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המפגש יתקיים בבית-אריאלה מרכז תרבות, שד' שאול המלך 25, תל-אביב, ביום ראשון 30.6.2002, בשעה 20:00, הכניסה חופשית

הנושא: שובו של המלך -- לעתים די בגירוד קל בציפוי של יצירות פנטזיה ומדע בדיוני, ומתחתיו יבצבץ לו המלך ארתור מהמיתוסים של ימי הביניים. מה הקשר בין אותו מלך אגדתי ואביריו לבין יצירות מודרניות כמו מלחמת הכוכבים, מחזור כישור הזמן, מארג פיונבאר, ממלכת אמבר, הארי פוטר ועוד? המרצה: זהרה רון -- זהרה רון עורכת את כתב העת "מסע אחר", וחובבת נלהבת של מד"ב ופנטסיה עתיקה ומודרנית

A Nasty Debate about NASA

Introduction: Dr. Amnon Stupp, astrophysicist at Tel Aviv University, took offence at my anti-NASA remarks in the May issue of *CyberCozen*. I quoted with enthusiasm author Stephen Baxter as saying, in his novel *Time*, the following:

"NASA has kept complete control over space. But since 1970 NASA has produced paper, not spaceships. This was the agency, remember, which destroyed the Saturn V rather than allow it to launch cheap-and-cheerful Skylabs which would have threatened its bloated Space Station program.... NASA won its turf wars. We lost access to space." (p. 237)

In the following I bring Amnon's email comments alternating with my nasty replies:

Shalom Aharon,

I read *CyberCozen* with enjoyment, as always.

However, in your review of *Time* by Stephen Baxter you remark:

"Baxter does not spare us his hatred of NASA either (although here I can only agree with him)."

You quote Baxter as saying that "since 1970 NASA has produced paper, not spaceships".

NASA has made many mistakes in its plans and funding allocations. Some of these mistakes are clear in hindsight, some NASA was warned about in advance. However, to say that NASA did not produce spaceships is absurd. I would like to direct your attention to the following site, in which are listed space missions ending after 1989. Most of these satellites were also launched after 1989. "Space missions" here is distinct from Earth oriented missions, such as the Earth Observing System, which are listed separately. The site is:

<http://spacescience.nasa.gov/missions/index.htm>

For intelligent NASA bashing, you can check the NASAwatch site :

<http://www.nasawatch.com/>

Regards, Dr. Amnon Stupp

Amnon -

Thanks for your comments. It's just a question of terminology. When Baxter or I say "spaceships" we mean manned spaceships, like NASA sent to the Moon. NASA could send an un-manned ship to the Andromeda Galaxy, if it wanted, but I still wouldn't call it a spaceship.

Aharon

Shalom Aharon,

As you know many scientists are opposed to manned (I suppose we should really say "personned") missions, because they cost more, and do not bring as much information as, un-manned missions.

A prominent example is the space station. Scientists opposed it from the beginning, and some say in its latest most cut-down form it is scientifically useless. So the problem is the definition of what NASA should do. Should it produce science, or should it (also) put humans in space?

Amnon

Amnon -

If the British hadn't sent convicts to Australia I suppose it would never have been settled by Europeans.

If the British hadn't driven non-conformist Christian groups out of England I suppose that what is today the eastern United States would never have been settled by Europeans.

Maybe we need penal colonies on the Moon and the asteroids? We certainly can't depend on the scientists to support sending people there.

The crazy thing is that millions of people from all over the world WANT to go to these places -- despite all the difficulties and the dangers -- and it's the SCIENTISTS who are opposed. Gad awful....

Aharon

Two Reviews of the Film: *Star Wars II: The Attack of the Clones*

Reviewed by Ted Henderson:

To tell the truth, I was rather disappointed. I feel that the 20 years which have elapsed since the release of **Episodes IV, V, and VI** have somehow not benefited the franchise. It was special effects run wild with the inclusion of some humans. George Lucas appears to have become overly intrigued with digitized special effects, but he has done an amazing job with them what with continuous action of space ships in the background and visible through windows along with a digital Yoda rather than the puppet used in the previous pictures.

Overall, the plot was impenetrable, and the acting was flat and stilted. The two principal actors cannot act at all. They are Natalie Portman who plays Senator Padme Amidala (Princess Amidala in **Episode I**) and Hayden Christensen who plays Anakin Skywalker. The latter began to show flashes of a dark character prophesying his apparent change in **Episode III**, as yet untitled and to be released in 2005, to the evil Darth Vader. Along with this foresight, there were some other nice continuity aspects relating to **Episode IV**.

Among the nonhumans were the droids R2D2 and C3PO. They are sometimes

more interesting than the human characters. Also in this Episode from **Episode I** was Jar Jar Binks. Fortunately he had a much smaller part. This time he was a member of the Senate, although I can't imagine how he could get elected to such an august body.

I had probably made a mistake by viewing my tape of **Episode IV** in the week prior to seeing the current version. The newer one lacks the charm and innocence of the earlier film.

In the *Los Angeles TIMES*, there was a critique in which the reviewer states that Lucas was trying to make a parody and a political comment on our current times, and that he had purposefully chosen the flat and stilted dialogue of soap operas and romance novels as a satirical device. Perhaps this is so, but I don't think the average viewer goes to this movie looking for political comment.

The *TIMES* writer also stated that the Jar Jar character is supposed to be gay. However, like many viewers of **Episode I**, I took him to be parodying African-Americans which also seemed to be the case here.

Having said all this, one should still go to see the picture just for the experience and because it is part of the *Star Wars* Saga.

Reviewed by Aharon Sheer

Lots of noise, lots of battles. Awful acting. Infantile plot. There is a sexy young woman hero (supposedly a *Senator*, but she doesn't seem smart enough to even be a Knesset member), and a sexy young man, both chosen for their good looks, and having little else to recommend them. What we wouldn't give for a couple of seasoned actors like Alec Guinness and Harrison Ford (who even as a sexy young man, could *act*)! Even Princess Leia

and Luke Skywalker of the original *Star Wars* movie seem mature by comparison. The makers of this film have become so enamored of their special effects that they have forgotten that there are other requirements for a film. Still, it is better than Part I. The effects are better – not so flat and two-dimensional. The background noises and music are more convincing. What both Part I and Part II are missing are the wonderful sense of

menace and tension that Part IV (the first filmed, of course) had – and the humor too. Ah, well.

Let's hope Part III is better.

Book Review by Clara Rimon

bellwether by Connie Willis (1996), 247 pages.

I enjoyed this book immensely. Not that I could quite understand all the science – chaos theory and all that. But when the sheep entered the picture, I was delighted. I didn't know the meaning of the word "bellwether", which is the title, before I read the book. I couldn't identify the word, and playing my "association" game, I came up with "classic novel of rural England" or "something to do with the church". HA! So it was very instructive. And, of course, the research into fads, as exemplified in the introduction to each chapter, was thoroughly fascinating. **Dictionary Note:** A "bellwether" is a castrated male sheep, with a bell hanging from its neck. The bellwether is supposed to lead the flock, which is its connection with fads. **Note:** *bellwether* was also reviewed in *CyberCozen* by Aharon Sheer in July 1998.

Book Reviews by Aharon Sheer

The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay by Michael Chabon (2000), 636 pages.

Recommended by Ofer Rosenzweig.
This is not a science fiction book, but the heroes all read science fiction. This is not a fantasy book, but the Golem of Prague is one of its characters. Magic is also an important feature, but in this case it is stage magic, the kind that uses sleight of hand to perform miracles. Also, it is a book about the writers of comic books. It's a parallel history, a world like ours, but in which two young Jews in New York in 1939 create a comic strip, *The Escapist*, which becomes one of the most popular in America. One of the two young men, Josef Kavalier, is a refugee from Prague Czechoslovakia. After it had been conquered by the Nazis, his country introduced steadily increasing mistreatment of its previously always equal Jewish citizens. The Kavalier family, thoroughly assimilated and successful Jews, the father an endocrinologist, the mother a psychiatrist, one grandfather an opera singer, sold everything they had in order to provide their eldest son Josef with the necessary papers to escape the Nazi occupation and get to America. In New York they had relatives; Josef had a cousin there, Sam Clayman. Josef's dream on reaching America was to raise enough money to buy his family's freedom, especially that of his 13 year old brother. With his cousin Sam (who called himself Sam Clay) doing the writing, and Josef (Joe Kavalier) drawing the color covers, they began producing comic strips, and were fabulously successful at it.

Their comics were anti-Nazi – that was a principle that Joe established. All of their superheroes fight the Nazis, with great success. However, getting people out of Nazi controlled Czechoslovakia is not as simple as beating the Nazis in a comic book.

I found this book fascinating. The author has loaded it down with details about life in America from 1939 to 1954, which is not too strange to me, as I was born in 1936 in America and finished high school there in 1954. Although I never lived in New York, this is a world which rings a bell with me. The writing is dense – often too dense – as the author loads an occasional long paragraph down with details about life in those days, which he himself never experienced, having been born in 1963. Still, it's almost believable. One part of the book takes place in Antarctica. Poor Joe, having enlisted in the U.S. Army in order to bomb the hell out of the Germans for what they did to the Jews in Europe, is sent to Antarctica by the American Army. This too rings a bell, since I not long ago I read Kim Stanley Robinson's book *Antarctica* (see review below).

All kinds of crazy, incomprehensible things happen in this book. The people are weird, believable people, mixed-up and confused just like real people such as me and my friends. The story keeps moving in twists and turns that astound, horrify, move, depress, anger, sadden and delight the reader. Not sf, not fantasy, not history, but – I liked it.

Antarctica by Kim Stanley Robinson (1998), 653 pages.

Robinson is the author of the Nebula and Hugo award-winning Mars trilogy, *Red Mars*, *Green Mars*, and *Blue Mars*. The Mars Trilogy described the settlement and terraforming of Mars in the next hundreds of years. The first book, *Red Mars*, was one of the best books I've ever read. This book is an attempt to describe the state of settlement, exploration, research and tourism in Antarctica twenty or thirty years from now. Intensely detailed, with some very convincing characters, it is nevertheless nowhere near as interesting as *Red Mars*. Let's face it, Mars has a romance to it which Antarctica doesn't have. Robinson has said that had he visited Antarctica before he wrote *Red Mars*, he would have emphasized the dangers of the cold on Mars much more strongly. My feeling is that Mars will be vastly more difficult to settle than Antarctica has been, while Antarctica has and will be enormously difficult. Of course the big difference with Antarctica is the storms. Having almost no atmosphere, Mars doesn't have much in the way of weather. Even with the expected future vastly improved technology of protection against the cold, hardly anybody remains in Antarctica during the winter. It's just too difficult.

The constant background of this book is the original explorers. Their tale is the thread binding this book. Every place they went still has the remains today of the things those explorers used more than a 100 years ago. In Antarctica things

don't wash away or deteriorate the way they do further north. The cold aridity is a great preservative. One of the themes of this book is following the footsteps of Amundsen, Scott, Shackleton, who, with primitive equipment, traveled over completely unknown terrain. Current day explorers have GPS and satellite photos constantly available. Today travelers know where they are and where they are going.

The book follows various characters to give us a flavor of future life there. A simple but highly intelligent manual laborer attracted by the romance of Antarctica but stuck doing a lot of very difficult and repetitive work. A tour guide ("Follow in the Footsteps of Amundsen"), a mountaineer, with her crew of tourists looking to do things the hard way. A Chinese philosopher traveler, "a kind of Chinese Walt Whitman", whose every sight and comment is recorded and sent off to China. Geologists trying to find out how Antarctica has changed in the last millions of years. A senator's aide, trying to help his senator decide on laws for the future protection of Antarctica despite possible development (is there oil under that ice?). Each character is well done, but *there is so much detail*. Did I really want to know that much about Antarctica?

If you are fascinated by detailed travel books, this will be a great book for you. For me, it's too long.

Deepsix by Jack McDevitt (2001), 432 pages.

Recommended by Russell Letson of LOCUS as one of the six best sf novels of 2001. The novel takes place in the same future (200 years from now) as McDevitt's novel *Engines of God* (1994). Like *Engines of God* it is a tale of future archeology, the study of lost ancient alien civilizations that left ruins on other planets. However, *Deepsix* contains much more. It is a disaster novel. "Deepsix", the earth-like planet whose ruins are being studied, is about to be smashed by a Jupiter-sized planet thrown out half a billion years ago by another star. The visit to Deepsix described in this book was made to observe the physical effects of this impending collision, to learn as much as can be learned from this massive and extremely rare interstellar event. So there are discussions of how the planet will break up as the massive planet approaches on its collision course. The visit to the planet reveals ruins of a lost civilization whose existence had not previously been known. As a result a small group

goes down to the planet to study as much of the ruins as possible in the few weeks remaining before the collision. The expedition runs into trouble, so we have a description of a trek across the planet by a group of people who face hostile intelligent alien animals (and plants) while trying to walk from one place to another. The ruins on the planet are those of aliens whose level of civilization is about our Middle Ages. They built towers (including an astronomical observatory) and towns, had libraries and religious buildings. But their civilization collapsed three thousand years before when a cosmic dust cloud, passing through their planetary system, reduced the available sunlight so much that today most of the planet is covered by year-long snow and ice. Vegetation exists only in a narrow belt along the equator, and only there are herds of animals visible from space. Almost all of the signs of the lost civilization are covered by snow. The tower was found only because it sticks up above the snow.

The cities can only be observed by scanning from space as they are completely covered by snow. There are almost no visible remains on the equator. Yet there is still another mystery. Floating in space, not far from the planet, is a huge alien artifact made of a material lighter and stronger than anything known to the humans.

Obviously this artifact cannot be the product of the low-technology civilization on the planet. Who put it there? What was it for? As a disaster novel, the book is filled with close calls, losses, personal battles, struggles, and surprises. There is really too much – but then the author has 432 pages to do it all in. Pretty good.

Here are a few quotes from our future. They sound a little bit too much like today:

From a future news broadcast:

“Separatists in Wyoming had gone on another shooting spree, and another round of violence had broken out in Jerusalem.” p. 32

Popular future author Gregory MacAllister, one of the unexpected heroes of this novel, quoted from one of his essays (in his book **Love and Chocolate**):

“Put men and women in the same room and everyone’s IQ drops thirty-six points. Psychologists have recorded it, tests have shown it, studies leave no doubt. Passion doth make fools of us all.” p. 237

Thoughts of a spaceship pilot about her future:

“She could end up talking to management groups for eight thousand a throw. Maybe hire a ghostwriter to do her memoirs. That wasn’t bad. Her old friend Janet Allegri had recently published *her* account of the Omega mission, *The Engines of God*, and had made very good money.” p. 250

Deepsix’s predecessor *Engines of God* was reviewed in *CyberCozen* October 1998 (in Hebrew, by Gal Haimovich), December 1998 (in English, by Aharon Sheer), and January 1999 (in English, by Avi Chami).

Quote of the Month:

“Out on the fringes of scientific thought are questions that are big enough to interest almost everybody, but small enough for there to be a chance of answering them reasonably accurately. They are questions like ‘How did the universe begin?’ and ‘How will it end?’ (‘What happens in between?’ is quite a different matter.) Let us acknowledge, right up front, that the current answers to such questions depend on various questionable assumptions. Previous generations have been absolutely convinced that their scientific theories were well-nigh perfect, only for it to turn out that they had missed the point entirely. Why should it be any different for our generation? Beware of scientific fundamentalists who try to tell you everything is pretty much worked out, and only a few routine details are left to do. It is just when the majority of scientists believe such things that the next revolution in our world-view creeps into being, its feeble birth-squeaks all but drowned out by the earsplitting roar of orthodoxy.”

From *The Science of Discworld* by Terry Pratchett, Ian Stewart and Jack Cohen, p. 50

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