about to click the “check out” button, your final rationality draws you back—you might doubt who the reviewers are and whether they are hired by Amazon and dedicated to persuade customers to purchase books. Take it easy. Amazon.com thought about this—below the headline of each review appears the name and badges of the reviewer and the number of people who think this review is helpful. Although seemingly trivial, all of these appeal to ethos and enhance the reviewers’ credibility. A special badge for the reviewers is “Vine Voice,” whose owner’s reviews are so reliable and usually highly rated that they get products from Amazon for free and write reviews for them. In such a “paid” context, they are willing to write an honest, informative, 300-word review, rather than a couple of sentences that most regular

customers write, and they gain more credibility if many people think their reviews are helpful. In such a benevolent cycle, most books at on Amazon.com have some helpful reviews. In fact, the reviews on the first page are mostly from these “Vine Voices.” These high-quality reviews will probably get you attached to the book very quickly.

Now, suppose that you have happily accepted the recommendations from the reviewers, bought the book, and finally finished reading it. As the plots are still haunting your brain, you will probably do what I did: research. When I had finished reading the book, I wanted to know more about the book and the author and I asked questions like “How did the author create the novel?” or “How much influence did the author have?” and so on. Then, I liked the Facebook page of *Three Body Trilogy* and found a posting that immediately caught my eye. The link said, [“The Aliens are coming! So are the Chinese! Ken Liu on ‘The Three-Body Problem’”](#) (Jackson). It had consecutive exclamatory sentences that tempted me to click on it and also showed me it was an interview, which I thought was probably the best way to get information about the book. Yes, the interview on an author intends to be presented to the audience, *some* of whom, like me, have finished reading the book and want to know more.

When I clicked the link and read through the interview, I found the intended audience was not just the existing readers but also new readers who have not read the book, because the interview started with an interesting hook—[“The aliens from the three-star system are on their way to attack Earth. It's not looking good”](#) (Jackson). Then it presented a brief, vivid introduction to the novel; the interviewer, Jackson, also recommended the book by writing [“it's vivid and interesting with strong characters.”](#) These descriptions are already familiar and unnecessary to the existing readers and fit the curiosity of new readers well. However, as the article presents the dialogue of the interview, the intended audience is mainly the existing

readers, because Jackson asks the questions they want to ask, like “[How did it come about that ‘The Three-Body Problem’ became available in English?](#)” and “[As the rest of us cannot go out and read Liu Cixin's other work until we learn Chinese, what are his other books like? Who do his influences seem to be?](#)” and “[Are there any plans for Liu Cixin to promote his book in the United States?](#)” and so on. These questions comprehensively cover topics including the history and behind-the-scene stories of the book, the author’s influence, and future plans. The informative answers by the interviewee, Ken Liu, are just what existing readers want to know. On the contrary, the new readers may be less interested in these issues than the book itself.

After reading the interview as a curious reader and fan, I learned a lot about what happened to the book and the author’s background, as is expected by the interviewer. At the same time, the interviewee has his own purpose that he wants to achieve in the interview as well. Liu says, “[You can read the sequels to ‘The Three-Body Problem’ in 2015 and 2016, assuming the schedule holds.](#)” He also recommends Liu Cixin’s works like “The Wandering Earth,” a collection, which he thinks is full of “[wonderful stories and demonstrate the same grand imaginative scope and meticulous attention to scientific detail that characterize ‘The Three-Body Problem’](#)” (qtd. in Jackson). Since the interview is a perfect opportunity to advertise, Liu takes his chance and tells readers to expect the rest of the two books of the trilogy and to explore Liu Cixin’s other works.

When reading the interview, I found the diction straightforward and the tone conversational. This is because the interview was originally conducted orally, and, naturally, the Q&A layout, which this article uses, is the most suitable format for the interview. Although most of the answers are direct quotes, because the piece is published on a website, the writer includes paraphrased sentences with parentheses that represent significant translations and action. For

example, Liu says, “[Chinese fans typically gather to meet writers at major events like the Xingyun \(Nebula\) Awards or Yinhe \(Galaxy\) Awards, which are major awards given for genre fiction](#)” (qtd. in Jackson). The words in the parentheses were probably not said by the interviewee. Without them, readers would not know what “Xingyun” and “Yinhe” refer to. Therefore, the parentheses are added in order to explain some confusing concepts, to make the article easier to read. Additionally, as a common feature of online articles, links are included in this interview. For example, Liu says, “[Liu Cixin himself has cited Arthur C. Clarke as a literary influence, and you can read more about his thoughts on his own work here](#)” (qtd. in Jackson). A link is added to the word *here*. During the oral interview, Liu may not have said what the work is. While editing and researching, the interviewer found the work, so added a link. It provides further reading and sources for those who want to know more about Liu Cixin.

In general, since Amazon is a place where discussions with humor, critiques, complaints, or anecdotes are welcomed, people choose to write in a casual tone. The reviews, whether they praise or criticize the book, straightforwardly express the reviewers’ opinions, serving to persuade costumers to buy or not to buy the book. The audience of a written interview is readers who want to know more about the interviewee. It usually starts with a brief introduction that tells the background of the interviewee. The interviewer’s questions are mostly what the audience cares about, and usually related to the behind-the-scene stories of the public figure. Sometimes, the interviewee sends his or her own message via the interview.

By now, perhaps you have realized that I am not only leading you on a reading journey through different genres, from book reviews to an interview but also indirectly recommending *The Three-Body Problem*. I have borrowed many complimentary words from the two types of articles. Don’t you feel curious about this book and want to read it? Many articles in various

genres are written about this book, and since this book is so wonderful, most of the related pieces, including the interview and the one I am writing now, serve a common purpose that is to recommend the book. This is an amazing thing about genres—diverse articles in different genres can share a common purpose, and one article of a certain genre can aim at multiple types of audience and serve different purposes.

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