



Science-Fiction Fanzine

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Letter to the Editor:

Aharon -

Day before yesterday I received the November issue of *CyberCozen*. I was interested in your article on the transliteration of Hebrew names into English. My first reaction on seeing Xargol would be to pronounce it Shargol. In Portuguese, the letter X represents the sound of sh. In exploring the New World, the Spanish took that over as many of the native mesoAmerican words contained the sound sh which doesn't occur in Spanish. In that way, the Aztec word for flower is spelled in Latin letters as xochitl, but it is pronounced something like

shochitl. (The combination tl represents a liquid sound which also does not exist in Spanish.) Similarly, in medieval Spanish, X was used to represent the sound now represented by J [pronounced like a guttural "h"]. In this way, Xavier and Javier are equivalent. That is why the correct pronunciation of Mexico is Mejico, and it is sometimes written that way. My guess is that in spelling Xargol with an X the publishers might have been trying to represent the guttural sound such as in the German word ich.

Ted Henderson

The Israeli Society for Science Fiction and Fantasy

The next **Gefen** lecture will be on **Tuesday, December 25, 2001, at 19:00.**

This is a special (and longer) meeting dedicated to the end of the year 2001.

Note the early starting time (19:00)

During the evening there will be several lectures:

"Arthur C. Clarke Odyssey" – Dr. Emanuel Lottem

"From the Dawn of Humanity to HAL" – Prof. Dan Grawer

"2001 – The future is already here" – Eli Hershtein

"Musical Variations in Space" – Vachslev Ganlin (composer and JAZZ player) will play music that was composed under the inspiration of the movie *2001*, while screening scenes from the movie

The event will take place at BEIT ARIELA (25 Shaul HaMelech, Tel Aviv)

Entry cost: 40 NIS. For society members 20 NIS (be sure to bring your membership card)

The event is part of a series of BEIT ARIELA lectures about **Stanley Kubrick** that will take place between December 19, 2001 and January 23, 2002 (for more details contact BEIT ARIELA: 03- 6910141).

Shortcut URL to Society page:

<http://sf-f.org.il>

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כל הזכויות שמורות למחברים וליוצרים, כפי שצוינו.

Two Books by Jack McDevitt reviewed by Aharon Sheer

Jack McDevitt is one of my favorite authors. We've reviewed a number of his books in *CyberCozen*. Gal Haimovich reviewed *Ancient Shores* (1996) and *The Engines of God* (1994) in Hebrew in October 1998. I reviewed *The Engines of God* and *Eternity Road* (1997) in December 1998, and *Ancient Shores* in December 1999. Avi Chami reviewed *The Engines of God* in January 1999. Here are two more:

A Talent for War by Jack McDevitt (1989), 310 pages.

McDevitt's specialty is archeology and history. This is a future history novel of a special kind. We all know that every generation tries to rewrite history according to its current orientation and patterns of thought. Fans of past wars love to travel to historical war sites and to try to understand them better, in the light of increasing information about the past. The stories that people told at the time of the war itself are not good enough – they couldn't see the big picture. It's only in hindsight that we can understand what really happened in the past. Here we have a hero about 11,300 A.D. who has been dragged almost unwillingly into studying the great war with the alien telepathic Ashiyyur race that took place two hundred years earlier.

Humans have spread across many stars and planets. While there was much enmity and jealousy between planets, neither deep cooperation nor deep enmity could really develop, because it took weeks or months to travel from star to star. Travel is via the Armstrong drive, which takes the ship into some kind of alternate universe where distances are shorter, and then brings it back near the desired destination.

The book's hero, Alex Benedict, is an antiquities dealer, whose uncle dies in an Armstrong drive ship disappearance. Such things have been happening for hundreds of years; just one of the rare risks that interstellar travelers face. Alex's uncle had written him just before his trip that he had discovered something that would make him rich and famous.

When Alex inherits his uncle's home, he finds that someone has broken into it and stolen precisely the data cube that described his uncle's latest discovery. Curiosity aroused, he begins investigating. What he gradually discovers, as he tries to cover the same ground his uncle covered, arouses his ever-greater interest. The great war, with its almost mythical heroes, has many fascinating facets, and we learn about this war from readings, simulations, poetry and descriptions of works of art. If you were a Civil War buff, this could be about studying the Civil War. If the First World War fascinated you, this could be about studying the First World War. Instead it's about a far distant war of which the reader knows nothing when he starts reading. The author tells us the story within the framework of Alex's trying to find out who stole the results of his uncle's researches, and why.

One of the interesting futuristic aspects is that visits to libraries or offices, for example, are often made by putting on a headband and sitting in a chair. The connection is so real that one feels one has entered into someone's room and is talking directly to that person. In the same way, one can put on a headband and relive events from the war so realistically that one feels one is actually there. One can be a passive observer or an active participant. But these simulations can only be based on conventional history. What really happened?

Here is an example from such a simulation (p. 89):

"Targeting information flowed across the screens: schematics of the incoming frigate appeared, rotated. I could hear hatches closing throughout the ship. Below me, all activity seemed to have ceased. I reached up and increased the flow of cool air into the cockpit.

"'Cruiser getting underway.'

"'Corsarius will handle. Stein take the frigate.'

"The lights of Sim's ship blinked out. We kept on: the enemy vessel appeared on the short range scopes, a black sphere gliding toward us between the stars.

"White light flared on its surface.

"At the same instant, we turned a hard bone-crunching left.

"I'd belted myself down. But I got thrown around pretty well anyway, and I managed to crack myself in the jaw. There was a brief spurt of nausea, and I would have touched the headband for reassurance except that I didn't dare let go of the webbing until we straightened out."

Naturally we get a revision of the conventional view of this future war, and of its heroes. If you like history, you will probably find this book fascinating. I don't like history, but nevertheless the book gripped me.

MOONFALL by Jack McDevitt (1998), 544 pages.

Jack McDevitt has written a near-future space and earth thriller: it takes place in 2024. Compared to *A Talent for War* whose story takes place 11,000 years from now, this is tomorrow. A very fast-moving apparently interstellar comet is discovered heading around the sun on a course that will take it smashing into the moon. If the comet hits, the moon is likely to break up into an enormous number of pieces of all sizes, many of which will fall on the earth. In this future there is an international space station orbiting the earth. Mankind has gone back to the moon, and there is now an international base there, called – yes -- **Moonbase**. A ship is being readied to go the Mars. In other words, mankind is once again moving out into space.

One worry of the politicians is that the scientists say Moonbase will almost certainly be destroyed if the comet hits the moon. All that money invested will go down the drain! The public will refuse to support the space program any more! The supporters of the space program will be humiliated!

The human part of the story is that the U.S. Vice President, Charlie Haskell, is visiting the Moonbase, along with a number of aides, just when the comet is spotted. The president is not well, and will not run again, but he does not support Haskell's bid to replace him. Haskell is too independent, and too honest, to make a good president. Haskell's also a great supporter of the space program, and romantically very excited to be on the moon. When the news of the coming comet reaches them, it's clear that everyone on Moonbase will have to be evacuated. Haskell makes a speech from the moon, saying he's going to be the last one off the moon. Big romantic speech! But, in the limited time available, with the small number of space ships capable of going to the moon, is it possible to get everyone off the moon? Will the hero of the book be killed by a flying rock? I'll leave you to guess the answer to that.

The second half of the story is the possibility of enormous destruction caused on earth by pieces of falling moon. The president consults with his science advisors and receives a variety of opinions. At one extreme there are those who say nothing's going to happen, the

comet will fly by harmlessly. At the other extreme there are those who say all life will be destroyed on earth. Everyone agrees that if large chunks of the moon land in the ocean, the tidal waves generated are likely to kill everyone living near the coasts. The idea of evacuating all coastal areas in the United States is appalling. There will be enormous traffic jams, it will be impossible to supply food for so many people, and medical care will not be available to the old and sick. And what if nothing actually happens? What if the comet doesn't hit the moon? How will the president look to history with all the deaths and injuries that will result from an unneeded enormous evacuation?

The president decides to tell the Americans that nothing is going to happen, that the best thing they can do is stay at home and wait it out. One of the biggest news services agrees, doesn't interview any of the disaster mongers, presents only optimism, and quietly moves its top people from Manhattan to Chicago. Most Americans stay at home, but the ones that leave face all the predicted problems of non-moving traffic jams, lack of food and water, lack of medical care, hostile local people worried about themselves, etc.

A lot of exciting stuff goes on here. But frankly I think Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle did it better – and more plausibly – in *Lucifer's Hammer*. In that book there was only one comet hitting the ocean instead of millions of pieces of the moon. In that book there was still plenty of damage, and civilization was driven back to primitivism, at least temporarily. That book had more good characters, and more reasonable answers, than *Moonfall*. We might say that McDevitt is better at presenting big important people in difficult situations, most of whom make really dumb decisions. McDevitt has a very contemptuous attitude toward the average politician, but it's nice that he has one here, Haskell, who is a smart, decent, tough and honest guy, and an enthusiastic supporter of the space program.

We'd better get out into space now, McDevitt is saying, and start thinking about protecting the earth from falling objects. I don't know if that can be done, but I agree with McDevitt that mankind should try.

Some Classics – Reviewed by Aharon Sheer

The Heritage of Hastur by Marion Zimmer Bradley (1975), 381 pages.

Recommended by Julie Stampnitzky. When Marion Zimmer Bradley died a couple of years ago, I realized that I have never read any of her fifty novels. Julie suggested this one.

This novel is part of the **Darkover** series. Darkover is a planet settled by people from earth so long ago that the people there had forgotten earth and that they came from elsewhere. Not only that, it appears that when the settlers first came there were other beings on the planet, beings so close to humans that they could mate. The descendents of these matings are telepaths (often with six fingered hands), and many have other psi powers too. Voluntarily the Darkovans gave up advanced technology and returned to a feudalistic life with a telepathic aristocracy ruling their accepting serfs.

And then earth people – after thousands of years without contact -- suddenly showed up. Hi, folks, said the earth people, we want to help you rise out of backward feudalism and gradually take your place among a space-travelling commonwealth of planets using high technology. Go away, say the Darkovans; we're not interested. We had our Age of Chaos, wars and destruction, and have renounced all that. We like our lives as they are now.

Sounds like a good basis for a science fiction novel, or, as in the case, a whole series of novels. But that is not really what we get. The whole atmosphere of the novel is fantasy. Dark and evil powers war for control of men. Relationships between people are feudal, and remain determinedly feudal. There is intermarriage between the newcomers from earth and the Darkovans. But each must choose: you are either loyal to earth or loyal to Darkover – never to both. There are even Darkovans who switch to the earth side. But this is acceptable, since on reaching adulthood each Darkovan chooses what master he will be loyal to; if he chooses earth as his master, that's perfectly acceptable, since everyone belongs to someone.

What's missing is a serious exploration of the problems of contact after long separation.

This book is also a tearjerker. I admit I cried toward the end – from happiness and from sadness, depending on each character and what happened to him/her. What I did not like about the book is its strident over-emotional style. The author uses all the tricks to get us into suspense and keep us there, and all too often those tricks are both painfully plain and quite unnecessary. The story is good, fast-moving and exciting. We don't have to be repeatedly forewarned by the author of what is coming. A typical example, and there are far too many, is the following:

...“I slept too, in the deepest happiness I had ever known. Or was ever to know again.” (p. 256)

I had the feeling the author had written this exciting story and then gone back and sprinkled hints of horrible things to come, like salt. To my taste, it was too salty.

On the other hand, if you are a fantasy fan, who likes some sf to take it out of the realm of pure fantasy, this is for you. The book is gripping. The characters are persuasive, including the men. In fact, in this novel, most of the heroes and all of the believable characters are men, and the story is always told from the men's point of view (there are two heroes). The interactions between people are well done. Difficult and genuine human problems are raised and dealt with interestingly in the framework of a feudal world. I just wonder whether *any* of her novels raise and deal with any science fiction problems. Because in this book, although telepathy and the learning of control of telepathy is a major topic, the approach to telepathy is still fantasy and not scientific – at least to my way of feeling. Maybe I should read another in this series?

The Stars My Destination by Alfred Bester (1956), 246 pages.

This was selected in the **LOCUS** poll as one of the thirty best science fiction novels written before 1990 (see **CyberCozen** November 1998). The basic idea is that everyone has in his forebrain the potential for teleportation. A person who was raised as a child in a situation in which no one speaks any language (raised by wolves, say?), will never learn to speak properly, for the part of his brain required for speech needs to be developed in childhood. Similarly someone born blind, who regains his sight as an adult, will never learn to see properly, for the same reason. We cannot teleport because we

were not taught to teleport as children. Now imagine that in the future someone does learn to teleport. He can then teach this ability, and in a generation, everyone will be doing it. Think then of the far-reaching changes in society that will result. You only have to travel to a place once to be able to go back there again. (But you do have to get there once.) Thus all current transportation systems will become single-use. There will be no privacy – anyone who has been in your house once can go back there any time he wants. How do you protect your wife or daughters from a rapist who can appear

suddenly, attack, and then vanish? So in Bester's future, respectable women are kept locked up, out of sight, so that only closest family will know how to teleport to them. The book has some really wild characters, some remarkable societal developments, and numerous unexpected plot twists. I enjoyed reading it,

although it has more violence in some parts than I care for. (This book in that respect belongs to the 80s, not to the 50s.) Pretty good, but I don't think I would say it's one of the 30 best sf books ever written.

Film Review by Aharon Sheer: *Charly* (1968), 99 minutes.

One of the best sf novellas ever written (1959) (later expanded to a novel in 1966) was *Flowers for Algernon* by Daniel Keyes. It was made into the movie *Charly*. Keyes pretty much dropped out of sight afterwards, his subsequent books unsuccessful in America. His last two books sold two million copies each, but you never heard of either one of them. They were published in Japanese translation only, and have never appeared in English.

Charly is the story of a mentally defective young man (learning disabled?) who has a strong desire to improve himself. He has been going to night school regularly, trying to improve his reading and writing. "Charly" is Charley's misspelling of his own name (not likely). When offered an opportunity to participate in an experiment to increase his intelligence, he takes it. The method has only been used previously on rats, and involves planting healthy (fetal?) cells in a portion of his brain which has not developed properly, thus possibly giving him normal intelligence. His night school teacher is enlisted to help him adjust to the changes that he must deal with as he becomes steadily more intelligent. Thus we have a developing love story too.

In the original novelette, Charley becomes perhaps the most intelligent man on

earth. As a mental defective, he was sweet, friendly, good-humored and trusting. As a genius he becomes overbearing, supercilious, contemptuous, etc. An ugly character. When the experiment fails, Charley returns to being a mental defective, but now he is sad and embittered. He's known better.

In the movie, however, they could not deal with a hero becoming a monster (what would they do with the love story?), nor with the tragic ending. Charley in the movie remains a nice guy. When he realizes that he cannot retain his intelligence he tries to do something about it, but fails. In the end, he goes back to being a happy-go-lucky dope.

It's hard to translate a novel into a movie. In this movie they spent a lot of time on Charley's passionate love affair with his ex-night school teacher, with beautiful scenery. The changes in Charley's personality described in the novel are just left out. Disappointing.

Actor Cliff Robertson got an Oscar for his portrayal of "Charly". A remake of this movie is rumored, but I doubt if it will be any better.

Short Book Review by Aharon Sheer

Galactic Effectuator by Jack Vance (1980), 219 pages.

Jack Vance is one of my favorite authors. Although a few of his books have had some really good social satire, most are just fun to read. He creates human and alien societies which are strange and wonderful. His heroes are talented and effective, and, although they may go through great suffering in the course of the story, they always find their way to success. The fascination of Vance is in his style, his language, his portrayals of people, his sly remarks on social customs. While his books are sf in that they take place far in the future, in a universe in which mankind has spread over tens of thousands of planets, living on many of them in uneasy coexistence with aliens of all kinds, physical science is not what interests him. His books are more like alien adventure or detective

stories. This book contains two novellas about an "effectuator", a sort of future kind of private detective who works with or against the law (depending on how the law behaves), trying to right wrongs and help his clients. One of Vance's specialties is inventing exotic names. His hero is Miro Hetzel. Hetzel's employer is Sir Ivan Hacaway, whose wife is Lady Bonvenuta Hacaway. One of the nasty people Hetzel is looking for is Casimir Wuldfache. And this is just on the first three pages. I found this book fascinating. If you like the strange and wonderful, this is for you, too. But don't expect reading any of Vance's books to change your life.

