



Science-Fiction Fanzine

Vol. XV, No. 10; October, 2003

Letter to the Editor

Shalom Aharon,

As usual I enjoyed reading *CyberCozen* (September 2003), and I would also like to respond to the quote you had from *The Science of Discworld* (by Terry Pratchett, Ian Stewart and Jack Cohen). I would like to say that carbon sequestration by forests is a subject about which much is still unknown. There is much on-going research around the world investigating how much CO₂ forests use, some of which is also being done in Israel in Yatir forest, by Dan Yakir of the Weizmann Institute. I understand that the authors take the long term view, in which newly growing trees take CO₂ from the atmosphere and use the carbon to build their structure, but a "steady state" forest has zero net use of carbon. However, there is long term sequestration of carbon by forests, for example, when dead trees are buried in the ground and so their carbon is not released back into the atmosphere. I also do not understand the reference to asphalt as saving carbon. Extracting the asphalt and using it burns fuel and releases CO₂ into the atmosphere. Perhaps the authors assume that the alternative to using the asphalt to pave roads is to burn this by-product of the oil industry, and in this case using it does prevent carbon from being added into the atmosphere.

Second, *Haaretz* Book Supplement of 1 October published a review of *The Golden Compass* by David Pullman in Hebrew. As you remember, I wrote such a review for *CyberCozen* of February 2003. Also, I saw a Hebrew translation of one of Dianna Wynn Jones' *Crestomanci* books, which Sara reviewed for *CyberCozen* in January 2003. So, it seems that *CyberCozen* reviews, unlike *Haaretz* Book Supplement reviews, predict events, and not lag them -- as is fitting for an S.F. publication.

Regards, **Amnon Stupp**

Amnon -

I thought that in Cohen and Stewart's reference to asphalt they were trying to be funny. I can well imagine that just the paving of the road with asphalt releases noxious substances to the atmosphere. And of course storing carbon as books in libraries is little more long term than planting trees. Eventually the books will rot and release their CO₂, just as the trees do. But I must say Cohen and Stewart's style is entertaining, and I think it's good that they shake up so many people's "Common Wisdom" which is so often wrong.

Aharon

For Comments: POB 84, Rehovot 76108. Email: asheer@netvision.net.il. Tel: Aharon Sheer 08-947-1225

Editor: Aharon Sheer. 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. For free email delivery ask asheer@netvision.net.il (XP Word format, or RTF format).

Copyright © 2003.

All rights reserved to specified authors and artists.

כל הזכויות שמורות למחברים וליוצרים, כפי שצוינו.

“Got Potassium?” Doron Calo reviews the book

***Destiny’s Road* by Larry Niven (1997), 438 pages.**

Even though the book is probably not one of Niven’s all-time classics, *Destiny’s Road* as a whole is a captivating read. Niven does in this book what he does best: creates a strange new world for human colonists to find and explore. Only this time, some part of the mystery is man-made. The story follows Jemmy Bloocheer, a teen from Spiral Town, in his life-long search for a landing craft gone missing some 250 years before. The craft, called *Cavorite*, is one of two such landing craft that brought settlers to the Crab peninsula on the planet Destiny, a short while before a mutiny on board the settler ship Argos left the colonists marooned on the planet. While the other lander stayed behind to become a base of operations which later evolved into Spiral Town, *Cavorite* began a journey towards an unknown destination, during which it burned a Road out of molten rock across the continent using its engine’s flame. *Cavorite* never returned to Spiral Town for reasons no one in particular is very hot on finding out, nobody except Jemmy.

An unfortunate accident sets him on the Road to avoid being accused of murdering a merchant of a Caravan that was in town. The merchants possess absolute power over the inhabitants of the Crab peninsula because of the latter’s dependence upon a kind of grain which is essential for their diet, and which can only be obtained from a Caravan. For fear for his life and for his family’s fate, Jemmy embarks upon a journey which takes him across the continent and across the veil of mystery and legend which kept his people from even wondering what lies beyond the final curve of the road, beyond the town’s edge. During that journey, each time he hides behind another name, chosen either by him or by circumstance, it’s as if he’s living another life, a

different version of himself. As he gets more skillful at his chosen profession – cooking! – he realizes a simple, courageous plan to bring salvation to his people’s unknowing plight.

In this novel, Niven builds yet again a beautifully detailed world, populated with a variety of communities – human as well as alien – each having to face its different challenges. With dashes of ecology and biology thrown in for good measure, and some pretty neat ideas in those as well as other fields (nanotechnology for instance), the story feels real and – for me at least – is also quite touching. Not a mind-boggling feat of the imagination, yet it’s effective in its attempt to describe how a curious and resourceful person can be driven by desperation and a strong survival instinct to eventually break free of the limitations his world has set for him. Jemmy does all that, and at the end of the Road, many years after his departure, he does not forget the commitments he made to his home and to his people nor the person that he was back when his journey had begun.

I must comment on what Aharon Sheer said about Niven’s scientific error in his review of *Destiny’s Road* in the July 2003 *CyberCozen* : I personally think it’s intentional. It was pretty clear to me that lack of potassium harms the body in a way quite different from what the book describes, and I can hardly believe that Niven would make such a gross mistake. The exact nature of the element that is crucial to intelligent life and yet isn’t available to the locals on the Crab isn’t important; the way the settlers overcame this problem is the main issue here. I know Aharon doesn’t regard this as a major defect in the novel. From what I read in his review I found that he liked it too. He just didn’t get so carried away by it the way I did, I guess....

Film Review by Aharon Sheer: *Solaris* (2002), 99 minutes

This is an American remake of the classic Stanislaw Lem novel *Solaris* (1961), first filmed by Russian director Tarkovsky in 1971. The producer is James Cameron (*Titanic*) and director is Steven Soderbergh (*Traffic*). Actor George Clooney plays the hero. When a group decides to (re)make a movie of a classic book, they have to decide whether they are going to present the message of the original book, or a message of their own, or perhaps a message directly contradicting the message of the original book. Examples are *Blade Runner* (1982 - a message of its own), *War*

of the Worlds (1953 - the message of the original book), or *The Puppet Masters* (1994 - a message directly in contradiction to the message of the original book). This movie version of *Solaris* has chosen to downplay the message of the original book, and present a message of its own.

Stanislaw Lem’s serious science fiction presents the point of view that when we go out into space and encounter the “alien”, we will not be able to understand it. Lem’s aliens are not charming interstellar traders going from planet to planet with their wares, nor are they war-

mongering Mongol types who just want to conquer. Lem's aliens are simply *alien*, incomprehensible. In *Solaris* the alien is an entire planet, covered by a non-water ocean. In the book, it seems that the planet tries to communicate with human visitors in an orbiting space station both by constructing figures and objects in the ocean, which have clearly been derived from the minds of the visitors, and, more frighteningly, what appear to be actual known people who walk and talk in the space station, and speak directly to people. In this movie they have deemphasized the ocean, which is barely active in any figurative way, and keep mainly the recreated people who visit the space station. But they have also deemphasized the alien. Instead they have placed their emphasis on a love affair.

The hero is a psychologist who has been sent to the space station to help the people there deal with some unspoken horrors. Why have several people on the station committed suicide? When he gets there he soon understands why, when his wife – who had committed suicide years before – appears beside him in his room. His first reaction is horror. But gradually he sees it as a chance to start life again – to try and correct the errors he and his wife made the first time. So this film emphasizes the *love affair*. The *alien* is put off to the side. It is incomprehensible, but the movie also shows us no attempt to comprehend it.

My psychologist friend Prof. Shlomo Kravetz points out that a major message of Lem's in the book *Solaris* is the question of how we know what is real and what is imaginary. Insane people may see and hear things which seem to be

real, but which are not. In some kinds of insanity, the person is aware that his visions are not real, but in other kinds, the person is not aware, he has no insight into his situation. The book discusses this question at length, which is one reason why psychologist Shlomo liked it so much. Sadly, on the DVD the director explains that he filmed these extensive discussions of reality, but then *edited them out of the movie!* The director felt that having such discussions in the film would make viewers think they were watching a science fiction film from the 1960s. He wanted viewers to know that this is a 2001 film. Boy is that stupid! Let's remove all intelligent discussion from our films in the new millennium!

The movie is very slow, which may be offensive to many people. The background music when on the space station is minimalistic – annoying but not interesting; this music also will be offensive to many viewers. To my mind the scenes on the space station, and the people on the space station, are very well done. Particularly the actor who plays scientist Stone (Jeremy Davies) is superb as one of the people who have been driven half crazy by the events on the space station. The space station itself is very convincing – cold and mechanical, its innards displayed to all. Visually I liked the movie very much. The frequent flashbacks to earth were less convincing – they were part of an attempt to justify the love affair. Over all this movie has to be seen for itself – not so much as a movie version of *Solaris* but for itself. In that respect, it is pretty good.

The movie is rated PG-13 for “sexuality / nudity, brief language and thematic elements.”

Israeli SF in Russian: Is There Such a Thing? (Part I)

By Daniel Kluger

Talking about Russian sf in Israel, one immediately encounters the problem of definition. Is it Russian sf written in Israel or Israeli sf written in Russian? It seems that the national identity of sf, as of any other kind of literature, is determined by its language rather than the author's place of residence. For example, the fact that Norman Spinrad has lived in Paris for the last twenty years does not make him a French, rather than an American, writer.

However, Israeli sf written in Russian is a special case. It should rather be regarded as part of contemporary Jewish literature since both its themes and its authors' worldview differ from the ethos of specifically *Russian* literature.

There is nothing strikingly new about such a definition, since until World War II practically destroyed the Jewish culture of Eastern Europe, multilingual Jewish literature had existed as an international cultural phenomenon. Russian literature in Israel, including its sf part, is a Jewish literature written in the Russian language. And this is how both readers and publishers in Russia itself normally consider it. Neither Pesach

Amnuel's nor Leonid Resnick's books (both are Israeli authors writing in Russian) are seen as belonging to the indigenous sf scene by the Russian audiences but are rather regarded as specifically Jewish productions. In this context, confusingly enough, Israeli literature is perceived as the equivalent of Jewish literature, even though this is hardly a common perception in Israel itself.

It so happens that Israel in fact possesses a fairly large community of Russian-speaking authors working primarily in sf and related genres. These authors include Pesach Amnuel, Zeev Bar-Sella, Lev Vershinin, Elana Gomel, Maya Kaganski, Daniel Kluger, Alexander Rybalka, Keren Pevzner and others. Science fiction stories, serialized novels, and articles about sf appear regularly in Russian-language periodicals. For a short time, around six months, there was even an attempt to publish a magazine dedicated to Russian-Israeli sf called *Miry* [*Worlds*], which folded for financial reasons. Rarely and with difficulty (because of the small size of the market) new books are also being published. The generic variety of this output is quite amazing. The whole generic spectrum of fantastic literature is covered in the works of Russian-Israeli writers: hard sf, fantasy, horror, and the generic hybrids of sf and mystery, sf and the thriller. Every form of prose writing, novel, novella, short story, and essay, is represented. We would argue that a whole library could be stocked with Russian-language sf works written in Israel and this library would be interesting, varied, and comprise highly professional literary texts.

Now we want to briefly consider specific authors and their works. Among the most interesting sf texts to appear recently is Pesach Amnuel's novel *The People of the Code*, first published in the magazine *Miry* and then issued in book form. Characteristically, it has received an award for the best *foreign* sf novel at one of the Russian sf conventions, "Fancon". *The People of the Code* is a classic example of serious philosophical sf. Critic and writer Rafail Nudelman claims the novel should be seen as the first specifically *Jewish* sf novel, since its core is a unique imaginative treatment of Jewish history. Precisely this aspect of the novel turned out to be a barrier to its reception in Russia: despite flattering reviews and literary awards, to date *The People of the Code* (along with a majority of Russian-Israeli sf) has not been issued by a Russian press. Publishers fear that *The People of the Code* is too "Jewish" a book for the Russian audience. Nevertheless, the author's new novel, *The Triple Universe* is soon to be published in Russia.

Until recently, the main publishing venue for Russian-Israeli sf writers was the Israeli Russian language newspaper *Vesti* [*News*] and its literary supplement "Okna" ["Windows"]. The credit goes to the editor of the supplement, Zeev Bar-Sella, an sf aficionado who has published critical essays on the subject. Apart from the abovementioned novel by Amnuel, the "Okna" supplement showcased Leonid Resnick's sf thriller *The Last Jew*, an alternative history distinguished by fresh ideas and intricate plotting. Resnick is also the author of the first fantasy novella based on the traditional Jewish legend of the thirty-eight righteous men who save the world, entitled *Death Angel with Trembling Hands*. The novella has also been published in the Russian magazine *Iskatel* [*The Searcher*].

However, if *The People of the Code* may be defined as the first major sf novel dealing with a Jewish problem, the first Jewish *fantasy* novel has been identified by critics as the 1999 *Millennium on Loan* jointly authored by Daniel Kluger and

Alexander Rybalka. This is an epic fantasy based on Jewish demonology rather than on Tolkienesque Celtic folklore. Both writers are well known to sf readers in Israel and Russia. Daniel Kluger's sf mysteries, such as *The Dybbuk Heist*, have been published in both countries, and so have been Rybalka's stories, comprising the cycle *The Chronicles of Valdez Duchy*. The latter has also authored novellas "The Guards of the Last Heaven", "The Prince of the Shining House", "Azazel" and others. Daniel Kluger has also cooperated with Elana Gomel who was born in the former Soviet Union but writes her fantasy stories in English.

Periodic appearance of new writers on the scene also testifies to the vitality of Russian-language sf in Israel. For example, Karen Pevzner, a mystery writer, has published a novel *The City of Winds*, an ironic fantasy with elements of parody. In this novel the forces of evil are opposed not by the famous legendary heroes but by their decidedly un-warlike girlfriends.

Equally impressive is critical output on the subject of sf. Noteworthy are the literary essays of Maya Kaganski and the articles and reviews of Elana Gomel, Zeev Bar-Sella and Rafail Nudelman.

Thus, a bird's eye view of Russian-language sf in Israel reveals a flourishing creative field. In just a few years since the great wave of immigration in the 1990s the joint sf output of the Russian speakers in Israel has comprised a dozen novels and novellas, hundreds (!) of short stories and a number of critical articles that have had lively response among the readers. However, there is a paradox in the reception of this literature among the Hebrew-speaking majority of the Israeli population who seem to be uninterested in the specifically *Jewish* problems that characterizes Russian-language sf. While the readers in Russia itself may find texts dealing with Jewish mysticism or the Holocaust unpalatable for a variety of cultural and historical reasons, it seems strange that the Hebrew audience evinces an equal rejection of this material, despite its being produced literally in their own neighborhood. Perhaps part of the problem is simply the language barrier, which of course may be overcome. But there might be deeper reasons, having to do not so much with the quality of the texts themselves as with the currents of Israeli culture, which in general exhibits a certain reluctance to come to terms with the history of the Diaspora.

And finally, an interesting sidelight on the general picture of sf in the Jewish state is provided by the fact that despite being the most technologically developed country in the Middle East, Israel is far from being the leader in the publication and consumption of fantastic literature. The Arabic countries take the lead. Egypt, for example, publishes around 200 hundred original sf titles per year, and many more translations. In Iran readers are treated to around 500 translations of American sf annually. Unexpectedly, an Arabic translation of Orwell's *1984* was published in Iraq, of all places. If we are to see interest in sf as one of the indicators of a country's technological advancement and social progress, the general picture is unexpected and hardly flattering to Israel.

Notes to the article:

1. The list of Israeli authors mentioned in this article is not complete. We must mention Pavel Shuvaev a.k.a. Nebrit, whose short stories were first published in the Ukraine, Michael Judson who published fantasy book *Stair to the Cabinet* in Israel in 2001, Alexander Svishev, and others.
 2. *Miry* [*Worlds*] was published in 1995-1996 (a total of 4 issues of 5 planned came out). The editors were Daniel Kluger, Pesach Amnuel, and Elana Gomel. *Miry* published works by Daniel Kluger, Pesakh Amnuel, Elana Gomel, Zeev Bar-Sella, Rafail Nudelman, Alexander Rybalka, Leonid Resnick, and others.
- Daniel Kluger's series on Israeli sf in Russian will be continued in following months.**