



## Letters to the Editor

Dear Aharon,

Would it be possible to put a note in *CyberCozen* to the effect that BWA, the "B" Women's Apa, is actively seeking members outside the main English speaking countries, and would particularly like a member in Israel? Candidates must be **women**, and able to carry on a written correspondence in English discussing, among other things, **SF** and **fantasy**. Age doesn't matter. (Ages of current members range from 17 to 60.) Anyone interested should contact me at [lucys@panix.com](mailto:lucys@panix.com) or my postal address, 137-22 70<sup>th</sup> Ave., Flushing NY 11367-1926, USA. Note: The "B" in BWA stands for nothing in particular.

Regards, **Lucy Schmeidler**

**Shalom Aharon,**

In your article about Helium 3, in *CyberCozen* of March 2002, you paint a grim picture of the coming energy crisis. I would like to point out that, first, natural gas can be used for propelling anything which works on oil, and there are vast reserves of gas. So, no immediate worry.

Second, there are other ways of getting energy. For example in order to send cargo across the Atlantic, we could use solar powered Zeppelins with very little fuel on-board. So the cargo won't cross the ocean in 10 hours, but in 10 days - who cares.

Finally, when and if natural gas runs out we could start producing biological fuel; i.e. alcohol. It should be possible to power internal combustion engines with alcohol, and the trick would then be to produce it in large quantities and at low cost. If it does become necessary, then perhaps huge vats of alcohol-producing algae or microbes will stand in place of the huge oil refineries of today.

Of-course, the real hope is for a breakthrough in battery technology, or fuel-cell technology, which would do away with internal-combustion engines.

In any case, I don't think it will be an energy crisis which forces us to use horse drawn carriages. Perhaps other things, but not that.

By the way, even today there are experimental solar-powered cars, it is just that the collecting area has to be very large, the speed is low (20 km/hour), and of-course they don't run at night.

Regards, **Amnon Stupp**

## Book Reviews by Aharon Sheer

*Slow Lightning* (published in the U.S. as *Infinity Beach*), by Jack McDevitt (2000), 540 pages.

Recommended by Stephen King, the best-selling horror writer, on the back cover of the book. King's recommendation is 150 words long – not one of those out of context half-dozen word quotes. Readers of *CyberCozen* know that McDevitt is one of my favorite authors. This book, like his earlier book *A Talent for War* (1989), reviewed in the December 2001 *CyberCozen*, is a rewrite-of-history kind of book, in which the heroine finds herself dragged into trying to find out what really happened. The story takes place about 900 years in our future.

Earthmen have developed hyperdrive and can travel to other stars. They've terraformed nine worlds, and settled them. They've even had an interstellar war. They've sent probes or people to visit a thousand worlds. But they've never found life of any kind, not even single-celled organisms. Earth life is apparently all there is.

The heroine is Kay Brandywine, a failed astrophysicist, who has found herself doing public relations work for the Beacon Project, an organization which sends people out to distant space, looking not just for life, but for intelligent

life, life with an advanced technology. She lives and works on Greenway, a planet settled almost six hundred years before, in 2411 CE (our dates). Dates on Greenway are from year 1, the first year of the settling of Greenway. The first chapter of the book describes a short battle taking place on Greenway, in Greenway year 573, between an earthman and an alien enemy whom the earthman succeeds in destroying, but which also kills him. Minutes afterwards there is a tremendous explosion, and part of a mountain is destroyed, including much of the town of Severin.

But then the next chapter takes place in 599, 26 years later. We find that no one knows that this battle with an alien ever took place. Gradually we learn that there is a strange, unsolved mystery. In 573 the Beacon Project sent out an exploration ship, the *Hunter*. The *Hunter* had problems with its hyperdrive; the people on it aborted the mission, returning home early. But, of the four people who were on the ship, three disappeared shortly after the ship returned. One of them was Kay Brandywine's older clone sister Emily. Police investigations showed that Emily and another woman from the ship took a cab to their hotel, but never got there. Of the two men on the ship, both had lived in the town of Severin in which the explosion took place. One of them disappeared at the time of the unexplained explosion and is presumed to have been killed then, although his body was never found. The other – the only living survivor from the *Hunter*'s trip – left the area shortly afterwards. He had explained that their trip had been uneventful, ending when a minor hyperdrive problem appeared which forced them to turn back.

So we have an unsolved mystery, and a clue about an alien entity which only the readers know. Three of the four people on the *Hunter* disappeared, one of them Kay's older clone sister. So Kay has a strong personal interest in what happened. Yet it all happened a long time ago, when Kay was only ten years old. She has never looked into it seriously. One day Kay gets a call from someone who taught her philosophy at the university. He tells her something like this: Go to Severin, not alone, wander around at night, there is something very strange there, I've seen it, you will too. So she goes with a man friend to Severin, explores the ruins of the home of the man from the ship *Hunter* who disappeared, and finds a woman's shoe there designed to be used in zero gravity. The shoe's size is suitable for one of the women on the spaceship who disappeared (not Kay's sister). Now Kay's interest is aroused. She becomes an amateur detective trying to find out

what really happened 26 years before, what happened to her sister, what caused the explosion. And she encounters opposition. Some of the relatives of the people involved do not want the matter dredged up. If foul play is proved, it will destroy the reputations of the people, and by extension, of their relatives. The matter has been quiet for 26 years, drop it. One of these relatives is a major cash donor to the Beacon Project, where Kay works. So Kay's employers also want her to drop it.

Well, this is a very exciting story, with an optimistic ending. I was pulled forward and wanted to know what was going to happen. Repeatedly we see people (including the heroine) making discoveries, and decisions based on these discoveries, and then hiding these discoveries and decisions from almost everyone else. "What will people think?" they say. "We'll look bad," they say. "We can't let anyone know how we've screwed this up," they say. McDevitt has a bias against the good sense of most people. In my opinion his view is (and I suppose he is not alone in this) that most people will do the wrong thing if just given the chance. And McDevitt also believes "those whose tastes run to personal power could never be trusted to act save in the pursuit of their own ambition." (p. 231)

I have to bring in another quote, for no good reason. "He had the sort of professional aloofness one usually finds in museum directors, fiction writers, and morticians." (p. 127)

I liked the book. Lots of food for thought. We're talking about First Contact, which is all too easy to do wrong, turning neutral aliens into enemies. I hope that any human group that goes out into interstellar space, if we ever get that capability, will be better prepared than the people in this book, for that first meeting with intelligent, dangerous, alien life. But I doubt it. McDevitt has probably got it right.

Some comments about McDevitt's future. Although *A Talent for War* and this book are in completely different futures, they have a lot in common technologically. Most people spend a lot of their time in virtual reality. They have the technology to provide plenty of cheap energy, so anyone who does not want to work gets a government allowance which allows him to live in his dream worlds, or to be a creator of music, art or literature, or to enjoy sports, sightseeing and other outdoor activities. Lifespan has been dramatically extended, but for many fields, McDevitt says,

"... truly creative work must be done in the early years, or it will not be

done at all. Genius fades quickly, like the rose in midsummer. And all the genetic enhancement known to science had not been able to change that melancholy reality.” (p. 37)  
 In McDevitt’s futures, Artificial

Intelligences exist, but they are not really sentient. Hyperdrive has been developed and mankind has settled other worlds. Non-human intelligent life is extremely rare, but it exists. And, tragically, wars still take place between human societies, even between distant planets.

***Hoka! Hoka! Hoka!*** by Poul Anderson and Gordon R. Dickson (1998, a collection of short stories published in 1957 and 1983, with tie-in material), 305 pages.

Humor is rare in science fiction. Anderson and Dickson, both of whom died in the last two years, both graduated the same year (1948) from the University of Minnesota, were both members of the Minneapolis Fantasy Society, became friends, and collaborated on a number of stories. This book is a set of humorous stories on the Hoka, an alien race of charming, highly intelligent creatures, similar in appearance to teddy bears. The Hokas have been invited by the United Commonwealth of Planets to receive instruction in how to advance their society and technology, so that they may eventually join the Commonwealth. The Hoka’s unique quality is that they love earth literature, and, when a group of Hokas has read a few books of a certain kind, they may enthusiastically adopt the society described in the books, learn to speak the language, and dress and act as much as possible like the people described there.

Each story here has, as its central character, an earthman named Alexander Jones, who became an expert on the Hoka after he crash-landed on their planet, Toka. In his first contact with the Hoka, he found himself facing an English-speaking society of America’s Old West, riding horses, raising cows, carrying old-fashioned bullet-shooting guns, and fighting Indians. Of course the horses and cows were not earth animals, but local Toka species that could be used instead.

Jones, having survived his first experience with the Hoka, and having gotten along well with them, is given an official position as earth representative on Hoka. Each story describes the Hoka take on some earth literature.

In one of the funniest, a Toka island has been renamed England, and has adopted late 19<sup>th</sup> century English customs. When Jones is asked to assist in finding an interplanetary drug smuggler who is using “England” as his base, the local Hoka “Sherlock Holmes” helps him, and we find that “Holmes”, using Jones as his “Watson”, always gets his man.

One of the most difficult chapters for me to understand was based on the Mozart opera “Don Giovanni”. Jones has taken a delegation of Hokas back to earth, and they have chosen Jones to be their “Don Giovanni”. When the Hokas meet Jones’ girlfriend, they break into song from the opera about Don Giovanni’s (Don Juan’s) prowess with women, and his wide-ranging sexual activities. Jones has difficulty dealing with this one, and so did I, as it requires an intimate knowledge of the story of the opera, which I don’t have.

If you like humor, chances are you will enjoy this book. Each story takes a different literary base, and surely you will find one or more that will entertain you.

***Cryptonomicon*** by Neal Stephenson (1999), 910 pages.

Recommended by Sara Beck Svetitsky, who reviewed it in the February 2002 issue of *CyberCozen*. This is a funny, fun, entertaining book, with some fascinating puzzles presented to the reader. Yes, it’s also a war book, with descriptions of the many horrible things that happen to soldiers in war. Yet these war scenes are written in such a sly, upbeat way, that the reader just passes over the horrors with only the slightest ill feeling. After all, we know, the hero will survive, and that’s what counts. The structure of this book is the family saga. There are two intertwined families, each of which goes through

World War II, and each of which fights business battles in the contemporary high-tech world. (The intervening 55 years are glossed over.) A central theme, as the title suggests, is cryptography, and puzzles in general.

**The Waterhouse family:** One of the U.S. heroes, in World War II, was a world-class cryptanalyst, who worked in the group that broke both the German (for example, the Enigma) and the Japanese codes, without the Germans or the Japanese realizing it. This group made a major but at-that-time secret contribution to British and U.S. efforts in WWII. Waterhouse’s grandson is

involved in modern use of cryptography to try and keep governments' hands off the worldwide communication networks, thus trying to preserve privacy for both the very wealthy and the average man.

**The Shaftoe family:** The parallel U.S. hero in WWII was a very clever sergeant, who was significantly personally involved in keeping both the Germans and the Japanese from knowing that their codes had been broken, even though he himself had no idea what he was supposed to be doing (it was secret, remember). His son runs the company that is laying part of the cable for the great data haven (called the Crypt, located on an island on the western side of the Pacific Ocean) through which enormous quantities of encrypted data will flow to and from the whole world. The Crypt will be a boon to money-launderers, drug smugglers, big businesses, crooked banks (are there any other kinds??), and pornographers, as well as simple people who just don't want anyone looking over their private communications.

And there is a third family: **The Goto family:** We see personally only the WWI figure: Goto Dengo, a tough Japanese from a mining family on Hokkaido who struggles to survive the war, realizing long before others do that the Japanese have lost. We only see his descendents in 1999 in the form of a company called Goto Engineering.

The book jumps back and forth between WWII and 1999 (which is how we know our heroes' families will survive – at least until 1999), and keeps our interest almost always. Shaftoe meets both Waterhouse and Goto, in WWII, at various times and places. A Waterhouse descendent meets Shaftoe descendents and also Goto Dengo himself in 1999. The world is a big place. The chances of these meetings taking place are vanishingly small. The fact that they do take place, in this novel, gives it much of its realism,

since, as the saying goes, "it's a small world".

**Style:** The following is Stephenson's description of a sunset:

"The sun has made a long, skidding crash-landing along the Malay Peninsula a few hundred kilometers west, breaking open and spilling its thermonuclear fuel over about half of the horizon, trailing out a wall of salmon and magenta clouds that have blown a gash all the way through the shell of the atmosphere and erupted into space." (p. 717)

I think there are few writers that would be capable of writing such a description of a sunset, and fewer still that would want to, and even fewer readers that would want to read such a description. If you think about it word by word, it is quite an impressive sunset, but is that one sentence worth that much effort? Couldn't the author have said the same thing in several shorter, clearer pieces? In which case the reader might immediately have known what he was trying to say? We get this kind of writing here frequently.

*Cryptonomicon* was not a page-turner for me. It's too dense. There are too many explanations of complex ideas (both past and present), and too many things happening that are hard to understand. I couldn't read more than an hour or two at a time, and then I had to put it down for a few days. Since it's over 900 pages, it took me months to read. But I really liked it. I suggest that it's for any computer programmer who likes popular science and maybe science fiction too (that's me). It's also good for any who are willing to work their way through some slow reading parts, which are nevertheless well worth reading because of the complex puzzles presented. The story is quite gripping, and the characters are *weird people* (that's me). Highly recommended to the right people.

Other books by Neal Stephenson: *Snow Crash* (1992) was reviewed in *CyberCozen*, September 1999, by Aharon Sheer, and in June 2000 by Gal Haimovich. 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. All are recommended reading.

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***The Stardroppers* by John Brunner (1972), 144 pages.**

This starts off as one of the most interesting books I've ever read. As I read, I kept thinking, "This is wonderful. How come I never heard of this book?" Unfortunately the ending is so utopian, and so silly, that I realized why. The idea is that someone has discovered a simple device that picks up alien messages. An earpiece, an amplifier, a magnet on a brass slide (for tuning), and an ultra-hard vacuum in an aluminum box. No physicist can explain how it works. The public has named them "stardroppers", for it appears that they eavesdrop on the stars. They are addictive. As people listen to the sounds that their box produces, tuning it until they get something which seems to mean something to them, they become more and more fascinated. They listen for hours, until they stop from exhaustion. Some lose weight, stop working, and become disconnected from normal activities. Others continue a normal life, but use this as their exclusive recreational activity. Groups of enthusiasts, even communes, form. Each brand of stardropper is different. Each person understands something different from what he hears. Each finds a different band on his stardropper that speaks to him. It is as if the listener is tuned into some kind of cosmic consciousness, so alien that he cannot understand a word, yet he is convinced that he will find meaning in it.

How does government respond to this new invention? With fear and worry. Could it be a weapon? Could those who succeed in communicating with aliens become superpowerful? Or is it just some kind of hypnotic device, taking over people's minds and preventing them from functioning normally? Research is going on everywhere, top-secret agencies investigating in parallel with commercial manufacturers.

The hero is a highly trained secret agent of an American outfit whose job is to maintain peace in the world. They meddle in conflicts all over the world (including the continuing Arab-Israeli conflict), trying to prevent any kind of major war from breaking out. This new device has them very worried!

I'm going to tell you how it ends, because I doubt if you will ever read it. From a fascinating psychological sociological thriller it turns into a real disappointment. Right near the end of the book we find out that the stardroppers

provide the secret to teleportation. Only young people are capable of understanding, and reacting fast enough to that understanding, to survive it. For, when you teleport, you jump to a standard point in space in earth's orbit, and then jump back to another point on earth with the same gravitational characteristics. If you stay at that point in outer space too long – you die. There's no oxygen to breathe, and it's freezing cold. How can the observer who sees the stardropper disappear tell what has happened? If there is a loud implosion - the vacuum from outer space has replaced the person who has teleported, and he didn't survive. If the stardropper disappears silently, that means that the air from his final destination has replaced his body from his starting point, and he got there. Where you go may be another planet. If the atmosphere there is safe, you may have a meeting with aliens who have long ago mastered this mental technology. For the stardropper is only a learning device. Once you have learned, you can go any place that has similar gravitational characteristics, instantly, independently. Experienced travelers wear a diving suit with an oxygen tank so they can visit airless places.

What a marvelous idea. But what does Brunner do with it? Well, it seems that his young travelers are all idealistic utopian peace lovers. There is not a bad person in the lot. And they want to prevent war. So off they go, all over the world, disassembling atomic, biological and chemical weapons, in hidden silos and in underwater submarines. Afraid that the world powers will start a war to prevent other world powers from controlling this weapon, the young people guarantee that the world will forever be a peaceful place. No more war.

A nice dream, but when a person can jump from his bedroom to yours instantaneously, why should we believe that anyone who can do this has only peaceful acts in mind? If I can jump into your weapons room and take apart your a-bomb, why can't I just pick it up and take it with me and drop it on Tel Aviv? Does it make sense that this power will go only to those who love all of mankind, and have no enemies?

Brunner takes a wonderful idea and sticks it into a silly dream, and then stops. No more to say.

**The Israeli Society for Science Fiction and Fantasy**