

Letters to the Editor

Aharon,

This email is in response to your comments about fusion in your latest newsletter. [See review of *Back to the Moon* by Homer H. Hickam, Jr. in the October *CyberCozen*.]

According to the latest *Physics World*, the proposed International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER-FEAT), which will cost 4 billion dollars, should produce at least ten times as much energy as it consumes. Fusion may still have problems but they are more or less on schedule. They've been starved of funds, which has slowed down their achievements. But this news pretty much seems to match what someone apparently talked about in your club about 10 years ago, that within a decade fusion reactors would be generating power.

In one of the most recent *Natures* there was a report saying that fusion scientists were doing as good research as in any other field of the physical sciences (which is a pretty impressive claim), but that they were too isolated and not putting their knowledge back into the rest of the community.

Dr. Samuel L. Braunstein, Informatics, Dean Street, University of Wales, Great Britain

Sam, "The next machine will generate more power than it uses." That's what the fusion physicists have been saying since the 1950s. It looks to me like an asymptotic approach to zero profit. Let's hope they can do it because we desperately need clean cheap power. **Aharon**

Aharon, What you say is NOT true. Such a claim was not made then. **Sam**

Sam - OK, maybe not the 50s, but in the 60s they were definitely saying that we'd have practical fusion power within ten years. I was there listening. So was Arthur C. Clarke. Why do you think there's so much reluctance to put more billions in fusion research? These guys have been wrong for so long that it's almost sure they're wrong now. Why not go back to the moon, gather Helium 3, and use that? I bet it'd be cheaper and we'd have working fusion power sooner too. **Aharon**

Aharon, I wonder. Was it really the scientists saying that or was it the Scientific American types? My understanding is that for the last 30 or more years, each claim about what the next machine would achieve has been on the button. I expect it will for this next one too. Though for this next one, they planned on a larger machine, but had to scale down for budgetary reasons. So the question is: Just where did those promises come from? The scientists or some hypesters? **Sam**

The Israeli Society for Science Fiction and Fantasy

Meetings (in Hebrew) on *Science and Science Fiction*

Next lecture: **Wed., 29/11/00, 20:00:**

"The Bionic Man and the Cryonic Woman - - Science Fact and Fiction in the space between organ freezing and immortality, and between bionic chips and Cyborgs."

Lecturer Prof. **Boris Rubinsky** from Berkeley University (an Israeli, SF fan, and world leader in Cryobiology and Bionics). The lecture will be in Hebrew!

Meetings are held in **Beit Ariela**, 25 Shaul HaMelech, Tel Aviv at 8 p.m.

Join the Society, go to its meetings! Call 03-528-3803 or 03-604-4959

For full details look at the SF-f Society Website: <http://sf-f.org.il/story.php3?id=59>

The Israeli Society for Science Fiction and Fantasy

Armageddon Convention

First international Sci-Fi convention in Israel. For more details see link below.

Guests of Honor: **Larry Niven, Joan Vinge, Paul McAuley, Dr. Jack Cohen, Ian Watson, Jim Frenkel**



01.01.01

Now it's nearer then ever...



www.armageddoncon.org

(Letters to the Editor continues)

Aharon shalom,

I would like to reply, in brief, to Clara Rimon's letter in the last issue of *CyberCozen*.

Dear Clara,

You should know that I totally agree with you about Scientology (or any other cult for that matter) of it being completely nonsense, intended mostly to make the "priests" rich and make the innocent followers give more money to the "priests".

But, as Aharon said, you don't have to agree with a person's views or activities to enjoy his or her books, music, films or any other kind of art.

I mentioned at the end of the review that Hubbard invented Scientology and that Travolta is his follower simply as Trivia.

Yours, Gal Haimovich

P.S. Speaking of Hubbard, there is now talk about making the book *Battlefield Earth* into an animated series of 20 episodes, 1 hour each. (My source is <http://www.movieheadlines.net>)



- 1) A new print of Tod Browning's 1930 classic *Dracula* recently released to the video stores.
- 2) *Soldier*, a film originally shown here in theaters (but I missed it during the theatrical screening).

Dracula (1930)

As video stores in Israel rarely bring classic films to their customers, who have to wait until the cables air their favorites, it was a pleasant surprise to find a copy of Tod Browning's 1930 film *Dracula* on the shelves.

Browning's film was the first official adaptation of Bram Stoker's novel (it was preceded by an unauthorized adaptation called "Nosferantu" in 1922). The film's amazing opening sequence follows Renfield (Dwight Frye), a naive real-estate agent who arrives at the castle of Dracula (Bella Lugosi) after making arrangements for the count's travel and residence in London. The film then splits into several viewpoints: Reinfield, who is hospitalized in a mental institute in London, under the care of Dr. Jack Seward (Herbert Bunston), who becomes a very good friend with his new neighbor, count Dracula, and whose daughter, Mina (Helen Chandler), finds herself attracted to the count.

The film is a wonderful lesson in the history of movie making. Not only does it show the historical roots of everything from director Tim Burton to "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" but it also shows how well the special-effects industry of Hollywood worked in the pre-computer and pre-stop-motion age. Browning was a director of nuances and small gestures: the way he made every opening coffin, every ugly insect climbing the walls and every spider web in a collapsing

castle seem meaningful is admirable, as is Karl Freund's photography. The original release of the film didn't include any musical score (other than a few short pieces by Schubert, Wagner and Tchaikovsky) but the re-release was added with a wonderful new score composed by Philip Glass and performed by the Kronos Quartet. And best of all is Lugosi, who, in this film, established his status as the ultimate Dracula, with his authentic East-European accent and the hypnotizing look in his eyes.

Some parts in *Dracula* did get old. Bat-puppets on a string won't scare anyone these days and cardboard sets don't look very convincing. Other than Lugosi and Frye, most of the acting is theatrical and exaggerated (the script is actually based on a stage play adapted from the novel). The film was also restricted by tough moral codes limiting filmmakers in the early 20th century: you just couldn't show too much violence back then (whenever Dracula leans toward another victim there's a fade-out, and we move to the next scene).

Still, with all this taken into account, *Dracula* is highly recommended, both as an authentic piece of film history, and as an excellent film in its own right. One word of warning, though: ignore the Hebrew translation subtitles. They're simply terrible.

Soldier (1998)

Perhaps the most frustrating thing about *Soldier* is the fact that it comes so many times very close to fulfilling its potential – and then fails. An ambitious combination of a science fiction feature, a western and a war movie – sort of *Robocop* meets *Terminator* meets *Mad Max* – *Soldier* keeps staying one step short of becoming a really good film, but ends up a disappointment. Largely because of the man heading it. I'll get to that in a minute.

The film takes place in the near future, where wars are fought using soldiers who were raised to become programmed killing machines – violent, ruthless with no emotion or conscience whatsoever. The first and most impressive sequence of the film follows one such soldier named Todd (Kurt Russell), through the battles of this futuristic “history”. But as Todd ages he becomes less and less efficient, and an ambitious Colonel Mekum (Jason Isacs) decides a new generation of soldiers will replace Todd's unit. Todd himself, mistaken for dead after a battle with a soldier of this new generation (Jason Scott Lee), is thrown on a planet that serves as galactic garbage disposal. However, Todd is not dead, and when he recovers he finds out that there is a small colony of humans on this planet – abandoned there after an attempt to flee from Earth. He attempts to fit into this peaceful society, falls for a married woman named Sandra (Connie Nilsen) who takes care of him, and must deal with painful flashbacks from his time as a warrior. Then Mekum arrives on the planet to test his new soldiers – and he's more than happy to discover the colonists on the planet, who can make great target practice. Todd, of course, comes to the rescue.

While Russell has been doing way too many roles like this one since *Escape from New York* his performance here is as confident as always. Nilsen is also good despite the stereotypical role given to her. The real disappointment comes from the actors who play the bad guys. It's common Hollywood wisdom that the bad guys are more interesting than the good guys are, but Isacs' acting is so flat that

he's simply painful to watch, and Lee's performance is too robotic. (Okay, he plays a robot, but that's no excuse. Schwarzenegger played a robot in *Terminator* and his performance there was still interesting).

Soldier's script was written by the very talented David M. Peoples, who also wrote the script for *Blade Runner*. The film's setting – a garbage dump planet – was the location in which Peoples' early *Blade Runner* script drafts started, and the two films seem to take place in the same universe (two of the battles seen in the opening sequence of *Soldier* are briefly mentioned in *Blade Runner*). Peoples' touch for creating moving, believable characters and dialogue is also evident here; his script is clearly the strongest element in the movie. Another good element is the cinematography by Davis Tattersall (*The Phantom Menace*) which makes interesting use of colors – a beautiful combination of red, yellow and brown. Still another *Blade Runner* veteran – production designer David L. Snyder – served on this film, doing a good job in enhancing the western atmosphere. And the special effects team headed by Ed Jones (*Space Jam*) did a good, if not amazing job.

Unfortunately, the director chosen to lead this film, Paul Anderson (*Mortal Kombat*, *Event Horizon*), is way below the level of the other people involved. He handles the first (and more interesting) half of the film, in which Todd adjusts to his humanity, with dull, unimaginative close-ups. He feels more at home with the second half, in which the action sequences take over, but there's nothing really outstanding here – from the *Aliens*-like military action to the final one-on-one martial-arts combat (shot with John-Woo style slow motion) – everything in these sequences has been done before, and it's been done better.

Overall, *Soldier* remains an interesting, but eventually disappointing film to watch. I wish they had chosen a director who could put things together in a better way.



Short Book Reviews

by Aharon Sheer

October Sky by Homer H. Hickam, Jr. (1998), 428 pages. Recommended by Sara Svetitsky.

This is not a science fiction novel, not a fantasy, but a memoir. It is the autobiography of a teenage boy in a West Virginia coal-mining town, who was inspired by the Russian satellite

Sputnik. *Sputnik* went up in 1957, and it was the first successful artificial satellite of the earth. Homer saw *Sputnik* go by overhead and decided he wanted to build rockets. He knew nothing

about how it was done, having no books or other sources of information except the rocket tests that he saw on TV (where the rockets usually just blew up on the launching pad). Yet he organized a group of high school friends, all fourteen years of age, and they began building rockets.

When their rockets flew, they wanted to know how high they had flown. They were told that to do that required trigonometry, so they taught themselves trigonometry (which was taught in school only in the twelfth grade). After a couple of years a sympathetic schoolteacher bought Homer a book on rocket principles. To understand that book they had to learn calculus, so they did. All this in a West Virginia town where, normally, the only kids who ever went to college went on football scholarships. If you were a boy, and couldn't be a top football player, your probable future was working in the mine. These boys were doing college level work.

But this book is more than just a story of making rockets. It's a story of a way of life. Coalwood was a company town. This means that the company that owned the mine provided the coal miners low rent housing, free electricity, water and coal (for heating the house in winter, and for hot water heating), and free medical and dental care. The company provided cable TV, since the high mountains around prevented normal TV reception. Even the church was built by the company, and the company paid the salary of the minister. The downside was brutal. From time to time accidents happened in the mine, and workers were killed. When that happened, the worker's family was given two weeks to leave their house, and the town. Apparently the company didn't want any widows around to remind people of the possibility of death in the mine. Every Coalwood family had a father, and that father worked for the company that owned the mine.

Homer had a big advantage over other boys. His father was the mine superintendent, a self-taught man who knew everything about the mine, and who felt that he personally had to be

sure the mine was safe for the workers to work in. Homer's father went to the mine every day, and went down into the most dangerous situations. Homer's mother hated that. She wanted her husband home with the family more, and out of those dangerous situations where he might be the one killed. She certainly didn't want her son to end up working in the mine.

But being the son of the respected boss meant a lot of people would go out of their way to help him. When he and his friends had designed a rocket and needed it built (and we're talking about solid steel tubes, and welding, and very accurate lathe work to make precision rocket nozzles), he was able to get the help they needed. But often it required making trades: I'll help you with this if you can get me that. Company employees couldn't give him company property. So the boys had to raise money to pay for materials. The stories of how the boys got what they needed are wonderful. They were prepared to work very hard indeed to earn money or to find things they could use in trade. The stories are often hilarious, and just as often terrifying.

There is a saying: God loves fools. These boys could have been killed building those rockets, especially before they had enough experience to understand what the risks were. It was fortunate indeed that none of them, or any one else, was killed or even permanently injured. Homer's mother's repeated refrain was "Just don't blow yourself up." They narrowly missed having that happen, more than once.

October Sky is a tearjerker. I cried when good things happened, and I cried when bad things happened. The book carries us through Homer's high school days, good and bad. It's a very moving book, a tribute to hard work and spirit, and well worth reading.

Originally titled *Rocket Boys*, the book was made into a successful movie (1999) of the name *October Sky*, and the book was renamed after the movie.



Two Books by Charles Sheffield

reviewed by [Aharon Sheer](#)



Sheffield is an Analog writer. That means that he writes for *Analog Science Fiction* *Science Fact*, a magazine that tries to publish exciting scientifically accurate stories. The emphasis is on good science and imaginative science, not on the human characters. The original name of the magazine was *Astounding Science Fiction* and the emphasis was on the astounding science. Those were the kind of stories that my friends would criticize when I was in high school, saying, "but it's not literature!" Although I wouldn't admit it then, most of the stories were far from being literature, but many were great fun to read and quite educational too. I had never paid attention to Sheffield before, but I heard him speak on a panel at the World Science Fiction Convention, and was interested in what he had to say.

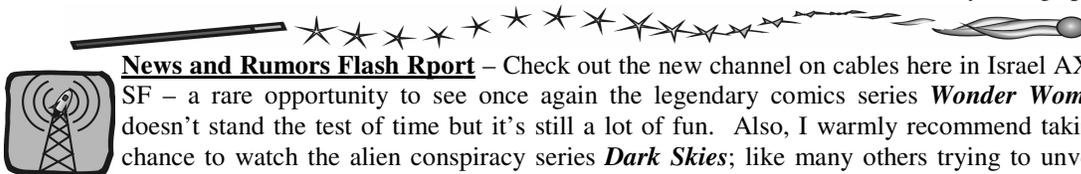
He is a physicist, and sounds like he knows his science. I bought and read two of his books, which are reviewed below.

***Putting Up Roots* by Charles Sheffield (1997), 247 pages.**

This is what was once called a "juvenile", but is now called "Young Adult" (YA). That means that it is intended for bright younger teenagers, but it can be enjoyed by adults like me who have a 16-year-old mind. I loved reading it. The main character is a 14 year old boy, Josh, who has been dumped on his aunt by his actress mother, who finds him a burden to drag around with her from city to city as she tries to make her career advance. Unfortunately the mother has forgotten that her sister is dead and Josh finds that his uncle has remarried and has lots of financial problems too. So Josh's step-aunt and uncle decide that farming a newly discovered planet is just the thing for the nephew, and they ship him off to Solferino. At this point besides having a thriller in terms of plot, we have a fine description of an alien world. The plants of this world are fascinatingly developed, and we get glimpses of the animal life too. Some of the physical characteristics of the world are well described too. The whole process of acclimating the new settlers to the new environment is done by tailored bacteria, so they can soon breathe the air, drink the water, and eat the native plants. Josh's fellow settlers are all abandoned young people like him, including his uncle's autistic daughter who is Josh's age. So we get a detailed description of an autistic child too. The only character we really get into is Josh himself, who is the only point of view character in the book, and more or less convincing. The other characters are all nicely drawn caricatures, described in a few brief sentences and presented by their actions but not by anything more. Nevertheless this is a fast moving book, and I recommend it to any teenager who wants to be able to say, after reading an sf book, "I learned some science, and also got some ideas as to what the future might be like." This book is part of Sheffield's "Jupiter" series of YA novels, all of which apparently deal with teenagers stranded on other planets.

***Cold As Ice* by Charles Sheffield (1992), 372 pages.**

This novel takes us on a trip to the moons of the larger planets. Part of the story takes place on Ganymede, but the nitty-gritty is on Europa, the second moon out from Jupiter. Recent scientific ideas are presented, including the idea that there may be life in an ocean under the icy crust of Europa. In fact, there are today thoughts about sending an exploratory (unmanned) space ship to Europa to look for such life. In addition I learned about DOS, the "Distributed Observation System", a whole network of coordinated orbiting telescopes, which will provide such a wide base of observation that it will be able to look at individual planets of distant stars. There are indeed those who want to build such a system in the near future. The heroes and heroines are very unusual scientists, with a variety of well-described interests. There are also some other extremely unusual people in this book. Like Sheffield's other books, the science is the best part, but in this case there was less science and less discovery than I would have liked, and too many strange people.



News and Rumors Flash Report – Check out the new channel on cables here in Israel AXN for SF – a rare opportunity to see once again the legendary comics series *Wonder Woman*. It doesn't stand the test of time but it's still a lot of fun. Also, I warmly recommend taking the chance to watch the alien conspiracy series *Dark Skies*; like many others trying to unveil the secrets of the US government about Rosswell, Project Blue Book, MIB and more. Finally, the first and only season of *Total Recall 2070*, based on the hit movie with *Arnold Schwarzenegger*, started last Friday. After watching only the opening episode I can understand why it was taken down but personally I'll give it a second chance.

More good news – new season for *Stargate SG1* on Channel 1 and the series is getting better by the episode! If you haven't watched it yet – start now.

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

For Comments: POB 9443, Tel Aviv 61093. Email: asheer@netvision.net.il. Tel: Aharon Sheer 08-947-1225.

Editor: **Aharon Sheer**.

Graphic Editor and Design: **Guy Eldar**.

Logo by: **Miriam Ben-Loulu**.

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.

עורך: אהרון שיר.
עורך גרפי ועיצוב: גיא אלדר.
עיצוב לוגו: מרים בן-לולו.
עבור משלוח בדואר של *CyberCozen*, הנכם מתבקשים לתרום 30 ש"ח לשנה; עבור דואר אוויר לארה"ב \$15; אם אהרון שיר יכול למסור את העיתון באופן אישי, 15 ש"ח.

Copyright © 2000.

All rights reserved to specified authors and artists.

כל הזכויות שמורות למחברים וליוצרים. כפי שצוינו.