

Meyer, Stephenie. The Host. New York : Hachette Audio, 2010.

Science fiction with a twist that is new in my reading experience – this story is told from the perspective of the alien being inhabiting the body of a human woman. Alien beings are called souls. Physically, they resemble silvery centipedes. And, of course, they are inserted at the base of the brain and entwine their long tentacles into the human brain to control it and the body. Their presence can be detected by an unhuman reflection when a light is shined into the eye. Souls have come to Earth, one of many planets they have colonized, to inhabit the bodies of all the people on the planet. The souls can potentially live forever by being implanted in one body after another, with time in cryotanks while being moved from planet to planet.

Most of Earth has been colonized. Melanie Stryder, one of the few humans apparently still free, is caught and becomes the host to Wanderer, who is starting her tenth life on as many planets. Wanderer is supposed to explore Melanie's mind and memories and report the information of any other humans to the Seekers (the equivalent of undercover police). Except for the actions of Seekers to catch humans, the souls are so gentle that there is no longer any crime or conflict or war on Earth. But Melanie is so strong she refuses to relinquish control of her mind to Wanderer and eventually begins to try to influence Wanderer and then to taunt her. Who will win this battle?

Wanderer, a lonely soul, becomes attached to Jamie, Melanie's younger brother, and Jared, the man Melanie loves, through the experience of memories as Melanie doles them out to her. Having become discontent in her life as a parasite on Earth and having found no other preferred companionship, Wanderer embarks on a journey into the Arizona desert to find Jared and Jamie, directed by Melanie according to memories of cryptic clues given to Melanie by her eccentric, survivalist uncle Jed years before. To get back to Jared and Jamie, Melanie decides to trust Wanderer at least to some extent.

When Wanderer is found by Jed and his group (the clues caused her to be spotted and tracked from a great distance), more of the book's great conflicts are set up – cultural prejudice, survival instinct, determination to resist and keep fighting. Jed, the survivalist is in charge of the community of humans living in the cave he found many years before, is unwilling for his niece's body to be killed outright. He suspects early on that only Melanie's strong presence and participation could have brought Wanderer to the desert. Jared is both attracted and repelled. Ian O'Shea, another member of the community, begins to believe that Melanie is present along with Wanderer, but develops his attachment to Wanderer. Romantic conflict involves two female personalities in one human body, and two men.

The greatest secret Wanderer protects is how to remove a soul from a human's body, something the humans are trying to learn by trial and error. When parties leave the cave to steal food and supplies, they also capture an implanted human and bring that person back for medical experimentation by the doctor of the community. Wanderer's initial response to the doctor is understandable – he is the torturer, the butcher of souls.

Trust and loyalty, choice and sacrifice, individual and community good – these are consistent themes. When Wanderer comes to value, even love, humans as individuals and not as just host bodies, she knows it is ultimately wrong that her species came to this planet. For her to leave Melanie and the planet, she has to trust in human good.

We talk and think about diversity and unity among people and communities. This story invites thought about diversity and unity on a different scale. It crosses species and planets. Even so, it seems to be all the same. Respect for life in all its forms is at the core of our relationships. What will we choose to do to put things right, if an option is open to us?

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