

Mycelium series by Vilma Kadlečková

summary

Mycelium is an eight-part saga totaling 3,723 pages. This monumental piece of writing is largely unparalleled in the Czech fantasy scene and offers a truly extraordinary reading experience.

The story takes place on our planet a few centuries from now. Humans have survived only thanks to the technological achievements of the ancient, alien, theocratic civilization of the Össeans.

Vilma Kadlečková's eight-part Mycelium saga offers readers a detailed and complex fantastic fictional world. Initially dominated by the mycelial technology-wielding planet Össe, the unique universe features a far-future variant of Earth and humanity forced to resist the slowly spreading cultural and technological influence of the Össeans. The genre of the work oscillates between science fiction and political thriller, but it includes many reflections on contemporary topics – among others, the role of the church and religion, the paradox of exceptionalism, which never comes for free, or the age-old struggle of power and the responsibility that this power carries.

Because of Mycelium's profound and often unsettling insights, and the psychological complexity of the narrative, critics have compared it to Orson Scott Card's classic Ender's Game. While never short on action, as in all great science fiction, the most significant conflicts in Kadlečková's saga are battles of ideas.

As the title suggests, mushrooms play an important role in the story—whether it be drugs or the plethora of mycelial technologies possessed by the theocratic planet Össe, thanks to which the priests there manage to subjugate the surrounding worlds. Readers—similarly to the main characters—quickly realize that there are countless ways to conquer a civilization and that one does not always need military force to do so.

The story's protagonists are Lucas Hildebrandt, son of one of the most renowned Össe experts, and psychotronic Ash~shaad of Fomalhiwav—men so similar and yet so different that

when they cross paths, it could shake up not only interplanetary politics but also the universe itself.

Mycelium tackles a range of current topics, but to reduce this octalogy to a mere listing of them would be neither fair nor right. The meticulously constructed world of the distant future deals with power struggles and the political machinations that go with it as well as uncompromising clashes of cultures, religions, principles, and beliefs.

We first enter the world of Mycelium in **The Opening**. Earth is facing an incipient crisis: the media has exposed the harsh truth about researchers on a remote space base, who have been, so to speak, thrown overboard. But why are they only speaking out now, decades later? And who is the mysterious Fomalhiwavian, so coveted by the government and the Össeans?

The second book in the series is titled **Ice Under the Skin**. Lucas may have succeeded in smuggling a Fomalhiwavian to Earth and introducing him to the public in a grand fashion, but now he must face the consequences of his actions. Of course, it wouldn't be Hildebrandt Jr. if he didn't approach the matter with a stoic calm. Only Ash~shaad can break his composure—and manages to do so more often than either of them would like. Lucas is repeatedly confronted with Össe, his past, his illness, and now also with his character flaws. *Ice Under the Skin* is therefore very much about Lucas' self-awareness—about moments of finally admitting the truth to oneself and learning from it. There are also hints of an undercurrent—something unspoken—whispering to readers that there's more to the story than meets the eye.

Fall into Darkness gives readers answers about Lucas' illness as well as the relationships between the individual characters. Many of the story's political and cultural machinations are revealed, but that doesn't mean Lucas isn't still surrounded by heaps of lies and schemes—in fact, they just keep piling up. Each plot thread grows more complex and intertwined with the others by the second. The undercurrent present in the previous book that made readers feel like something was being kept from them, that there was something they were missing, is now becoming a raging river.

In **The Sight**, Lucas has to not only come to terms with what has happened to him and the consequences, but he must also confront his past. Starkeepers are approaching Earth, and while the term doesn't mean much to humans just yet, a sense of panic starts to spread—especially because something is happening to the universe itself. Humans are also beginning to realize that they have become the oppressed majority on their own planet and begin to act. Against the backdrop of all these events, Lucas' personal struggles seem minuscule.

Voices and the Stars provide answers to questions that have accumulated over previous novels. Vilma Kadlečková does not hold back in revealing the harsh truth—and readers won't always like the answers they get. The more the motivations and weaknesses of the heroes—considered unshakable forces in the universe until now—come to light, the harder it is to reconcile with the realization that they could have spared themselves so much trouble had they joined forces.

A Layer of Silence gives us the missing pieces of the puzzle, with everything finally falling into place. It becomes clear how well Vilma Kadlečková has thought the whole story through—so well that despite Mycelium having grown to unexpected proportions, the story never loses any of its logic and every new book in the series is as good as the preceding one.

Forbidden Directions and **The Apocalypse Program** make up a very extensive single episode in the series that has been divided into two volumes for length's sake. Heavily impacting the story, the characters' flaws and mistakes have balled up into a force so strong it could easily snap necks. Readers watch on as the characters' efforts remain in vain and as they—often unwittingly—undermine one another's efforts. But Vilma Kadlečková raises the stakes by giving hope to the characters and readers: there is still time... But the characters are running on borrowed time. All things considered, the heroes' adherence to their daily routines despite what is happening in the universe and on Earth seems absurd, but also very human. It is this humanity and the accompanying emotional rawness of the narrative that perfectly characterize the whole saga.

Vilma Kadlečková devoted almost twenty years to writing Mycelium, allowing her to play around with the story and truly refine it. The cultural and political background of the story is diverse, sophisticated, and believable. In addition, Vilma Kadlečková presents a number of philosophical and moral questions and reflections within the pages of the book, many of which will resonate strongly with readers. At times, Mycelium is reminiscent of advanced metaphysics, reflected in not only the characters but the whole plot, making use of the author's largely abstract imagination.

Deep mysticism, psychotronics, science, and faith... those are aspects that come together in the pages of Mycelium from the very first volume, making the saga into an impressive piece of writing.

Despite the author's perfect worldbuilding and countless sub-storylines that hold the extensive piece of work together, it's the characters that underpin the whole story. That is because the various kinds of misfortune encountered by the characters are, naturally, owed to human error. Lucas himself isn't quite your stereotypical savior-of-the-universe hero. He has numerous

character flaws, many of which might be hard to forgive, whether it be his cold calculating nature or ability to play hardball. Still, it is impossible to miss how human all of this makes him. And let's call a spade a spade—if he were a prince on a white horse, he would never be able to survive in the world of Mycelium.

Vilma Kadlečková doesn't write words for the sake of writing words—every sentence is well thought out and adds value to the story. She shifts the reader's perception of the Össeans and their beliefs, shapes the characters, and makes them more believable. Every word helps create the intricate plot web and reinforces the extraordinary reading experience offered by the saga, as does the author's picturesque, poetic language, characterized by a rich vocabulary and flowery language. That being said, the author's writing style does not take away from the more action-packed passages, with the text flowing smoothly despite the narrative having a relaxed pace. This allows readers space to fully appreciate how well-developed the characters and the world of Mycelium are as well as to thoroughly enjoy all the series' colorful details.

It is also worth mentioning the author's subtle, subversive sense of humor and the fact that she manages to surprise time and time again—even when readers think they know where the story's headed and what is going to happen next, they often find out they were sorely mistaken when the author hits them with an unexpected plot twist.

Mycelium is truly unique—a work of such sophistication, complexity, and craftsmanship is rarely seen in the Czech fantasy scene. Upon finishing the last page, readers will be so thoroughly torn apart and shocked they will be left wondering whether it was all worth it.

And it was.

Vilma Kadlečková's eight-part saga Mycelium is one of the most daring undertakings in the history of Czech fiction. At first glance, it impresses with its size (totaling over 3,700 pages), but also with the sophistication and complexity of its fantastic fictional world. The unique universe, initially ruled by the mycelial technology-wielding planet Össe, contains a far-future version of the Earth, in which humanity is forced to resist the slowly spreading cultural and technological influence of the Össeans. The series is a blend of science fiction and political thriller but includes a number of reflections on contemporary themes—including the role of church and religion in our lives, the paradox of exceptionalism, which never comes without a price, and the age-old struggle between power and the responsibility that comes with it. Vilma Kadlečková has created a work as original and complex as the best foreign sagas of a similar style, a milestone of Czech fiction that cannot be overlooked.