



Science-Fiction Fanzine

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The Israeli Society for Science Fiction and Fantasy

1. המפגש הבא בסדרת ההרצאות ע"ש עמוס גפן יתקיים באולם מס' 302 בבית-אריאלה מרכז תרבות, שד' שאול המלך 25, תל-אביב, ביום רביעי 28.4.2004 בשעה 20:00, הכניסה חופשית נושא ההרצאה: המחר של האתמול – מדע וטכנולוגיה בספרות האוטופית המודרנית באוטופיות מודרניות רבות משמשים המדע והטכנולוגיה אמצעי להשגת היעדים החברתיים, לאילוף העתיד ולשיפור פני העולם בכלל. בהרצאה נכיר את המושג "אוטופייניזם טכנולוגי" ונעיין במבחר יצירות מן הספרות האוטופית המודרנית הנותנות לו ביטוי. **המרצה: מרב כץ** מרב כץ היא דוקטורנטית בתכנית להיסטוריה ופילוסופיה של המדעים והטכנולוגיה באוניברסיטת בר-אילן, ומרצה במסגרות שונות.

2. There's a new convention (Bidyon) after Shavout, and it will concentrate on SF literature and SF writing. GoH is author Paul Kearney from Ireland. All details in here (in Hebrew): http://www.sf-f.org.il/story_612



כנס ספרות ספקולטיבית

האגודה הישראלית למדע בדיוני ולפנטסיה שמחה להכריז על כנס **בִּדְיוֹן! 2004** הכנס יתמקד בספרות מד"ב ופנטסיה, ויכלול הרצאות של סופרים, עורכים, מתרגמים ואנשי אקדמיה העוסקים בתחום, ביניהם גיל הראבן, נורית זרחי, ד"ר עמנואל לוטם, פרופ' נחמן בן יהודה וד"ר אילנה גומל.

אורח הכבוד של הכנס הוא הסופר האירי **פול קארני**, מחבר סדרת הפנטסיה המצליחה "ממלכות האל".

הכנס יתקיים ביום חמישי, 27/5/2004, באולם **מופת**, ברחוב הרצל 31 (פינת רחוב קריניצי) ברמת גן.

More information is available (in Hebrew) at the Society's site: <http://www.sf-f.org.il>

Short Book Reviews by Aharon Sheer

The Bones of God by Stephen Leigh (1986), 289 pages. Recommended by Shmuel Kahn. In this remarkable book, U.S. writer and musician Stephen Leigh (b. 1951) has created TWO future religions. One is an unlikely combination of the great monotheistic religions of Islam, Christianity and Judaism, named after its proposer, Simon ben Zakkai. This Zakkaiist religion, first founded in 2098, gradually takes over the world, in good Islamic fashion, converting the whole earth into one great theocracy by 2310. This religion preserves and maintains its power by conducting a continuous Inquisition against all who disagree, torturing them to get them to recant, and killing them if they do not recant. This religion is the perfect combination of Islam and Christianity, adopting the worst of each, but where is Judaism in it? None that I can see....

The second religion comes from an alien race, the Stekoni. The Stekoni have discovered a way to travel between the stars, but the travel is filled with strange visions, including visions of a new god, MolitarAb. Many who travel that way become convinced of the invincible, incomprehensible oneness of MolitarAb. Earth people, gifted by the alien Stekoni with the power of interstellar travel, begin to settle the stars. But some become influenced by their visions and begin to leave Zakkaiism for a belief in MolitarAb. In fact, ALL of the Stekoni long ago converted to a belief in the new god. What will happen to the humans?

So we have the basis for a mortal conflict between the all-powerful Zakkaiist theocracy, and the interstellar travelers who convert to the Stekoni religion.

And then we have the hero, Colin Fairwood, a starship pilot who has adopted MolitarAb and is given – or so he thinks – infinite powers by this god. And Colin becomes the center of this great conflict between humans and Stekoni, Zakkaiists and supporters of MolitarAb. Is Colin truly the Prophet of this religion?

The alien Stekoni are interesting. In personality they are much like humans, and thus part of the proof that their god MolitarAb created both humans and Stekoni. On the other hand, they have interesting physiological differences. Their males are unintelligent, and used only for breeding (and thus their god is a She). One of their most important senses is the sense of smell. They release pheromones all the time, thus revealing their true feelings about one another. They can also sense the pheromones that humans release, which gives them a better understanding of humans than humans have of them. But another problem – from the point of humans, the Stekoni STINK. They simply smell awful. When a few Stekoni are present with many humans, they are asked to sit in isolettes, transparent compartments which allow them to watch and communicate with humans without the humans having to smell them. But what happens when a human has to go among the Stekoni? For example, Primus Keller is a human with a high position among the believers in MolitarAb. Thus we have the following delightful quote:

“Even Primus Keller, on those rare occasions when he walked [among the Stekoni], would always first stopper his nostrils with plugs. The Stekoni would shake their heads sadly at that – why did he not put out eyes and puncture his eardrums as well? So stupid.” p. 148

This is a gripping and fascinating tale, a tale of conflicting philosophies and races. There are numerous undercurrents of treachery and hatred, incomprehension and simple faith. The story kept me reading and excited. But it is not a cheerful story. This tale of a religious war does not have too many happy parts.

The following quote is from Simon ben Zakkai himself, spoken at the first All-Faith Conference, Jerusalem, 2089. It could only have been spoken by an American (Stephen Leigh), although ben Zakkai is supposed to have been born in Syria!

“There are a thousand reasons humanity is moved to grandeur or degradation: sex, politics, even the latest ball game can serve. All of them – mundane and glorious – arouse a surprising degree of emotional response.

“One of the strongest of these reasons has been constant throughout human history: religion. People will fight for God, kill for God, love for God. Religion has been the most important single rationale for conflict since the first Neanderthal touted his Lightning Spirit over a Cro-Magnon’s Fire Goddess.

“It’s indeed a pity that we find it so hard to gather up all this pious energy, this righteous fervor, and apply that power to fostering harmony rather than discord. That’s all *I* wish to do, my friends. I want to make all religious people one with God. There’s not much difference between us – Jew, Christian, Moslem, whatever. We all spring from the same source, we espouse much the same moralities.” p. 82

A Rose for Armageddon by Hilbert Schenck (1982), 175 pages. Recommended by Shmuel Kahn. This strange but fascinating science fiction book is a near future thriller, taking place (mainly) in 1984. The basis is a science for studying the past that combines archeology, history, zoology, economics, etc.; the author calls it “morphological analysis”. Does such a science really exist? Yes! Here’s a quote about it by Tom Ritchey: “General Morphological analysis was developed by Fritz Zwicky - the Swiss-American astrophysicist and aerospace scientist based at the California Institute of Technology (CalTech) - as a method for structuring and investigating the total set of relationships contained in multi-dimensional, non-quantifiable, problem complexes (Zwicky 1966, 1969).” In this near future of 1984, the whole of society is collapsing, economically, ecologically, socially – things must have looked really bad to the author writing in 1982. (I can’t remember things looking *that* bad, then.) In addition we have an unrequited love story. Two university professors of morphological analysis – a man and a woman – have been working together for years. The man is very unhappily married, but would never leave his wife. The woman has loved the man since they were teenagers – but he’s never had the slightest interest in her. And now they are both age 64, nearing retirement, and the world is collapsing around them. The story centers around the morphological analysis of a small island, Hawkins Island, on the east coast of New England, which has been occupied by a succession of groups since Indian times. The purpose of the morphological study is to try to understand this microcosmic environment and its successive occupants in the hopes of understanding why societies change and perhaps apply this knowledge to improving the larger world. The history of Hawkins Island is interesting, among other things because one of the people who dominated its life was a very smart black man – Black Jonas -- who married a white woman from a wealthy family at a time when slaves were still being kept elsewhere in America. Black Jonas’ story is remarkable by itself. The author’s experience with the sea and with American history are important in this novel, as they were in his book, ***At The Eye of the Ocean*** (1981), reviewed in ***CyberCozen*** November 2003. The book ends with an happy surprise – an important part of the love story – but not one that I as a *science fiction* reader liked.

***Revelation Space* by Alastair Reynolds (2000), 545 pages.**

This book got some very good reviews. Sf author Stephen Baxter is quoted on the front cover as saying "The most stunning and original alien artifact in modern science fiction." I found it continually interesting, and the ending was certainly cheery. However, I must confess I did not care much for the characters. They are extremely hard-nosed, ruthless people, who have goals which drive them without regard for others. The author has a strong hard-sf orientation, but this is very far-future hard sf (500 hundred years in Earth's future). Future high-tech is a major interest in this novel, as some of the quotes below show, and was the part I liked best.

The two planets described in detail are barely hospitable for humans.

One is the planet, Resurgam, which has million year old archeological remains, of an apparently low-technology intelligent species. They were destroyed when their star sent out a plume of destructive energy, wiping out all life and making the planet unlivable on the surface. Humans are now trying to terraform it, which will destroy the ruins, over the objections of the lead archeologist. He's worried not only about losing the ruins, but also about the question of how the planet was destroyed. Could this have meaning for humans too? What caused this extinction? Could it happen again? Terraforming will destroy the evidence.

The other planet, Yellowstone, has a crater with a deep chasm inside of which people live:

"Yellowstone's atmosphere – a cold chaotic mix of nitrogen and methane, spiced with long-chain hydrocarbons – would have been instantly deadly. Fortunately the crater sheltered the city from the worst of the winds and liquid methane flash-floods, and the broth of hot gases belching from the chasm itself could be cracked for breathable air with relatively cheap and rugged atmospheric processing technology." p. 36-37

So Yellowstone's people seemed to enjoy the threat of living in a city built on the inside of this deep chasm. Tough people.

One group of heroes live and work on a "lighthugger", one of a group of space ships provided to humans in the past by an alien race called the Conjoiners which is no longer interested in providing more of them for humans. So these ships are very valuable.

The ships travel near the speed of light, with most of the people on the ship spending their time in deep sleep, coming awake only when they reach a planet for interstellar trading purposes – which is not often. These traders are inevitably disconnected from planetary lives, having only others of their trade as their companions. For example, their last visit to Yellowstone was 85 years ago. This poses a problem when they revisit a planetary system. Many things in the system may have changed since their last visit, so they cannot safely act on past information, but must scout for hostile changes.

The author points out an interesting feature of the "lighthugger" spaceships: they are streamlined, even though they never enter an atmosphere. The author explains:

"Space only approximated a vacuum at slow speeds. Up near lightspeed -- which was where these ships spent most of their time – it was like cutting through a howling gale of atmosphere. That was why they looked like daggers: conic hull tapering to a needle-sharp prow to punch the interstellar medium, with two Conjoiner engines braced at the back on spars like an ornate hilt. The ship was sheathed in ice..." p. 114

The lighthugger space ship is four kilometers long, and has 1050 levels. However, it has been attacked by some kind of plague which has destroyed the usefulness of much of the ship, and of some of the people on it. The same plague has attacked the planet Yellowstone, with similar awful effects. Where this plague came from, and why it cannot be overcome, and why it does not affect everything and everyone, was never clear to me. The plague only attacks systems which are capable of self-repair, but that includes people.

There are other aliens besides the Conjoiners mentioned in this book. For example, the Jugglers:

"They existed on a number of worlds, all of them dominated by single planet-sized oceans. The Jugglers were a biochemical consciousness distributed through each ocean, composed of trillions of co-acting micro-organisms, arranged into island-size clumps.... the Jugglers had the capacity to store and retrieve information, acting like a single, planet-wide neural net.... Humans swimming in the Juggler-infested ocean were able to enter rapport states with the

organism.... Swimmers made startling breakthroughs in mathematics, as if the ocean had enhanced their creative faculties.” p. 95-96

Spacesuits used by the heroes are very high-tech. You turn your back to the suit and ask it to suit you up.

“... the open suit shuffled towards her. She felt its gently insistent pressure against her spine and the backs of her legs, arms and head. In her peripheral vision she observed the wet-looking side-parts of the head fold around her, and then she felt the legs and arms of the suit meld around her limbs. The chest cavity sealed.... Later the suit would flood itself with gel-air to protect its occupant against the gee-loads of flight....” p. 313

These suits can actually go down from orbit into an atmosphere, protecting their occupant from the heat of reentry, and by transforming themselves temporarily into an aircraft, land on a planet. So much for the space shuttle.

They also have technology to read minds. I find this unlikely. However, the author is good at describing pseudo-science.

Here is part of the process of reading a woman’s memories:

“Over centuries, statistical models had studied patterns of memory storage in ten billion human minds, correlating structure against experience. Certain impressions tended to be reflected in similar neural structures – internal qualia – which were the functional blocks out of which more complex memories were forged. Those qualia were never the same from mind to mind, except in very rare cases, but neither were they encoded in radically different ways, since nature would never deviate far from the minimum-energy route to a particular solution.... Identify enough qualia structures, map enough hierarchical linkages between them, and then let his algorithms chew through them.... He could sift through her memories at leisure.” p. 384

There was a lot of far future pseudo-science in this book that I liked, and an interesting overall tale. However, I wouldn't want any of the heroes as my friends, which greatly reduced my enjoyment.

Recommended, if you like this kind of stuff.

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כל הזכויות שמורות למחברים וליוצרים, כפי שצוינו.

Quote of the Month:

“A project known as Biosphere II attempted to sort out the basic oxygen/carbon transactions in the global ecosystem by setting up a ‘closed’ ecology – a system with no inputs, beyond sunlight, and no outputs whatsoever. In form it was like a gigantic futuristic garden center, with plants, insects, birds, mammals, and people living inside it. The idea was to keep the ecology working by choosing a design in which everything was recycled.

“The project quickly ran into trouble: in order to keep it running, it was necessary to keep adding oxygen. The investigators therefore assumed that somehow oxygen was being lost. This turned out to be true in a way, but for nowhere near as literal a reason....

“Eventually it turned out that the ‘missing’ oxygen wasn’t escaping from the building: it was being turned into carbon dioxide. So why didn’t they see increased carbon dioxide levels? Because, unknown to anybody, carbon dioxide was being absorbed by the building’s concrete as it ‘cured’. Every architect knows that this process goes on for ten years or so after concrete has set, but this knowledge is irrelevant to architecture. The experimental ecologists knew nothing about it at all, because esoteric properties of poured concrete don’t normally feature in ecology courses, but to them the knowledge was vital.”

From *The Science of Discworld* by Terry Pratchett, Ian Stewart and Jack Cohen, p. 152