

Cyber Cozen

Science-Fiction Newsletter

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Film Reviews: *Babylon 5* Movies

reviewed by Raz Greenberg

When a ground-breaking Science Fiction TV show is cancelled, its creator usually fails to re-create its former success with something new, and is largely remembered for doing his one-time classic (with the exception, maybe, of Glen A. Larson, who is remembered for making many SF shows – all of them god-awful). The case of *Babylon 5*'s creator, J. Michael Straczynski, however, is different: ever since the cancellation of the spin-off *Crusade* he's been keeping very busy. With two comic-book series – *Rising Stars* and *Midnight Nation*, a coming job writing for the *Spider-Man* line of comic-books, an online novel, *Tribulations*, an on-line audio drama *City of Dreams* and an upcoming new TV series (probably next year) called *Jeremiah*, I think it's safe to bet that we haven't heard the last from him.

Still, many *Babylon 5* fans are left with questions unanswered since *Crusade*'s untimely

death. Some of the answers can now be found in spin-off novels, and the scripts for three unfilmed *Crusade* episodes (available for free at www.bookface.com, along with JMS's new novel).

Two months ago the movie channel screened the first two *Babylon 5* movies, *In the Beginning* and *Thirdspace*. Both movies expand the picture of the *Babylon 5* universe given in the series. Two other movies – *River of Souls* and *A Call to Arms* – look beyond the series (*A Call to Arms* actually sets the stage for *Crusade*). The movie channel hasn't bought the last two movies yet, but it's not unlikely they will (and even if they don't, the movies will undoubtedly be screened at forthcoming ISFSF&F conventions, as they already have several times). Here's a look at the four movies:

In the Beginning:

Set before the start of the show, this film chronicles the events of the Earth-Minbari war as well as the contact between the Minbari and the Vorlons. The back-stories of most of the major characters of the show (Sheridan, Delen, Franklin – and also a little about Ivanova, G'kar and Londo) – are presented here in more detail.

Although not very surprising – we all know how the Earth-Minbari war ended since the subject has been chewed over and over and over during the course of the show – *In the Beginning* is nevertheless entertaining. Actors are very convincing doing the younger versions of themselves, special effects and action sequences are exciting, and the movie is a heaven for trivia geeks. (Did Ivanova's brother really serve with Sheridan on his last mission? Did Sheridan really go on a suicide mission along with Franklin and G'kar? Did he really meet Delen for the first time while being held captive on a Minbari Ship? Who cares?). There's also a hint about the ever-elusive Dilgar wars. I was a little disappointed that they couldn't expand more about Sinclair (all the sequences featuring him were footage already seen on the show, since they couldn't afford the actor's paycheck), but other than that – a fine movie.

Thirdspace:

Set during the fourth season, between the end of the Shadow War and the war against Earth, when *Babylon 5* was independent, underfunded and undersupplied. After winning a battle with space-pirates, the *Babylon* crew discovers an ancient Vorlon artifact. While exploring it with the help of a shady IPX team, strange events start occurring on the station.

Like a really bad *Star-Trek* episode, *Thirdspace* is badly paced, badly written and all over the place. The film takes too long getting its points across, and for the most part, isn't very interesting or exciting. The film also completely misuses Claudia Christian's character of Ivanova (who was sadly absent

from season 5), and Patricia Tallman really deserves better than her role here as Lyta (though it's not half as bad as what her character went through during the 5th season). Still, the film does pick up pace during its last 20 minutes, with some nice special effects and an imaginative alien design by renowned SF cover artist Wayne Barlow. Worth a look, but don't expect anything new or surprising.

River of Souls:

Set after the end of the 5th season, the film follows an adventure involving Lochley, Garibaldi, Zack, and the Soul-Hunters.

Revealing more about the plot is revealing too much, since most of the enjoyment of watching this film comes from the surprises it brings to its viewers. This is undoubtedly the best of all *Babylon 5* movies: fast-paced, interesting, entertaining – better, I should add, than all of the show's stand alone episodes. See if you can recognize Martin Sheen as a soul-hunter before he became the president of the United States in another TV show. All other actors – most notably Jerry Doyle as Garibaldi – also do excellent work. And this film actually made me like Lochley, believe it or not. Recommended.

A Call to Arms:

Set just before the start of *Crusade*, this film details the Drakh's attack on Earth and the building of the Excalibur ship (as well as the recruiting of two of its crewmembers).

The biggest problem with this film is that – not unlike season 5 – it often seems busier with setting up *Crusade* than with telling its own story. Things take too long to happen, there are too many explanations, and the plot-twists becomes less convincing by the minute. Bruce Boxleitner, who looks old and tired, doesn't really help. The film did introduce the characters of Durina Ne'fal, who later became the most fascinating character of *Crusade*, and the Technomage Galen, who had the chance of becoming another fascinating character, but unfortunately failed miserably. *Babylon 5* fans probably wouldn't want to miss this one, but as for others, I'd suggest not to bother. *Crusade* had enough expository material in its own right, done much better than in this film.



 **Book Reviews:**
Norman Spinrad - Sci-Fi Satire to the Extreme
 Shmuel Kahn (Shmuel@Kam-Motion.com)

Norman Spinrad has been one of my favorite authors of SF Satire for the past twenty years, and I find that he generally does an excellent job. A few months ago Aharon reviewed two books by Robert A. Heinlein (RAH) (see *CyberCozen*, March 2000). This got me to thinking about the (Neo)Fascist politics portrayed in books by RAHs and other "**Golden Era**" authors. This brought to mind a book I had just recently read by Spinrad, called *The Iron Dream* (1972)

Imagine, if you can, what would happen if Hitler crossed tracks with the beer guzzling, Harley motorcycle riding, leather coated Neo-Nazis of today. The book abounds with tall blond blue eyed fearless heroes, smashing skulls and waging merciless war against the evil mutated scum of the Earth. Stainless Steel Phallic symbols, mass rallies and motorcycle blitz attacks are also plentiful. Spinrad further attacks this silliness of the SF world by having

The Iron Dream written by none other than Hitler himself, who "after daddling in radical politics immigrated to the USA".

I found this book amusing, and rather enjoyed the fun it poked at the "Golden Era". It also totally destroyed any remaining credibility this type of Real-Hero fiction had with me.

Another Spinrad book I attempted to read recently was *The Void Captain's Tale* (1983). This is the story of the Captain and crew of a void-ship. Void-Ships propel themselves through the hyperspace void by having a young woman "hot-wired" into the ship, serving as a circuit breaker in the Jump-Circuit which propels the ship. All hell breaks loose when the Captain breaks all the rules and has an affair with her.

I found this book so mind-numbing boring that I couldn't even finish it. Can someone please explain the whyness of it to me? Why the rave reviews?

The Sirens of Titan by Kurt Vonnegut Jr. (1959), 319 pages.

Reviewed by **Gal Haimovich**

Kurt Vonnegut is known throughout the universe as a satirist, using black and intelligent humor to reflect on human society and humans themselves. The result is usually very good as exemplified by this book.

The story takes place in the not too distant future. Winston Niles Rumfoord was the first and only man to run into a chrono-synclastic infundibulum. Chrono-synclastic infundibula are places in space where all the different truths fit together nicely. Rumfoord, being now part of a chrono-synclastic infundibulum, is able to see back into the past and into the future of the solar system. Rumfoord has to travel with the chrono-synclastic infundibulum and, since it passes earth every 59 days, Rumfoord materializes on earth in his family mansion every 59 days. At first, the only one allowed to see him is his wife.

The story begins with a prophecy, given by Rumfoord, to his first visitor during materialization - Malachi Constant, one of the richest men on earth. Rumfoord tells him that he will travel to Mars, where he will marry Mrs. Rumfoord, Beatrice, and they will have a son named Chrono who will have a very special lucky charm. From Mars, Constant will go to Mercury, back to earth and then to Titan. As an incentive, he shows Constant a picture of three beautiful women from Titan.

Constant is obviously upset by this prophecy, the more so because he finds that he and Beatrice hate each other. So both try to avoid the prophecy, to no avail. Ten years later, Constant and Beatrice are on Mars, with their memory erased, as soldiers in the Mars invasion army. To his fellow soldiers he is known as Unk. Unk was a criminal - although he was subjected to mind control like all other soldiers,

he still kept some free thought and he is trying to remember. Nobody actually knows who runs this army. Not even the real commanders, whose memory wasn't erased. Then comes the call to attack. Unk doesn't want to go. He looks for his wife Bi but she doesn't remember him and doesn't care for him. While all the soldiers in their ships go to earth, Unk's ship goes to Mercury. The readers of course know that Rumfoord is behind the invasion army and that it has a purpose - Rumfoord wants to make a point, which will then enable him to establish a new religion on earth - the Church of God the Indifferent, in which God doesn't care for his followers, there is no Big Scheme. Unk/Constant's journey continues as prophesied, reunited with his wife Bi and son Chrono, they eventually arrive at Titan to see the lovely Sirens and to meet a very old alien.

Vonnegut's strength is not just in his humor and satire but also in his characters. They are not made of cardboard. His characters have a past and a future, they have feelings and thoughts. While reading, you learn to know the characters, to sympathize with them, to love or to hate them. As Vonnegut wrote after the dedication: "all persons, places and events in this book are real..."

The surprise at the end (which I will not tell you, of course) is not a real surprise because even a dim-witted reader will get it somewhere in the middle. However, you will have to think a little to understand the final joke of this book. It's very amusing and places the whole concept of God's Plan in a new light.

To conclude, *The Sirens of Titan*, like most of Vonnegut's books, is fun to read, amusing yet thought provoking at the same time.

Mission Child by Maureen F. McHugh (1998), 347 pages. Reviewed by **Aharon Sheer**

McHugh's first novel, *China Mountain Zhang* (1992) is one of the best novels I've ever read. I reviewed it in *CyberCozen*, May 1995. This book is also very good. Here McHugh has created a world that was settled by mankind a long time ago, so long that most of the people on the planet have forgotten their earth origins. While the planet has an earth-like atmosphere and climate, the difficulty is that its amino acids are different. Very few earth plants can survive without a difficult and complex growing process. A small number of animals - "renndeer" for example - were genetically modified so that they

can eat local plants, and people can eat their meat.

"We needed the amino acids of earth, and so did plants we could eat. This planet had different amino acids, and most of the stuff that grew we couldn't eat.

"There are three kinds of things: onworld, that will fill you up but not feed you or that will make you sick; in-between things like renndeer and potatoes, that we can eat but that can

live on onworld things; and offworld things, like dogs and people.” (p. 267)

In such a difficult environment, and for some reason (not given) cut off from contact with earth for centuries, people have gone back to a much more primitive life. Most sophisticated technology has been lost. What happens then when contact is reestablished with the highly technologically advanced earth people? The offworlders have come.

Essentially this is a very personal tale of a local woman whose life is deeply affected by the earth people who come – for good and for bad. So it is a tale of primitive life, and the bitter contrast between the advanced and the primitive, and the effects of this contrast on the lives of the primitive.

Here is part of a brief conversation the heroine has with an offworlder, after which the heroine sums up the results of this contact as follows:

“‘You speak English’, she said. ‘You don’t have to be like this.’

‘I laughed again, but it sounded different even to my ears. Bitter. ‘Offworlder, I have worked in a factory. I have lived in a, what do you say, a slum? A slum. Here is good, thank you.’

“She reached in her pocket and tossed a coin at me, a silver bar. More money than I had seen in a long time. I let it lie in the dust. She was doing to me what offworlders did to all of us. It was offworlders who had created the Mission. Offworlders who made the guns available that killed us. It was offworlders who put us in refugee camps and fed us like pets. ... Here was an offworlder, faced with a problem, and all she could think to do was throw me a piece of silver.

“But after they had walked on, I picked up the silver piece. I was not so proud.” (p. 232)

Nothing unusual there, you might say. But the story is well done, and moving.

One of McHugh’s areas of interest is gender conflict. The hero of *China Mountain Zhang* book is a homosexual in a Chinese-dominated America in which homosexuality is a criminal offense. The hero of her second book *Half the Day is Night* is a man who became a bodyguard to a very powerful woman. In this book the heroine suffers through a terrible war in which all of her friends and family are killed. Having nothing else to wear, she wears men’s clothes, and is mistaken for a boy. She accepts

this as a positive choice – feeling safer looking like an 18-year-old boy in violent surroundings than as a woman who may be subject to rape or forced into prostitution. In this situation she is offered a choice by the offworlders: She can remain a woman, she can be converted to a man, or she can be something in between: She chooses to be externally a woman, but with the hormonal characteristics of a man so that she is stronger, harder muscled, and has no menstrual period.

The title of the book refers to the heroine’s childhood. Until age 14, when the war came, she grew up in an offworld mission. Living in the far north, above the arctic circle, she lived in a community aided and taught by an offworld couple who had taken on the hard local life in order to teach the local people about their earth heritage and to encourage them to improve their technology.

When a local war comes the offworld woman tries to give her three gifts: an implant which will enable her to call the offworlders for help, an implant which will enable her to hibernate, and an implant which will enable her in an emergency to move extremely fast for short periods of time. These three implants are intended to help her survive the war.

“I watched my husband starve to death and then I waited in the snow to die, and when I woke up it was spring. Winter had gone. ... Before that I walked out into the dark and I should have frozen to death. When they found my body there was no breath, and yet an hour later, I was breathing again.” (p. 277)

It would appear that freezing to death and coming back to life is a science fiction trope which McHugh borrowed perhaps from Charles Sheffield’s book *Cold as Ice* (see *CyberCozen*, December 2000). *Cold as Ice* also has a man who, in an emergency, is able to move extremely fast for short periods of time. In Sheffield’s book these abilities are due to genetic engineering. In McHugh’s book they come from offworld implants. In this book, however, the heroine does not eat and drink massively before freezing – just the opposite, as the quote above shows. How it is done scientifically is not even hinted at.

Contact between the technologically advanced and the primitive has taken place many times on earth, such stories have been told many times. Here it takes place on another planet, in the distant future. Many of the characters are quite interesting, although only the heroine really comes alive. I enjoyed it.



Science Fiction and Fantasy
News and Rumors

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

The summer of 2001 seems to be promising only if we consider the upcoming hit of the first of the new trilogy, **Lord of the Rings**. Thinking of the further future, I went out to seek what's in store for us for the summer of say, 2003. Not many movies in early production stages have set a release date, but I found three interesting futures that I wish to share with all of you.

The first, and best known of the three, is the third and final film of **The Matrix** trilogy. It is scheduled to be released in the summer of 2003, a year and a half after the release of the second of the series.

The film will of course include, among others, star-actors **Keanu Reeves** as **Neo**, and **Laurence Fishburne** as **Morpheus**. Co-directors and screenwriters, **Andy and Larry Wachowski** are collaborating on the film as well. As for the storyline, not much is known, but there are some rumors. More details might come out after the release of the second film. On the other hand, producer **Joel Silver** has mentioned a possible CGI Anime style Prequel, which will tell the story of the making of the Matrix world.

The second film on the 2003 calendar is the film version of **Arthur C. Clarke's Rendezvous with Rama**. The only name (so far) on the cast list is **Morgan Freeman**. Director **David Fincher** (**Se7en**, **Fight Club**, **The Game**, and **Alien3**) and screenwriters **Scott Brick** (debut

and **Andrew Kevin Walker** (**Se7en**, **Sleepy Hollow**, and **8MM**) are collaborating on this project.

The story line is based on that of the book. When a giant alien spaceship, **Rama**, is discovered in 2130 to be heading directly for our sun, a team of astronauts (led by **Freeman**) aboard the spaceship **Endeavor** is sent to investigate. What they discover is an organic world inside **Rama**. With the book having three sequels, a successful first movie might have them made into movie-sequels.

The final movie, and the one I found most interesting, is **The Hulk**, based of course on the hit commix and animated series, **The Incredible Hulk**. After the great roller coaster at **Universal's Islands of Adventures**, the movie was just a matter of time.

Scheduled for the same summer as the other two, this film is in even earlier stages, for no cast member has been named. The most intriguing part of this production is the use of CGI for the Hulk, for they've decided no man can play this giant. Another intriguing detail is the surprising director – **Ang Lee** (**Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon**, **Sense and Sensibility**, **The Ice Storm**). As all first-in-a-series commix-based movies, this will also tell of the beginning of the Hulk. Hopefully, it won't be as bad as most first commix-based movies.

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

The Israeli Society for Science Fiction and Fantasy

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

Last meetings – “**Blade Runner – Do Androids Dream of Electronic Sheep?**”

- “מותר האדם מן המכונה” – Artificial Intelligence” – Yoci Memrod
- “The Future in the Age of Uncertainty” – Iri Rikin
- “Slaves in Megapolis: City of the Future” – Michal Peleg
- The Moral Aspect of *Blade Runner*” – Dr. David Gurevitz

Blade Runner Meetings are held in **Beit Ariela**, 25 Shaul HaMelech, Tel Aviv at 7 p.m.

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For full details look at the SF-f Society Website: <http://www.sf-f.org.il>

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