

CyberCozen

Science-Fiction Newsletter

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Letters to the Editor

מכתבים לעורך

Aharon,

I got the March *CyberCozen*. I like the ones with movie reviews. I thought *The Postman* was a stupid movie, especially since the star (*Kevin Costner*) is a terrible actor and read his lines horribly. Another fine issue of the fanzine. Thanks.

Best, **Sid Berger**

Sid, Kevin Costner was also the director and producer. Nothing to say about that? **Aharon**

לאהרון שיר שלום רב!

ברצוני לחדש את המנוי ל-CyberCozen שלמרות היותו fanzine בן מספר עמודים בלבד הוא תמיד מעניין לקריאה והסריקות בו מרתקות לעתים קרובות מאוד. בכבוד רב, **פבל יצקוב**, קוראכם הנאמן.



Film Review: by Aharon Sheer

The High Crusade, based on the book of the same name by *Poul Anderson*, produced in Germany but acted in English (1994), 87 minutes, is awful.

Technically it is pretty well done -- which makes sense since it was made in Germany. The actors are British and they are trying to be Monty Python. Thus they have spoiled the story by putting in chastity belts and blows to the testicles, which are typical stupid British jokes (every humorous British movie has someone getting hit in the balls). Half the movie is about the leader of the Crusaders and his inability to have sex with his brand new wife (the chastity belt is for HIM, not her -- isn't that funny?) The movie is, according to the cover of the video, "suitable only for persons of 15 years and over", but frankly I think that age 13 and below would be more appropriate. At least those kids might find jokes about getting hit in the balls funny.

Perhaps if I had not read Poul Anderson's intelligent and clever book on which

the movie is supposedly based I would have found the movie less disappointing, but the fact that the film was never released in America indicates that other people also were not impressed. My son Yaron (age 24) saw the video and thought the film not suitable for anyone above the age of 12.

The story in Poul Anderson's book is that a hostile alien starship visits England at the time of the Crusades. The evil intentions of the aliens are thwarted by a group of crusaders, who, through amusing blunders and misunderstandings, take over the starship. Then, through a continuing series of blunders and misunderstandings, the crusaders continue their conquests on other planets. Amusing and fun. The book is highly recommended. Why can't film makers follow the plot of a good book? Why do they have to "improve" it?

Rehovot Science Fiction: Next SCIENCE FICTION CLUB Meetings:

Tuesday July 27 *Avi Chami* (in Hebrew)

"The Evolution of the Human Race as Depicted in sf Stories"

Tuesday August 31 *Inbal Saggiv-Nakdimon* (in Hebrew)

"Israeli sf including books translated to Hebrew, Israeli sf magazines and fanzines, fan activities, conventions etc."

Rehovot Science Fiction meets (when it meets) on the last Tuesday of the month at the home of Tova and Bill Silverman,

19 Eisenberg St., fourth floor, Rehovot, Tel. 08-947-6142.

There is a REFRESHMENT CHARGE of 3.50 Shekels (for those who partake).



Short Reviews: by Aharon Sheer

The Left Hand of Darkness by Ursula K. Le Guin (1969), 304 pages.

This is one of the thirty best sf books ever written (before 1990), according to the *LOCUS* poll whose results were published here in November 1998. (Another of the 30 best, also by Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, was reviewed in *CyberCozen* in December 1998, in Hebrew.) I first read this book in Hebrew translation (it was called, I believe, *מעבר לעלטה*), and didn't care much for it. Too much ice, I suppose.

The story is of the rediscovery of a long-lost planet of humans, as interplanetary human confederation gradually redevelops after a long hiatus. This long-lost planet, *Gethen*, is unique among all human planets, however, evidently having been an experiment in genetic engineering conducted tens of thousands of years before. Every normal Gethenian is a hermaphrodite: that is, all have sexual and reproductive organs of both men and women. Normally, the sex organs are hidden inside. But once a month Gethenians go into heat; they become sexually aroused. When one such finds another such, they carry out a courtship in which each of the two must decide which will be a man, and which a woman. Then the sex organs adapt to the choice, male genitals, for example, coming out of the body, and sex can take place. The rest of the month Gethenians are neither male nor female, and have no sex drive at all.

To a human from earth, Gethenians are hard to take. We are used to dealing with each person as either a man or a woman. But on Gethen, a King can be pregnant. He can, at different times, either father a son or give birth to a son and nurse him. (Son?) The hero is an earthman sent to be the sole representative (an

Envoy) to Gethen from the interstellar confederation, whose job is to persuade the Gethenians to voluntarily join the confederation. Gethenians view the Envoy, of course, as a pervert, for he is perpetually male, and perpetually in heat.

The author, Le Guin, is the daughter of a famous anthropologist, A. L. Kroeber, and has created a unique society. She tells us its folk tales, its legends, and its proverbs, and of its differences. She creates a language, and two radically different countries. On Gethen there has never been a war. Skirmishes, yes, scattered violent quarrels, yes, revenge killings, yes, but a full-fledged war, never. For war you need MEN (males), and there are no MEN on Gethen.

The story is a moving one, as a true deep friendship develops between the Envoy and an important Gethenian. At first the Envoy is unable to trust this person, partly because he finds himself unable to accept fully someone he cannot categorize as male or female. One of the questions the Envoy asks himself, is, "Why does the confederation always send only ONE Envoy to a newly discovered human planet? Why not a group?" One answer he gives himself is that while one Envoy is an Ambassador, a *group* of highly technologically advanced visitors is an *invasion*. But he eventually comes to quite a different conclusion, and that is the great power of this book. For by coming alone he can be changed by his experiences on Gethen, and only after those changes can he and Gethen accept each other.

Fallen Angels by Larry Niven, Jerry Pournelle, and Michael Flynn (1991), 394 pages.

This is intended as a satirical novel about sf fandom, with a charming pseudo-scientific base, and strong support for the space program. Its chief defect is that from time to time there are passages so purple that I can't believe that either Larry Niven or Jerry Pournelle wrote them; it must have been Michael Flynn (whoever he is). For those deeply into the sf fan world, many of the characters must be immediately recognizable. I recognized a very few: Charley Umber who publishes "Hocus" magazine is really Charles N. Brown, who publishes "Locus". Wade Curtis, the brilliant but alcoholic sf writer, talks like Larry Niven himself. Other famous fans I recognized from the description are Forrest Ackerman and Ray

Duncan, but I can't remember the names they are given in the book.

The pseudo-scientific conceit behind the book is that we are really deep in a new Ice Age. The only reason we don't realize it is that the Greenhouse Effect has kept the earth pleasantly warm for us. In the imagined future, anti-technology supporters (the "Greens") have taken control, and eliminated air pollution. Thus glaciers are now pushing down the northern states of the U.S., gradually covering England, etc. Only "appropriate technology" is allowed in this dictatorial future. For example, the police have sophisticated weapons and gasohol-driven vehicles. The whole population is registered in a central computer data base, making it impossible

for dissidents to get jobs, buy food, etc.; dissidents caught are "reeducated" The only people still preserving a love of technology for its own sake are the sf fans, but they have been driven underground; a World Con is lucky if it gets 50 participants (in the 1990s World Cons attract 5000 or more people).

"Fallen Angels" are the nicknames given to two people from the surviving space stations. Earth has abandoned space, refusing to provide the stations with supplies. The two have

crashlanded on earth, having been shot down while trying to steal nitrogen from the earth's upper atmosphere. (These thefts of air are popularly considered to be the cause of the glaciers.) Having grown up in free fall, the "Angels" are unable even to stand up under the unaccustomed force of earth's gravitational field. Sf fans trying to helping these two illegals provides the plot.

The truth is I enjoyed the novel, for all its silliness. If you are a true-blue sf fan, read it.

Timescape by Gregory Benford (1980), 485 pages. Recommended by Avi Chami.

Got the Nebula award for Best Novel in 1980. Author Benford is a university physicist, and he gives us a tale of the personal and scientific lives of physicists, and how these interact in the doing of science. The story takes place alternately in 1962-3 and 1998, but it's not the 1998 we know. Ecological disasters have caused widespread starvation in this 1998. The ocean has been severely damaged, and people who depend on fish for food or livelihood are in trouble. A group of physicists at Cambridge decide to send a message to the past, using tachyon particles which travel faster than light, to warn people in 1963 of the ecological dangers of using certain chemicals. If you avoid using these chemicals, they want to tell 1963, you can escape the disasters. Now imagine a young PhD student in 1963 who has built equipment which can detect tachyons (something which in reality we cannot do even today). Instead of getting tachyon noise, he begins getting messages in English, in Morse code! Is anybody going to believe that he hasn't picked up some local transmitter? Or maybe tapped into some long distance communication system by error? How do you persuade the world that you aren't a complete idiot? Or that you're not a hoaxter? The worst is that the messages provide chemical danger information, but they do not explicitly say they are from the future. The scientific world,

like the rest of us, is open to small improvements, but a really radical idea -- someone from somewhere is sending us warning messages -- is not so readily accepted. His thesis advisor -- the hero of the book -- knows that there is no mistake, but the others in the department are pretty skeptical indeed. Are these messages from aliens on another planet? How does that idea go over? In the meantime, back in 1998, things are getting steadily worse. More crime, more poverty, the breakdown of the infrastructure, are part of 1998 life in Cambridge. Why waste money on this silly, unbelievable experiment? And if the messages do get through, and in 1963 they are acted upon, what will happen in 1998? Paradoxes? Our 1963 hero is a Jewish New Yorker physicist now living in La Jolla California with a sexy blond shiksa surfer literature student. He's got a WASP girl friend! His mother doesn't know! But the characters are not stereotypes, and not cardboard. They are mostly living breathing people, whose pain and suffering as well as joys and successes we can share. This is probably one of the best sf books ever written, both for its rich detailed (pseudo-)scientific basis, and its superb description of human beings in the real world.

(It was *not* listed in the LOCUS poll, but then a lot of very good books aren't.)

Take Back Plenty by Colin Greenland (1990), 484 pages.

Humor is always problematic, since what people find funny is so individual. I didn't laugh out loud, but I enjoyed most of the many absurd situations described in this book. With the start of human settlement of the moon and the planets, aliens -- the Capellans -- have appeared and provided earth with faster than light (FTL) travel. But there are some limitations: 1) The Capellans run the show, and 2) No trips outside the solar system. This is pretty embarrassing to proud humans, but there isn't much they can do about it. All attempts to understand the secret of the FTL have failed; the

Capellans have said that human brains are not sufficiently complex to grasp the principles. Pretty humiliating. So we have wild and weird encounters with a variety of client races of the Capellans, with a lot of beings trying to do things that aren't strictly kosher, and sometimes getting caught and punished for it. Fairness is not a great trait of the Capellans, nor of their appointed policebeings (who look like talking dogs), either. This is an adventure story with a human heroine, and some other human, part human, or non-human companions. The heroine also has a talking computer who is a very good listener. I

enjoyed it all (in a low key way -- this is *British* humor after all), except for some time spent on lushly vegetated Venus, a situation I find too

scientifically unlikely even if you can only go outside in a space suit. Try it and see what you think.

Permutation City by Greg Egan (1994), 341 pages. Recommended by Bill Silverman.

In this book wealthy people can be scanned and then downloaded into a computer network. After that the Copy runs at whatever rate the computer network can give it. But even someone who's very rich and owns his own network of super computers so he doesn't compete for computer resources can still not run faster than 1/17 normal speed (because of the limitations of communication between the parallel computers). So his daily supply of seconds is in reality at most 86000/17, whereas real people get the full 86,000. The makes the Copy rather disconnected from the lives of ordinary people.

In the end these Copies realize that since they are essentially immortal, it doesn't

really matter at what rate they run. They can waste all the time they want. Which we mortals find rather repulsive -- at least I do.

One of the most fascinating parts of the book is the description of an artificial computer-based universe, an automaton with its own physics, its own set of chemical elements (only 30), and its own biology. If you give this automaton universe enough resources, will it eventually develop intelligent life? If you let it run faster than our universe runs, will it catch up with us? Will it realize that we are its creators? A very strange and rather depressing book, but engrossing to those interested in computers and artificial life.



Quote of the Month:

"Errors tend to cluster. *Zero Defect Software*, the bible of the movement says, 'The next error you find is far more likely to be found in the module where eleven other errors have already been found, than in the module where no errors have been found.' Error clustering is so prevalent in software that it is known as the cockroach rule of thumb: where there is one error seen, another twenty-three lurk unnoticed.

"Here's the remedy according to the *Zero* bible: 'Do not spend money on defect-prone code, get rid of it. Coding cost is nearly irrelevant compared to the cost of repairing error-prone modules. If a software unit exceeds an error threshold, throw it out, and have a different developer do the recoding. Discard work in progress that shows a tendency toward errors because early errors predict late errors.' ...

"I asked Nobel Laureate Herbert Simon how zero-defect philosophy squared with his concept of 'satisficing' -- don't aim for optimization, aim for good enough. He laughed and said, 'Oh, you *can* make zero-defect products. The question is, can you do it profitably? If you are interested in profits, then you need to satisfice your zero defects.'" [p. 198-199]

From *Out of Control*, by Kevin Kelly (1994).

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For mail delivery of *CyberCozen*, please donate 30 shekels per YEAR; For airmail to US \$15; If Aharon Sheer can hand-deliver it, 15 shekels.

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