

Review of Peter Watts's book *Starfish*

by [Jacob Williams](#) on 2025-02-09

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A quick search suggests that only about 4% of the reviews of this book on Goodreads use the word “claustrophobic”. I don’t know how the other 96% managed to avoid it. The most striking thing about the novel, especially in the first half, is how vividly it conveys a sense of being hemmed-in—not so much physically as *emotionally*.

Neurocomputers in the form of “[c]ultured brain cells on a slab” make an appearance and I’m pretty amused by one of the character’s euphemisms for them: “Head cheese.”

I like how the apocalyptic threat driving the plot is a microbial one that would manifest in a completely undramatic way:

“Let me tell you what happens if this thing gets out,” she said quietly. “First off, nothing. We outnumber it, you see. At first we swamp it through sheer numbers, the models predict all sorts of skirmishes and false starts. But eventually it gets a foothold. Then it outcompetes conventional decomposers and monopolizes our inorganic nutrient base. That cuts the whole trophic pyramid off at the ankles. You, and me, and the viruses and the giant sequoias, all just fade away for want of nitrates or some stupid thing.