

# Encounter with Extraterrestrials

*Cry from a Silent Planet* by John Rowland

*Reviewed by Henry Beissel*

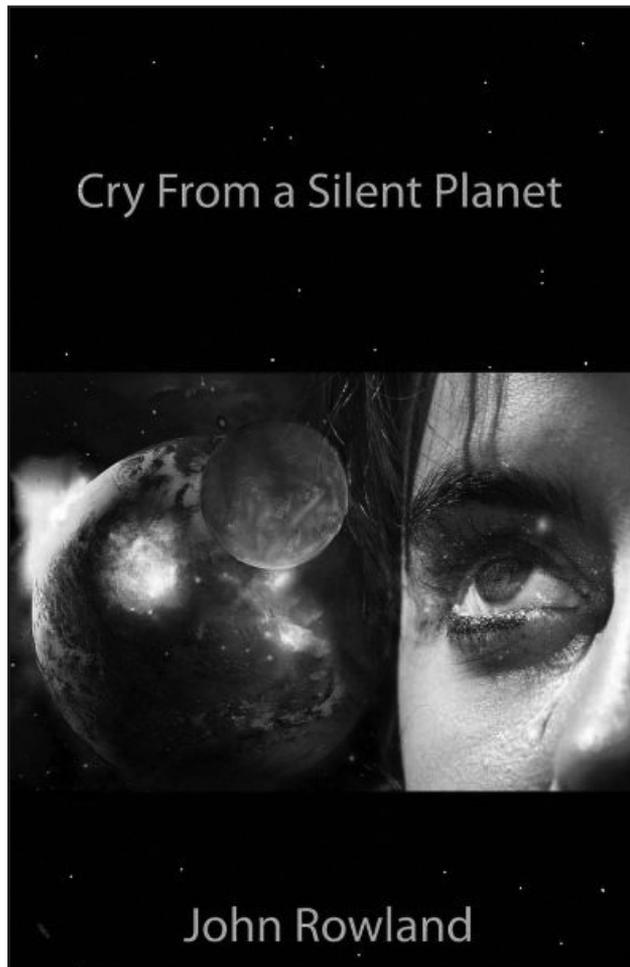
If you enjoy the feverish exhilaration of a thriller that also offers your mind substantial challenges, I highly recommend John Rowland's thoughtful sci-fi novel, *Cry From a Silent Planet*. It is one of those unputdownable works of fiction that reverberate in your mind long after the tension that kept you glued to all of its 286 pages has abated.

All imaginative literature springs from speculative questions. Rowland develops his story in answer to a series of suppositions that ask: what if on a planet light-years distant from earth a highly intelligent creature had evolved millions of years before *Homo sapiens* emerged from Africa's jungles? And what if an imminent cosmic catastrophe forced this technologically superior alien civilization to abandon its planet and seek a home elsewhere in the universe? And what if their space exploration had persuaded them that our planet was their best bet, but they needed to get rid of our species?

All these propositions are perfectly rational. Rowland is a lecturer in astronomy and physics in the UK, and he knows his sciences. The universe is about 13.7 billion years old; our earth about 4.5 billion years; and scientists now have evidence that the first galaxies formed as early as 200 million years after the Big Bang. Given the

fact that there are a hundred billion stars in each of a hundred billion galaxies in our universe, it is also reasonable to assume that life has sprung up and evolved on millions of planets with a suitable environment. It follows that there were approximately nine billion years in which life could have developed elsewhere before the earth ever came into existence. Allow, say, four billion years for life to evolve to the stage of our neocortex, and you face the reasonable possibility that there are planets on which sophisticated technological civilizations have existed and evolved over five billion years. Allow one or two million years for the evolution of our neocortex and the accompanying growth of sophisticated society, and such extraterrestrial civilizations would be five thousand times older than ours. Can you imagine the state of our technology on earth five billion years down the road from where science has taken us now?

This is, of course, assuming that technological societies are not intrinsically coded to self-destruct, an assumption that *Cry From a Silent Planet* rejects. The inhabitants of the planet Cryon, who, under threat of annihilation from an external cosmic force (a black star heading for collision with them) are searching for a suitable home elsewhere, have left the self-destructive



***CRY FROM A SILENT PLANET***

**John Rowland**

**COMPAID GRAPHICS**

**286 pp**

**ISBN 978-1-105-95341-5**

phase of technological civilization millions of years in their past. But in choosing to settle on planet Earth, they come face to face with our species, which has wedded technological superpower to unfettered supergreed and is therefore on the road to a supercatastrophe.

All of which is to say that the suspension of disbelief Rowland's what-if suppositions call for, are grounded in solid science and sound reasoning. To act out a scenario derived from these particular circumstances, we are introduced to Vorkan, the leader of the expedition across interstellar space to transfer the inhabitants of their planet, Cryon, to Earth. His opposite number among humans is Matt Slater, an electrical engineer in the business of producing batteries that yield sustainable energy. The year is 2024, and tracking across the wilds of Wyoming on a vacation trip, Matt Slater and his family come across a

strange, massive Gateway that resists all attempts to open it, or even just to explain its origins and purpose in the middle of nowhere.

Trying to find a key to open the mysterious Gateway sets off a chase that leads across space and time in breath-taking leaps and bounds. To reveal more of the novel's relentless plot might spoil the excitement of a first reading. Suffice to say that Vorkan and Slater are the protagonists who lead the reader on an adventure tour that includes a visit to the Moon and a first-row seat to witness the extinction of the dinosaurs. They also engage in various verbal exchanges that throw a revealing light on *Homo sapiens* and the state of our planet.

*Cry From a Silent Planet* is definitely a page-turner. The plot never slackens, and the ending is as unpredictable as it is thought-provoking and disturbing. After reading it, you will want to reflect on the truths about our world that Rowland has embodied in this exciting and intelligent sci-fi novel. A splendid and rewarding read!

*Henry Beissel is a poet, playwright, essayist, translator and editor who has published more than 30 books. He is Distinguished Emeritus Professor at Concordia University, Montreal, and now lives in Ottawa.*

*[www.HenryBeissel.com](http://www.HenryBeissel.com)*