

From *Darkest Skies* is Sam Peters' impressive space sci fi debut novel, which he describes as being 'a science fiction thriller wrapped around a love story'. A tale of obsession and loss, humanity has expanded out from Earth and advanced to a time of incredible connectivity, but this doesn't mean that you can't still feel alone.

The novel opens with the grief-worn and disgraced Agent Keon Rause who has been expelled from Earth after a security operation went wrong. Five years previously his wife Alysha was murdered by a bomb planted on a train back on his home planet of Magenta, with no explanation of why she was smuggled away on it or why that train was targeted. He is now making his way back to Magenta, the first time since he left, to take up his old detective post. With him travels the illegal AI of Alysha that he built using the digital scraps of her left online. He built her to help him search for answers, but is trapped in limbo with her ghost. Unable to move on from his obsessive picking over of her case, his sole drive is to solve the mystery, but what if Alysha isn't the person he thought she was?

Back on Magenta with a team of ill-fitting agents under his command, work begins on an investigation into a mysterious drug-related death. Meanwhile, Keon uses the opportunity to dig out details from Alysha's case that he was barred from accessing. Inevitably, the two investigations coincide as hidden laboratories and vanishing scientists appear in the wake of exploding drug users.

A key theme underlying the narrative is grief. Every time there's a pause in the main story, Rause falls back into himself and his memories. We actually find out very little about him - no interests, no hobbies, no dreams beyond solving his wife's murder. This is beautifully mirrored by the vast and unpredictable storms that sweep across Magenta and shut everything down; trapping people in place until the fury has passed and normal life can continue. Alongside this is the gruelling therapy he is undergoing to build up his body to cope with the higher gravity. Every day is both a mental and physical slog for him, but inch by inch he gets closer to what actually happened.

The AI Alysha, Liss, is referred to as being a ghost of the 'real' Alysha who lives in a 'shell' - the physical body she can move out of to interact with surrounding networks. Created from fragments of his wife gleaned from her digital footprint, she is a perfect copy in many ways of the human Alysha, but always present is the machine logic underneath, recreating her mannerisms too perfectly and a constant reminder of what Rause has lost. Is she actually helping him, or is she holding him back? This is being pitched for fans of the TV programmes *Westworld* and *Humans*, but being a firm bibliophile it reminded me a lot more of Peter F Hamilton's work. Not on the same immense scale by any means, but there's the same blend of high tech sci fi mystery focused around massive secretive corporations and the casual way human life can be terminated, tethered to a very human, emotional base. I thoroughly enjoyed it and with two more sequels due, it's a solid and promising start.