

Cyber Cozen

Science-Fiction Newsletter

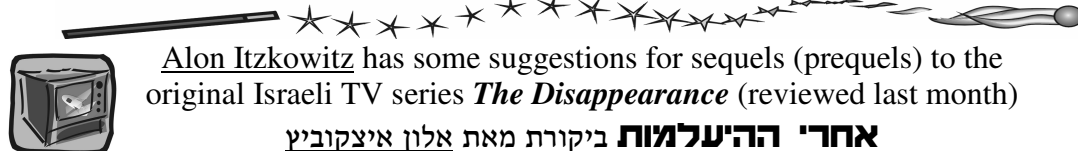
Vol. XII, No. 3; March, 2000



Quote of the Month

"Faster-than-light travel is always kind of hand-waving in science fiction. I thought, 'There's got to be a theoretical way to at least make it plausible.' So I figured out a mathematical way you could do faster-than-light travel. It involves making your speed a complex number, which means physically we don't know how to do it, so it's not something we could build now – it's a game you play with mathematics. But I wrote it up in a paper and sent it to the *American Journal of Physics*, telling them 'This is a mathematical game I gave my students in class.' They published it! ('Complex Speeds and Special Relativity', in the *AJP* 4/96.)"

-- from an interview with physicist and sf writer **Catherine Asaro** in *LOCUS* November 1999, p. 76.



Alon Itzkowitz has some suggestions for sequels (prequels) to the original Israeli TV series *The Disappearance* (reviewed last month)

אחרי ההיעלמות ביקורת מאת אלון איצקוביץ

לאחר ההצלחה המדהימה של הסדרה הדמיונית בערוץ 2 "ההיעלמות" מן הראוי להציע לערוץ 2 להפיק מספר סדרות המשך או בת או הקדמה (כפי שמקובל באמריקה) על אותן דמויות שלא זכו להתייחסות מספקת בסדרת האם.

סטארדסט (אין הכוונה כמובן לדיוויד בואי " זיגי סארדסט" וגם לא לספר המד"ד (מדע דמיוני) בשם: **אבק כוכבים**) - סדרה חדשה המתארת את עלילותיו של השוטר החביב סטארדסט השמן שאוהב לישון עם דובי במיטה, אוהב מאוד אוכל וכמובן פיצוחים, וצופה קבוע בתוכנית הבובות לילדים "טלאטבויז". השוטר סטארדסט ישתף גם בפרק מיוחד של סדרת הכלא "זינזאנה".

קרן המהירה היא הסדרה החדשה אודות העיתונאית האמיצה קרן ירדני. הסדרה תחשוף גם את סוד יכולתה המופלאה של קרן לרוץ בחצרות בתים פרטיים מבלי שאנשי שב"כ ספורטיביים יכולים עליה וגם כיצד לא הבחינו בה השכנים הזועמים (גרים שם בכלל אנשים?).

נרקיס (מלך הביצה) האיום סדרת אימים חדשה המתארת את היסטוריה של האיש הרע והמפלצתי שמואל נרקיס ומעורבותו בתככים פוליטיים בחמישים שנות קיומו במדינת ישראל. בדומה לפרק שהופק בסדרה "תיקים באפילה" אודות ה"מעשן" ומעורבותו בתככים פוליטיים באמריקה כמו רצח קנדי כך יתוארו מעשי הזוועה של מר נרקיס, מעורבותו ברצח רבין ומעשי עינויים שביצע בעצירים פוליטיים וכדומה.

ועוד הצעות:

תחנת הכוח בחדרה – אינה עונה מה מסתתר באמת בתחנת הכוח בחדרה? האם יש שם טכנולוגיה סודית או שמא זה רק טאבון של מאפיית פיתות? אולי בפנים הכל ריק ועבדו עלינו?

באגס באני מארח: ליאור מילר – פרק מצוייר מיוחד על מרדפים מצויירים בקניון עזריאלי המפואר. באגס באני וליאור מילר נמלטים יחדיו מ"הרעים" להנאת הצופים הקטנים.

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The end is also the beginning...



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Two Old Books by Robert A. Heinlein
 One Awful, One Good Fun
 reviewed by **Aharon Sheer**

The Number of the Beast by Robert A. Heinlein (1980), 511 pages.

In the latest LOCUS poll Heinlein was chosen as the best science fiction writer of all time. In his earlier days, Heinlein wrote numerous fine novels (see review below), and many fine short stories. Unfortunately, much of what he wrote after 1970 was awful, and this book is one of them. Still, even Heinlein at his most awful is more fun to read than many other authors.

Dr. Jake Burroughs, one of the four heroes of this book (the others are his wife Hilda, his daughter Deety, and his son-in-law Zeb) has invented a device which can travel in six dimensions. Three of those dimensions enable one to move from any spot on earth to any other. Another dimension allows one to travel to various alternate versions of our universe. For example, in one version of our universe that they visit, the letter 'J' has been discarded in English as being unnecessary. Another dimension, it turns out, allows you to travel to alternate imaginary universes. Thus we make regrettably brief visits to Lilliput (from Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*), Oz (from Frank L. Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*), Dr. Smith's world (the *Lensman* series), Wonderland (from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, and in which Lewis Carroll himself makes an appearance). Sadly, the longest sequence (much of the second half of the book) involves Lazarus Long (from Robert A. Heinlein's own *Methusaleh's Children*, 1958). Long appeared in several of Heinlein's later, awful, novels, and he is just awful here.

One of the problems of this book is that each chapter is told in the first person by one of the four characters. This would be all right if the characters had distinct personalities, portrayed in a meaningful way. Regrettably they all talk in the same style, and often the only way to know who is talking is to refer back to the beginning of

Jake reiterated patiently, "Laz-Lor, the key point of Commodore Hilda's theory is that we are *all equally* figments of imagination. 'Reality' thus becomes a null symbol."

Deety shook her head emphatically. "Stick to geometry, Pop. Or stamp collecting. Leave symbology to symbologists – such as your favorite daughter. I'm real, I am! Smell me."

"No doubt you could use a bath. So could we all; it's been an adrenaline day. But that's the other side of the coin, Deety. 'Imaginary' and 'Real' turn out to be identical. Consider this chow bench. On one level of abstraction it is mathematical equations. At the level just below that it is a swirling nothingness,

the chapter where that information is provided. The failure to provide clear characterization is just one of the many weaknesses of this book.

In a way, this whole book is a series of complex, running jokes. The four main characters all have doctorates (Hilda, a successful business woman, has the most, but they are all honorable doctorates given in recognition of her financial gifts to various universities). So they repeatedly introduce themselves to other people in a style like this: "This is Dr. Jacob Burroughs, and this is Dr. Hilda Burroughs, and this is Dr. Z. J. Carter, and I am Dr. D. T. Burroughs Carter". The first time it's funny, the tenth time less so. Dr. Jake Burroughs, the mathematician inventor, is convinced that all women are inferior, so he repeatedly tries to get his wife Hilda, who has been elected captain of their little six-dimensional travelling ship, replaced by a man (there are of course only two on the ship). So why did Jake vote for Hilda to be captain in the first place? To prove that a woman couldn't succeed as captain. Jake's attempts to show his wife Hilda's incapacity may be funny the first time, but as a repeating joke it really drags.

Heinlein even makes jokes about himself: After having his heroes each list what they consider the best sf and fantasy novels of all time, he has one of his characters say about Heinlein's own book *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1963), "I didn't vote for 'Stranger' and I'll refrain from embarrassing anyone by asking who did. My God, the things some writers will do for money!" (p. 349) However, one scene made me laugh out loud, and with it I finish my review:

with mass-energy a rare event. But on the gross level abstracted by my senses I can place this drink on it with utter confidence that it will not sink through this near vacuum.”

My father-in-law matched his words by placing his highball on the snack bench; it sank out of sight. (p. 416)

Methuselah's Children (בני מתושלח) by Robert A. Heinlein (1958), 160 pages.

Having read and reviewed one of Heinlein's awful later novels (see above), I was inspired to go back and reread one of his early ones. Despite its shortness, there are a lot of great ideas in this novel, a lot of things to think and argue about.

The first idea is that you can create a race of extremely long-lived people by collecting young people whose grandparents are long-lived, and persuading them to marry only each other (the "Howard Families"). The assumption is that if long-lived people marry long-lived people their children will live even longer. Unfortunately, this is probably not true because of the principle of **Regression to the Mean**. If you take a somewhat tall man and a somewhat tall woman, and have them marry, their children will likely be taller than the parents. But if you take an exceptionally tall man and have him marry an exceptionally tall woman, the children will likely be *shorter* than both of the parents. This regression to the mean has been extensively studied. If a population of long-lived people marry only others of their kind, the result after some generations will be a population whose average life span is the same as that of the original group. You will not end up with people who live vastly longer than their ancestors, as Heinlein assumes.

Heinlein predicts the reaction of the

general population to the discovery that there is a group of people who are exceptionally long-lived: Hatred and anger. The average person will reject the fact that this longevity is the result of purely selective breeding, and is convinced that they are hiding some secret. So the Howard Families are driven from the earth, and forced to find another planet. Here we have another nice Heinlein idea: the *gods* on the new planet are real: aliens who have converted the local original population into domesticated, contented residents. Heinlein argues that most *humans* would not want to live in a world where they can have everything they need without working. Man is not intended to live that way, he says, man needs to be challenged, to try new and difficult things. This is another point that one can argue with! The book contains descriptions of the problems of space travel, long before there was any. One example is nausea in free fall. Heinlein assumes incorrectly that eventually everyone gets used to free fall, whereas in fact about 20% of astronauts never do. As part of Heinlein's **Future History**, it mentions humans settling on steamy, tropical Venus. Bubbling over with ideas and characters that we can argue with, it is not one of Heinlein's best books, but it is still great fun to read. Available now in Hebrew as *בני מתושלח*.



Heinlein predicts the reaction of the

TV Series Review: *Seven Days*
by **Raz Greenberg**

Isn't it funny how every new time travel TV show tries to narrow the focus? Doug and Tony in *Time Tunnel* could go backwards and forwards in time with no limits. Then came Dr. Sam Beckett, who in *Quantum Leap* could only go back in time and was limited to his own lifetime. And now comes *Seven Days* (Saturdays, 19:25, Channel 3) whose hero, Frank Parker can only go – well – seven days back in time. I'm sure Doug and Tony are rolling in their grave wherever (or rather, whenever) that is....

Speaking of Parker, he's an ex-CIA agent who, at the beginning of the series, is hospitalized in a mental institute by his former

employers for knowing too much. But when the White House is destroyed by a terrorist attack, Frank is offered a deal: in return for his participation in a time-travel project called "Back-Step" to stop this disaster from ever happening, he will be released. I'm not really spoiling anything for you by revealing that he succeeds in this mission, and there are more (missions and episodes) to follow.

The first thing that strikes you while watching *Seven Days* is the incredibly bad writing. It starts with a clumsy, unconvincing attempt to create an *X-Files* style sub-plot about alien technology from Roswell. Then there is a large cast of cliched characters (the good

scientist, the bad scientist, and the beautiful-female scientist) that takes itself so seriously that it's actually funny. Finally there are some huge plot holes and gaps in logic. (How come Frank never meets himself when he goes back to the past? The show doesn't even offer an explanation.) And the writing isn't the only unbelievable thing here. The settings, for example, are even less believable. I refuse to believe that a time travel facility would look so miserable, even if the government built it.

From what you've read so far, you might get the impression that this is one show that should be sent back in time into history's garbage can, but this isn't the case really. Once I got past the show's less-than-promising premises (Channel 3 decided, for some reason, to cut the pilot into two parts – but hey, these are the same genius-heads who air *Crusade* at 23:25. What did you expect?) I actually found it to be very enjoyable. It's like watching a B-class action

film every week – sure, you know how it's going to end, but until the ending, you have fun. The action sequences are very well directed, and the special effects are downplayed, mostly due the show's small budget, but that also makes them more effective. The charismatic duo of Jonathan LaPaglia (who plays Parker) and Justina Vail (who plays the beautiful-female scientist I mentioned above) also helps, and I'll take it over the David Duchovney/Gillian Anderson sub-zero temperature personality any day.

I'm not sure how long I'm gonna keep watching *Seven Days*. The pilot episode had Frank stopping terrorists from blowing up the White House. The second episode had him stopping a deadly virus that kills 94% of the world's population. The third had him saving the world's most brilliant scientist from being killed.... I'm sure I'll get tired of it at some point. But it still hasn't happened. So all in all, *Seven Days* makes a good, if brainless, fun




Letter to the Editor



Aharon

I beg to differ with your opinion of *The Postman* by David Brin (the book) in the April 1999 *CyberCozen*. I found it highly exciting, if somewhat grim. All the blood and violence and tortures you mentioned do appear there, yet that was far from the emphasis of the book. The book was, in my humble opinion, about HOPE, or the lack of it, even in the face of complete culture deterioration. Right, there wasn't anything really new about the description of the post apocalyptic culture, but all in all, there were some interesting ideas.

Assaf K. Dekel



Film Review: *Deep Blue Sea*



reviewed by **Aharon Sheer**

Raz Greenberg reviewed this film here in September, 1999. The basic sf idea of the movie is that, since sharks do not develop Alzheimer's, there is some protein in shark's forebrains that can be used to treat Alzheimer patients. To get lots of this substance, the researchers have (illegally) genetically engineered sharks to have larger forebrains. The sharks are raised in the center of a deep-sea platform formerly used for other purposes, which has a large enclosed water area in which the sharks can be kept and from which they cannot escape. One remarkable side effect of enlarging the sharks' forebrains is an enormous increase in the shark's intelligence. In fact, the sharks become vastly more intelligent than human beings. Some examples from the movie will illustrate this. Although the sharks live underwater, and have never seen television, they are able to guess that the underwater television cameras scattered around the area are looking at them, and when they decide to take action

against their captors, they systematically destroy the cameras. This I consider remarkable, as human beings often walk in places where there are video cameras watching them – banks, for instance, or various public buildings – but very few people are even aware of the presence of these cameras or of their function. I think you would have to show someone the TV screen that the guard looks at, and show him how people walking through the area are displayed on the screen, and only then would the person become aware of their function. Another example: the sharks have never been in a kitchen, have never cooked food, and certainly have no idea of the function of the various things in a kitchen. When a large kitchen, which is below water level inside the floating platform, is half flooded with water, a shark is able to swim in. Since these are nasty man-eating sharks, the cook climbs into a large industrial oven to protect himself from the shark. What does the shark do? It turns on the oven with its teeth, in order to force the cook to leave

the oven. I think this is very clever of the shark, and I doubt if any human being who has never seen an oven and has no idea of the use of an oven could figure out why and how to turn it on. Smart sharks! This movie reminded me a little of the movie *Alien*, in that the nasty sharks pick off the humans one by one, and the only ones to survive are the lower class members of the crew,

while the smart academic types all get wiped out (long live the lower classes). The curious thing is the viewer isn't bothered at all by all this gore and death. We develop so little attachment to the heroes of the movie that we couldn't care less whether they survive or not. In fact, I think we actually enjoy seeing all those people wiped out. Cheery movie, but rather pointless.



Short Review

by **Raz Greenberg**

The Red Tape War \ Jack Chalker, Mike Resnick & George Alec Effinger (1991), 244 pages.

This book is a paradise for bureaucrats. The story starts with Millard Fillmore Pierce, class 2 Arbiter, lost in space with his AI computer (the computer's personality is a combination of Marvin and the ship's computer from "the Hitch-hiker's Guide to the Galaxy"). Aliens, who, as we find out soon enough, are closer to humans than we thought, capture his ship as a first step to conquer our galaxy. From this point, the story gets more complicated with every chapter, because the book isn't a collaboration. Instead, the writers wrote the book in turns (Resnick the 1st chapter, Chalker

the 2nd etc.). Each one of them tried to create a near- insoluble situation for the next author to solve.

Part of the fun in reading this book is to try and figure out which chapters were written by each of the authors (very easy with Chalker).

The bureaucracy isn't very noticeable at the beginning but, believe me, after reading this book, you will have nightmares, of regulation 229/b, in 19 copies, fill-in this box, and answer these questions; now sign here, and here, and here...



Science Fiction and Fantasy

News and Rumors

Collected and brought to you by **Guy Eldar**

Hope you enjoyed the SF Animation piece last issue. I'm now in the midst of collecting animation genre Fantasy films, since this is an SF-Fantasy newsletter. I hope to bring you up to date on that in next month's issue.

Meanwhile, a short TV news update. The second season of *Chris Carter's* now-dead show *Millenium* can be seen in Israel on "Star World" (it is well into its mid season, but keep checking back – as I know Star World, they'll start airing it again from the beginning right after its last episode). While the first season was rightfully axed by the critics for being a "serial killer of the week" show (personally, I stopped watching it not long after it started), Raz

Greenberg says the second season, which was headed by TV writers *Glen Morgan* and *James Wong* (*Space: Above and Beyond*), is much better.

First, there are no serial killers this season. Second, a complex conspiracy sub-plot was added. Third, there are all those cool guest actors from both *Space* and *The X-Files* brought in by *Morgan* and *Wong*. And finally, two of this season's episodes are written by *Darin Morgan* (who wrote some of the best X-Files episodes ever - most notably "Jose Chung's *From Outer Space*" and "Clyde Bruckman's *Final Repose*"). Highly recommended by Raz.

*Comments, News and Rumors' facts and sites would be appreciated. Write to: eldarguy@netvision.net.il
Please subject messages as "News and Rumors".*

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