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# Black Light Express (Switch Press:)



## Synopsis

With superb world building, gripping action, and ruthless political intrigue, *Black Light Express* delivers a breathtaking adventure into the darkest depths of space and is sure to please sci-fi fans and foes alike. At the edge of the Great Network, a small-time thief and an android girl ride aboard a sentient train. They hurtle toward the unknown, ready to see what lies beyond the end of the universe. But Zen Starling and Nova leave behind worlds on the brink of chaos. Old rulers are dead, and now young Threnody Noon sits precariously on the throne. Unrest spreads like a virus, a rival corporate family grows hungry for power, and the once tranquil Empire seems bound for ruin. Watching everything are the Guardians--the mysterious god-like AIs to whom people of the Network offer their prayers and praises. But even gods have secrets. Secrets the so-called benevolent deities would do anything to keep hidden deep within the farthest reaches of existence. Return to the exciting sci-fi world of Philip Reeve in this sequel to *Railhead*, which received three starred reviews and was praised by *Publishers Weekly* as a thrilling and imaginative escapade.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I absolutely loved Railhead, and of course I had high expectations for this book. I am thrilled to be able to say that it surpassed all of them. I'm even more excited now that events are well in place for a further novel in the series. The Hungry City Chronicles still stand among my treasured favorites, but these two have definitely joined them. Fans of Philip Reeve, rejoice: the sequel you've been waiting for has arrived.

The conclusion to Railhead. This story continues the tale and takes you to new heights. The strangest of love stories you will come across between boy and Android.

This is the second book in Reeve's Railhead series. In the first book, "Railhead", we learned about the Great Network, K-gates, station angels, Guardians, the Railmaker, and the magnificent sentient locomotives that travel the Network from planet to planet. At first look the entire premise seemed a bit precious, but Reeve created a convincing and compelling world that I was happy to accept and experience. This second book starts up exactly where the first left off. Our heroes, Zen Starling and Nova, the android girl who wants to be a human girl, find themselves on a one-way trip to escape the Network Empire and explore new and uncharted reaches of the great rail system. It could be possible, I guess, to start with this book, since Reeve offers enough catch-up backstory that the reader could figure out the action and the recurring characters. But, it strikes me that that would be a mistake. The great appeal of "Railhead" was in the world building; the plot/action was almost incidental. In this second book the plot/action, (and political intrigue), is more the point and the world is taken as given. For people who really enjoyed the first book this second helping is fun. But, it would be a shame to start here and miss the pleasures of learning all about the Great Network and the magnificent sentient locomotives that ply its rails. That said, in this book we go out further into the Network Galaxy, meet a wide array of Star-Wars-Cantina worthy aliens, are introduced to several engaging new main characters, and spend time with several even more snarky than usual trains. Not bad. As always with Reeve, the writing is crisp, clear and accessible to a tween reader. This series does skew toward a younger reader demo than some of Reeve's other books, which is fine since his world building, characters and plotting do seem like the sort that a younger reader could feel comfortable with. That said, while the first book had a lot of sneaking, thieving, hiding, lurking, escaping, discovering and adventuring, this second book does go a bit more toward the space opera, political side of the ledger, which might not be as appealing. Since Zen and Nova are such very engaging characters, and since a big chunk of the book is devoted to exploring the outer

reaches of the galaxy that "big" political plot isn't a deal breaker, but it might be something to keep in mind. In any event, the book is fast paced and the world is creatively imagined enough that the reader is still taken on a brisk, imaginative journey, and that is quite enough to commend this sequel. (Please note that I received a free advance copy of this book without a review requirement, or any influence regarding review content should I choose to post a review. Apart from that I have no connection at all to either the author or the publisher of this book.)

Black Light Express is Philip Reeve's just-as-good-as-the-first-book follow up to Railhead, continuing the exhilarating romp while expanding the universe and its inhabitants, as well as digging a bit more deeply into the hidden history of the created world and offering up some more page time to some of the first book's secondary characters. Warning, there will be some inevitable spoilers for book one (you can just stop here with the take-away that I recommend the duology). First one begins in the very next line! So at the end of Railhead, Nova and Zen had opened a gate to a whole other set of worlds, these inhabited by an inventively wide assortment of alien species. Taking on the role of "ambassadors" (being unwilling to admit they can't go back to their own worlds due to being fugitives and thanks to the gate they used being destroyed), the two travel around as traders, giving Reeve the opportunity to show off his alien-creation skills. As they travel, they learn of a horrific cataclysm called the "Blackout," which seemingly led to the destruction of the race that created the rails and gates. It's a taboo subject amongst the aliens, but solving the mystery of the Blackout, or at least exploring it, may lead, Nova believes, to a way home for the two of them. Unfortunately, to do so they'll have to find a way around an aggressive reptilian species that is after Nova for what she might teach them about advanced technology. Meanwhile, back in the human-dominated part of the universe, things aren't going so well with the ruling family and thanks to the ongoing political turmoil, we get to spend a lot more time with Empress Threnody, as well as her current handmaiden-former criminal Chandni (a seemingly throw-away character from book one). We also revisit Threnody's former fiancée Kobi, who finds hidden depths that were hinted at a bit in the first book, and Zen's sister's friend Flex, who also grows in complexity here. In fact, these two minor characters from the first book have some of the most moving moments here in Black Light Express. One of my favorite aspects of the sequel is that Reeve didn't play it safe by focusing on the two main characters but is happy to leave them behind for long stretches to let others have the stage. In general, characters here are

also nicely complicated, with “good” characters often frustrating readers hoping for a bit more solidly steady sense of ethics. And as with the first book, the cast of characters is not limited to the organic, as one of the most enjoyable characters is Ghost Train, though we meet several other trains with strong personalities as well. As one expects by now with a Reeve novel, the plot zips along via clear prose, though Reeve gives us a bit more description, having opened up a whole new “Web of Worlds” filled with wonderfully non-human species. The concepts as well as the geography are bigger, and we learn much more about the creation of the gates, the role of the Guardians, and why the gates have remained a mystery for so long. Meanwhile, Reeve continues to explore issues of identity and humanity, AI, the impact of technology, and the safety of stagnation versus the dangerous benefits of growth. Speaking of danger, Reeve isn’t averse to killing off major characters, and there are several wrenching moments (some involving death some not), including a painfully bittersweet ending that is all the better for being pretty inevitable from the start. Inventive, taut, quick moving, with the ability to move you or make you uncomfortable at any given moment, Black Light Express brings the story begun in Railhead to a strong close, though I’d be more than happy if Reeve found a way to return to this universe for more stories. (originally appeared on [fantasyliterature.com](http://fantasyliterature.com))

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