

Cyber Cozen

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Happy New Year ! תשנ"ט / 1999



Biography

David Brin and the Uplift Series
reviewed by Amnon Stupp

David Glen Brin was born in 1950 in California, and has lived there his whole life. Brin has a B.Sc. in Astronomy, M.Sc. in Applied Physics, and a Ph.D. in Astrophysics from the University of California. He is married to Cheryl Brigham, also a scientist, and they have a daughter and two sons.

Brin's novels have been translated into over 20 languages, one of which is (very recently) Hebrew.

Web Sites

Brin's Site : <http://www.kithrup.com/brin/>

A good fan's site : <http://www.slip.net/~rainbowf/brin/>

Text of a talk by Brin on the issues of modern information society :

<http://kspace.com/KM/spot.sys/Brin/pages/piece1.html>

A good general SF Site: <http://www.sfsite.com/home.htm>

Brin's Work

David Brin is, as he himself says, "a noted futurist". He has strong views about modern society and the direction it should take. Apart from being a popular speaker much in demand, he has also published the non-fiction *The Transparent Society* (1998), dealing with the issues of privacy in a digital age, and social questions in general. My personal impression from his web-site is that Brin himself considers *The Transparent Society* and his novel *Earth* his two most important books. As often happens these are not his most popular books, and I haven't read either. Therefore I will comment no further on the issues dear to Brin's heart. Instead, in this review I give my personal opinion about his great (in both meanings) *Uplift series*. For all interested, see Brin's Web-site, which is very interesting.

The *Uplift series* is Brin's major body of work, comprising 6 books in three trilogies, the second one just completed. The books are:

- 1) *Sundiver*, 1980, 340 pages
- 2) *Startide Rising*, 1982, 460 pages, awarded Hugo, Nebula and Locus awards in 1983
- 3) *The Uplift War*, 1987, 636 pages, awarded Hugo and Locus awards, nominated for the Nebula
- 4) *Brightness Reef*, 1995, 705 pages, nominated for the Hugo in 1996
- 5) *Infinity's Shore*, 1996, 635 pages
- 6) *Heaven's Reach*, 1998, 562 pages

Outline

In the Uplift series Brin paints for us a very large canvas of a culture which has existed for more than a billion years, across 5 galaxies, and is made up of thousands of different races.

This culture has persisted through an interesting method of inheritance. Every intelligent race seeks "pre-sapient" races, apparently on the level of our Chimpanzees, and "raises" these races to sapience through genetic engineering. This is an original, and logical, counter to the famous "first principle" of non-intervention espoused in other S.F., for example in *Star Trek*.

The newly sapient races are "clients" of the elder "patron" race which has raised them, and owe this patron-race a hundred thousand years of indentured service. The span of time seems enormous to us, as Homo Sapiens has only had writing for less than 5000 years, and has been in existence less than a hundred thousand years, but for a culture with records going back a billion years, it is short. The prestige of

a race depends on the number of clients it has, and on the antiquity of its patron-line, and therefore conservation of planets where pre-sapient may arise, and of the pre-sapient and their environment are of paramount importance. There is also more than prestige involved as the patron races introduce changes they think can benefit them during their genetic meddling. These changes can prove very worthwhile over the 100,000 years' service.

In this Uplift culture races are raised to sapience, become patrons themselves, grow old, and disappear. New races appear to take up the mantle of intelligence, and pass it on to the next "generations" of races. In the first books this culture seems like a benevolent, supra-racial and supra-galactic, version of what we know from our own racial existence. Add the important place of ecology in this culture, and superficially it would appear that Brin's universe is quite a nice place. Unfortunately, humanity is the odd-sapient-out. In a universe where every single race has been raised as a client to an older race, and can trace its line back from patron to patron, humanity is a strange anomaly. It seems that we have no patron. Is it even possible to achieve sapience without patronage? In the first books it seems that the aliens don't believe this, and instead say humanity's patron has abandoned us, and is hiding its identity - no doubt out of shame at the results of its efforts.

There are several other interesting ideas in the series, one of which is that there are many ways of faster than light travel. Brin himself refers to this, and writes that since there is no faster than light travel in known physics, he decided to go for broke and invented a dozen different ways. There is reference to a "probability drive", several "levels of hyperspace", there are "transit points", and maybe others. Faster than light drive is taken for granted and used extensively. The last book holds a surprise I do not want to spoil, but will only say Brin suddenly becomes very conservative.

Another important theme is ecology. There have been ecological books before (*Dune* is a very obvious example). Here there is a culture spanning millions of races, billions of years, and several galaxies, which is based on ecology, with many implications. For example, war is easy, because of the ease of interstellar travel, but it is strongly constrained. Even today we could destroy a planet's ecology by raining hydrogen bombs on its continents. In a culture with technology sufficient to blow a planet apart, the use of weapons much less powerful than hydrogen bombs is forbidden - at least on a habitable planet. This is far more than a plot device, it is a fundamental principle in Brin's universe. However, it also serves to bring the action down to the level of personal combat, where the reader can identify. As we all know an old fashioned swords or gun fight is far more interesting than people pressing buttons and impersonally blowing away entire buildings (or cities).

First Trilogy

The first 3 books can each be read independently. I liked *Startide Rising* better than any of the others, and following is a brief commentary on each.

Sundiver:

This is Brin's first book, and has an interesting idea. I once used to think about the proverb that "if there is a will there are the means" (אין דבר העומד בפני הרצון) that it is easy to give a counterexample. My favorite counterexample was people going to the Sun and actually visiting it. In *Sundiver* Brin gives a description of a method of actually delving into the sun.

In this book Brin introduces the *Uplift* universe, and humanity as the new kid on the block, under constant pressure and in constant danger. In spite of all that, I didn't like the book.

Startide Rising:

I consider *Startide* one of the best books I have ever had the pleasure of reading.

It is here that the good ship Streaker is introduced, and the ship and its crew, consisting mostly of Dolphins, will accompany us for the rest of the series.

Galactic culture is shown in this book as mysterious, with the actions of the aliens inscrutable. Even when we "listen in" to what the aliens think, we don't know why they do what they do, we only know they believe it is important.

The Streaker has discovered a fleet of mysterious, billion-years old ships, and has made the mistake of reporting her find to Earth. Immediately the known universe is thrown into turmoil, and half the races in the five galaxies start hunting for her. The reason for the hunt is a complete mystery to the crew. It seems that for some reason each of the alien races wants to know where the derelict fleet is, and doesn't want any other race to know. In spite of the deep-space venue, most of the action actually takes place on and around the planet Kithrup, where Streaker has found a temporary refuge.

Brin's description of the Dolphins and the way they perceive reality is especially interesting,

and is the best characterization of how it is to be truly alien I have ever encountered. Brin shows us what it is to see the world through eyes, and other senses, not Human, and to think thoughts in a way which is not Human. One of the most impressive sections in *Startide Rising* is when Brin introduces the idea that for dolphins the world is only partially real. Since the primary perception is sonic, and the dolphins can create "sonic structures", they can actually create their own private universe! The walls seem to disappear, forms not truly existing seem to appear, and the dolphin is in its own universe. An analogy for us would be if we could project holograms, and when alone in a room could change the appearance of a room, for example to make it seem we are in a forest, walking between the trees, and having a conversation with another person half-seen between the shadows. I would say that *Startide Rising* is in many ways an in-depth study of possible Dolphin psychology, assuming the genetic uplift of Dolphins is ever performed. The alienness of the Dolphins also emphasizes how alien the "real" aliens are, since the Dolphins are the "clients" of Humans, and their world-view is closest to the Humans'.

The action moves from deep space battles and weapons capable of blowing a planet apart, to the interaction between the Dolphins, the few Humans, and the single Chimpanzee on the Streaker.

The Uplift War:

Takes place during the same time period as *Startide Rising*, on one of the Human colonized worlds. Our understanding of Galactic culture is expanded, and the various aliens are resolved into factions and personality traits. We start to distinguish between "good guys" and "bad guys", and even get to know a few aliens as characters, following their thoughts and behavior. It starts to look as if the aliens are not so impossible to understand, which might actually be a drifting away from what "real" aliens would be like. In *Startide Rising* the heroes are Dolphins, and in this book the heroes are Chimpanzees, and also the alien Athaclena of the Tymbrimi.

In general the scope of the stories increases with each book, and concurrently there is a deepening of our understanding. The aliens in *Startide* are mostly evil enemies, or someone impossible to comprehend - even the Tymbrimi, who are humanity's friends - are described as acting for incomprehensible reasons.

In *The Uplift War* the heroes are mostly the Chimps, and it is no surprise they are comprehensible, being closest to Humans. But there are also aliens, who should be strange. Most of the novel is recounted through non-Human eyes, and thus we get more acquainted with Aliens as characters, as people.

Second Trilogy

Unlike the first trilogy the second trilogy has to be read in sequence. Not only that, but every book is also larger than the books of the previous trilogy.

Personally I dislike the tendency of writers to write multiple volumes, heavier and heavier tomes, over longer periods of time, which in the final account don't give me - as a reader - more than the 1950's thin, singleton, books. However, I must admit that Brin used the (enormous) space afforded by his second trilogy to develop his culture extensively. Probably most of the ideas which are presented did not exist when the first books were written, but Brin manages a seamless integration. Galactic culture is revealed, including what happens to the older races when they withdraw from galactic affairs. The history of the five galaxies, which it turns out were once more than five, is plumbed. Mysteries of space, time, alien races, and so forth, are untangled. And, as seems mandatory in American popular culture, a happy ending for all heroes is arranged. (Don't get me wrong, I PREFER books with a happy ending).

What I found more interesting than the new developments is expansion of ideas which did exist in the previous trilogy. I also guess that these ideas are related to Brin's non-fiction work. For example in the first trilogy we get hints that the Uplift culture, in spite of its seeming good points, acts to stifle the races within it. The Galactic-Library contains every idea and development ever thought of, and the races of the five galaxies come to depend on it. There is no room for new thought, in fact new thought is viewed with suspicion as heretical. This is one of the reasons for the suspicion and hatred towards humanity.

As reading material I liked the first book, *Brightness Reef*, most, and the last book, *Heaven's Reach*, least. Following is a brief commentary on each of the books:

Brightness Reef:

In this book we are introduced to the planet Jijo, which exists outside the Galactic culture. Jijo is inhabited by six different races, including Humans and Chimpanzees. Here we really see various aliens from "the inside". Also, the stifling nature of galactic society is clearly shown in the alien races who cut themselves away from it. It turns out that "wild" aliens are very similar to Humans! The young aliens

read Human books, and behave very much like Humans would. However, I found the book to be simply too long.

Infinity's Shore:

We continue with the Jijo group, and the Streaker story line is joined. There are hints of strange and special connections over millions of years and many races with some kind of destiny - or perhaps conspiracy - in the workings.

Heaven's Reach:

This is the final tying-up of loose ends. However the story is so much Space Opera with its scope of billions of years, tens of galaxies, hundreds of races, and so forth, that it becomes a little too much. My personal impression was that the book was not plotted well enough. Shocking revelations follow so quickly, and momentous events make the previous stunning catastrophes pale in comparison, that the book loses some feeling of credibility. Of course, what exactly is "credibility" in Science Fiction? Even Hard S.F?

The bottom line is we learn everything about the Galactic Culture, its past, its "orders of life", the final end of all races, everything that the "ordinary" galactic races didn't know themselves. It is so much knowledge that wasn't even hinted at before, that some of it seems, frankly, redundant.

The people of Streaker end up knowing vastly more than the other races encountered in the previous books, more even than the "Retired Order", which we only learned about in *Infinity's Shore*. Finally the crew is exposed to the secrets of the Transcendent races, and we get hints that there may even be things beyond that! Is it possible that another trilogy is in preparation?



Subject: Star Wars
To: Aharon Sheer <asheer@netvision.net.il>

I'm much worse than you -- I was bored by the FIRST Star Wars movie. There were a few amusing moments, I admit, and -- as my uncle pointed out to me, at the time--someone did have the imagination to portray a spacecraft as a beat-up old hulk, instead of a gleaming, streamlined, right-off-the-showroom-floor model. (That was quite an original idea for an SF movie in those days.) But on the whole I thought it was a trite and derivative fantasy. I was dragged to the second one, under protest, but it was hot and the theater was air conditioned, so I succumbed. It didn't even have amusing moments.

Nothing could have persuaded me to see the rest of them--I don't even know how many more there were -- and the new one does not tempt me any more than the others. Maybe I just have a low boredom threshold.

Regards, **Devra Kunin**

<p>Rehovot Science Fiction</p> <p>Next SCIENCE FICTION CLUB Meeting:</p> <p>Tuesday August 31 8:15 p.m. Inbal Saggiv-Nakdimon (in Hebrew)</p> <p>"Israeli sf including</p> <p>books translated to Hebrew, Israeli sf magazines and fanzines,</p> <p>fan activities, conventions etc."</p> <p>Rehovot Science Fiction meets (when it meets) on the last Tuesday of the month</p> <p>at the home of Tova and Bill Silverman,</p> <p>19 Eisenberg St., fourth floor, Rehovot, Tel. 08-947-6142.</p> <p>There is a REFRESHMENT CHARGE of FOUR Shekels (for those who partake).</p>	
<p><i>For Comments:</i> POB 9443, Tel Aviv 61093. Email: asheer@netvision.net.il. Tel: Aharon Sheer 08-947-1225.</p>	
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