



Thorns

Robert Silverberg

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In a world where humanity has colonized the solar system and begun to explore more of the local galaxy, a vast audience follows real-life stories presented by wealthy media mogul Duncan Chalk. Chalk feeds on the pained emotions of others. He plays cruelly with his staff, but gorges on the mass emotions generated by the dramas he orchestrates.

Chalk pairs Minner Burris, an emotionally withdrawn space explorer who was captured and freakishly surgically altered by aliens, with Lona Kelvin, a suicidal seventeen-year-old girl who donated eggs for a fertility experiment that produced one hundred babies, none of whom she has been allowed to adopt or even see. Chalk promises to solve their personal problems in return for a joint performance tour.

The two enjoy each other's company and become lovers as their mutual weaknesses somehow strengthen them, but their emotions then move them to conflict. Their breakup allows Chalk to break his promises but keep them on the hook by making new offers. Burris knows Chalk's promise was empty—the changes are irreversible and the surgery has also “improved” his body in unexpected ways that he won't give up. By accident, he learns of Chalk's true nature, and an encounter exposes the full depth of his pain to Chalk. Burris has convinced Kelvin to join him on a trip back to where he was mutilated, where they will confront the aliens and, they hope, undergo alterations that take them beyond their weakened humanity.

An early exploration of media exploitation and a deep look at freak-show entertainment on a mass scale, this novel was one of the earliest of Silverberg's mature masterworks.

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