

Cyber Cozen

Science-Fiction Newsletter

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Film Review: *Deep Blue Sea* reviewed by Raz Greenberg

Deep Blue Sea is perhaps the weirdest film I ever had to review. At first it seems like – no, actually, it is – a Hollywood blockbuster in all its nonsensical glory. On the other hand it's thoughtfully and even intelligently directed.

But first, the nonsensical part, that is, the plot. Dr. Susan McAlester, a young scientist with shaky ethics (Saffron Burrows) experiments on making sharks more intelligent in order to find a cure for Alzheimer (I'm not making this up, that's the plot). When one of those sharks gets a little too smart and starts attacking civilians, corporate leader Russell Franklin (Samuel L. Jackson) considers pulling the plug on the project. But before he makes his final decision, he agrees to spend a weekend in an underwater research facility with McAlester and a skeleton crew that includes Carter Blake (Thomas Jane), a shark hunter, Sherman Dudley – a cook who likes quoting the bible (played by rapper LL Cool J), Todd Scoggins, the Facility's technician, and two other scientists (Stellan Skarsgard and Jacqueline McKenzie). If, by the end of this weekend, Franklin will see significant project results, he'll keep funding it. Which is, of course, a great incentive for McAlester to speed up the unstable experiment. And before you can say "bad idea" all the above mentioned people will find themselves in a collapsing, drowning and burning underwater lab with some very intelligent and hungry sharks going after them.

So, like I said, the film's plot won't win any prizes for extra IQ. The dialogues aren't very good either: though some of the punch lines work, most of them don't. But come on, you don't really see movies like *Deep Blue Sea* because of the sensibility of the plot or the quality of the dialogues, right?

And this is where the refreshing aspect of this film comes up. First, the pacing. While

most of the films of the genre set everything in motion in 15 minutes and then struggle to keep it up, *Deep Blue Sea* is made of a sequence of small events that slowly progress to the inevitable, making it much more atmospheric. In addition – and again, unlike most of today's films - *Deep Blue Sea* shows no mercy for its characters. At a certain point you'll be asking yourself who's the next character to die. And towards the end of the film you'll be asking yourself if any of the remaining characters (and at this point there won't be many of them left) will live. Then there is the exciting direction by Renny Harlin (*Die Hard 2*) powered by Stephen Windon's (*Armageddon*) claustrophobic cinematography – both do an excellent job making this a very scary film.

The cast does a remarkable job. It starts with Samuel L. Jackson who would probably do well in any movie, but the big surprises come from the lesser-known actors. Saffron Burrows (whom you may remember from a much more serious work of science fiction – Denis Potter's *Cold Lazarus*) makes a great performance, moving from proud and overconfident to guilty and terrified. Also notable are Thomas Jane, who looks like a younger version of Kevin Costner (though he's a much better actor) and Michael Rapaport's on-the-edge performance. Finally, LL Cool J gives the film some of its better comic relief.

But how, I hear you ask, is this film any different than *Jaws*, *Alien* and *Jurassic Park*? Well, that's a matter of perspective, you see, none of those films had Saffron Burrows fighting a huge shark in her underwear. But seriously, this film doesn't do anything you haven't seen before – just better. I never thought I'd call a movie in which most of the characters end up dead "a fun movie" – but *Deep Blue Sea* is.



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The end is near!





Short Review by Aharon Sheer

Snow Crash by Neal Stephenson (1992), 468 pages.

Snow Crash is one of the big sf best-sellers of the decade. I bought it a few months ago in a San Jose California airport bookstore which carried only about thirty sf books. Later I saw it in an sf bookstore in San Francisco which had a very large selection of sf books. While almost all other books on the shelves had only one copy on display, there were *six* copies of *Snow Crash*. That's pretty good for a seven year old book. Sara Svetitsky reviewed two other books by Neal Stephenson, *Zodiac* (1988) and *The Diamond Age* (1996), in the June 1966 issue of *CyberCozen*. *Zodiac* was also reviewed in April 1997 by Aharon Sheer.

Snow Crash describes a future America built on the premise that that government governs best which governs least. Examples: In Washington D.C., "all the museums and monuments have been concessioned out and turned into a tourist park.... It's a philosophical thing.... Government should govern. It's not in the entertainment industry, is it?" (p. 176) On the same principle, prisons are run by private enterprise. When you need to imprison some one, you hire a prison cell for him. The country is divided into enclaves (the urban ones are called **Burbclaves**, coming, I suppose, from "urban", "enclave", and the California industrial town of "Burbank"). Each such enclave has its own police force and other defensive measures, such as walls, gates, and identity cards. World-wide collections of Burbclaves are run by organizations such as the Mafia, or by Hong Kong. Similarly, various business enterprises are run by world-wide organizations. Pizza baking and delivery appear to be entirely in the hands of the Mafia, and the Mafia delivers! They guarantee that your pizza will reach your house within half an hour of your phoned-in order – otherwise the world Mafia head, Uncle Enzo, will personally come to your house to apologize. True responsibility!

A second thread in this book is virtual reality. Everyone can log in to a vast simulated computer based universe (the **Metaverse**) where each person takes on a persona and can appear any way he pleases. People communicate with each other, argue, even fight murderous battles, all in simulation in the Metaverse. Of course, if you kill someone, he gets kicked off, and has to log in again. The hero of this book is a "hacker"

(used as a term of praise), a computer expert who has designed and written some of the basic software of the Metaverse. He knows how to take advantage of its quirks. Curiously, at the start of this book he is working as a pizza delivery man, a very exciting job because of the thirty-minute time limit, and the consequences of not making it. The Mafia doesn't like it if you are late. So far, lots of fun.

A third thread of the book is a lot less satisfying. This thread is based on the 19th century German anti-Semitic Biblical scholarly research which was aimed at proving that Christianity is a great improvement over Judaism. This is the research that was partly the scientific justification for the Holocaust. One of the source books for Stephenson's theories is *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* by Julian Jaynes (1976), a book which helps to bring lapsed intellectual Christians back to their faith. Jaynes says that consciousness is new in human beings only in the last few thousand years. Before that people acted more though instinctual common patterns and not through conscious thought. One of the first people to actually think verbally was Moshe Rabeinu ("Moses" in Greek) who thought he heard the voice of God but it was actually his own brain verbalizing its thoughts. People had never heard their own thoughts before, so Moshe couldn't imagine that these were his own thoughts; therefore they must be God's. Clever, huh?

Weave these threads together and you get a book which is fun to read, contains some great characters (be prepared to suspend your disbelief), a variety of disgusting characters (you don't have to suspend your disbelief for those), and events which are often very funny but just as often casually horrifying (no real governments, remember?). There were times when I was strongly tempted not to continue, but after getting over each of these rough spots, I was able to continue with enthusiasm. Recommended with lots of grains of salt.



TV Series Review: *Futurama* by **Raz Greenberg**

When it comes to making fun of popular culture, few people do it better than *Matt Groening*. This guy, who proved to us that sophisticated humor can also be on-the-floor funny in *The Simpsons*, now comes up with a new science fiction animation comedy, *Futurama*. I sort of expected to find him doing a science fiction show at some point. After all, some of the best science fiction spoofs were done in *The Simpsons* series (their *X-Files* spoof, the one with the fortune teller, and their annual Halloween specials). So, in *Futurama* he finally has a chance of doing that ground-breaking science fiction show he always wanted to do, right? Well... from the six episodes I've seen so far, he's not there yet. But he's on the right track.

The first episode of *Futurama* finds Fry, a young, not very smart, hapless delivery boy doing a pizza delivery on the last evening of the 20th century, which turns out to be a prank – he finds himself in an empty laboratory. Shortly after, he is thrown by accident into a cryogenic cell, frozen. When he wakes up he finds out that 1000 years have passed, and he is now in the last evening of the 30th century, where he has to fit into the role of... a young, not very smart, hapless delivery boy. Along the way, he is joined by a cynic resourceful one-eyed female alien called Leela (wonderfully voiced by Katey Sagal from *Married With Children*) and an annoying, lazy robot called Bender (my favorite character, who seems to pay more than a little tribute to *Douglas Adams' Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*). There's also a gallery of other

minor characters (one of them, Amy Wong, has such a lovely way of saying "bah!" which, I suspect, is going to be the successor to Homer's "Do'h!").

The biggest fun of this show is not so much Groening's twisted vision of the future, but rather how it reflects on our world. Everything's different, yet the same: a robot soap opera, commercials in dreams and suicide booths. This also goes on the verbal level, with some unforgettable one-liners as "I don't want anybody to think we're robo-sexuals". As I said, few can compete with Groening's inventive talents. So, what's the problem? Well, to start with, it is an animation show, and as such, it is surprisingly low on visual jokes. So far the only thing that comes to mind is construction robots working in a real-life Tetris game. Another problem (which seems to be common in science fiction comedies) is the fact that most of the episodes consist of many great jokes that don't sum up to anything. It seems that Groening has so much fun telling jokes, he forgets he has a story to tell. Also, some of the gags (not many) are tedious, trying too hard to make the viewer laugh.

Still, *Futurama* is a very good show with the potential to be even better. By the third episode you'll find yourself quoting it to your friends, humming its theme music and wondering what will be the next episode's tag line (*Futurama*: "In Color"/"As Seen On TV"/"Featuring Gratuitous Alien Nudity" etc.). I just hope someone is working on bringing this show to Israel – the sooner the better.

ICon99 -- a 3 day sf and fantasy convention on the 28th to 30th of October (Succoth vacation) in the Tel-Aviv Cinematheque

sf and fantasy films and lectures

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Two lousy books by *Robert J. Sawyer*
Starplex and *FrameShift* reviewed by **Shmuel Kahn**

As Aharon has been reading SF almost twice as long as I have been alive, I usually enjoy any books he chooses to recommend I read. Quite a while ago I told Aharon how much I don't like most SF written in the last decade, because it is too shallow and for the general 'duh' population. So he gave me these two books.

To summarize what I think of the author: He sounds like a Sci-Fi wanna-be kid, who hangs out at some SF convention (a lousy one, mind you), and takes notes from gossip he hears. To make himself look good he might even have gone down to a library and leafed through some old *Scientific American*.

Starplex: 289 boring pages (1996).

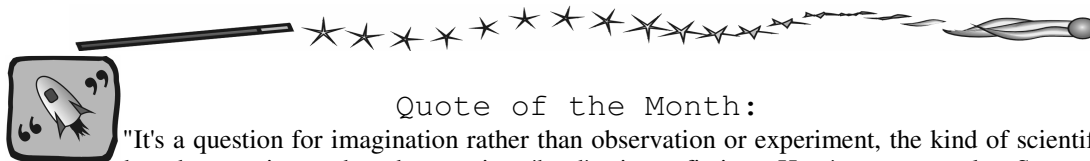
A silly book about shallow inter-species politics and prejudice. The plot is basically a story line used to glue some ideas the author thought would be nifty together. They are not very (most of them are old cake). Halfway through the book the hero learns that he will live for another billion years. There goes all the suspense created earlier.

FrameShift: 347 (hardcover) pages of low grade drivel.

This book is just another sort-of hi-tech thriller. Written in 1997, it would seem the author took a look at a digest of the newspaper headlines of the previous 5 years, and simply chose what he thought would sell. Take humanoid Hanna, Ivan Demjanjuk, genetic screening, cloning and the Human Genome Project, add a terminally ill (Huntingtons' disease) compassionate scientist, with a telepathic wife, a classic monster evil scientist and a bunch of Neo-Nazis. Mix thoroughly, and viola another junk novel for the slobbering masses.

The books are not worth the shelf space, and Sawyer has made my short 'avoid at all cost' author list. Just MHO.

Ed. Note: *Starplex* and *Frameshift* were reviewed in the August 1998 *CyberCozen* by Aharon Sheer.



Quote of the Month:

"It's a question for imagination rather than observation or experiment, the kind of scientifically consistent thought experiment that characterizes 'hard' science fiction. Here's one example. Suppose that on earth flight had first been invented by creatures that evolved tiny sacs filled with hydrogen gas, and not by the development of wings. These creatures could, for instance, have produced hydrogen from water or methane by enzyme action, or even electrochemistry. They would have taken to the air, at first borne randomly on the breeze but gradually evolving more sophisticated controls that would at least let them decide when to descend to the ground again. With -- to begin with -- no competition up there, they would thrive, just as the winged creatures did along *our* evolutionary track. Then the usual story of parasites and predators would unfold, all carried out using balloonists. Some balloonists might develop the trick of expelling their hydrogen in a stream, igniting it, and directing it at unsuspecting prey. Here Be Dragons! ...

"An intelligent race evolved from apes, birds, or something totally absent from our evolutionary track would have learned to tame the great blimps. Air travel would be commonplace, and not a horse-drawn buggy to be seen.

"You get the idea. If you want to have fun, rethink it all on Jupiter."

From *The Collapse of Chaos*, by Jack Cohen and Ian Stewart, p. 376-7.

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