



Science-Fiction Fanzine

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The Israeli Society for Science Fiction and Fantasy

האגודה הישראלית למדע בדיוני ולפנטסיה, בשיתוף עם בית אריאלה מרכז תרבות, שמחה להזמין למפגש הבא בסדרת ההרצאות ע"ש עמוס גפן. המפגש יתקיים בבית-אריאלה מרכז תרבות, שד' שאול המלך 25, תל-אביב, ביום רביעי 29.12.2004 בשעה 20:00 הכניסה חופשית
נושא ההרצאה:

סיפורי "המרחב המוכר" של לארי ניבן כתרגיל לבניית יקום

סדרת "המרחב המוכר" של לארי ניבן היא אחת הסדרות הידועות והרחבות ביותר בספרות המדע הבדיוני. השיחה תתמקד בתהליכי בניית סדרה של סיפורים המתרחשים כולם במסגרת יחידה, בבעיות המתעוררות עקב כך ובדרכים לפתרון, ותעסוק גם בבעייתיות של "שיתוף עולמות" - הזמנת סופרים אחרים לצרף סיפורים משלהם לסדרה.

מרצה: עמנואל לוטם

ד"ר עמנואל לוטם הינו עורך ומתרגם, וכיהן כיו"ר הראשון של האגודה הישראלית למדע בדיוני ופנטסיה.

For further details see http://www.sf-f.org.il/story_674 (in Hebrew)

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

Short Book Reviews by Aharon Sheer

DON'T PANIC: The Official Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

Companion by Neil Gaiman (1988), 182 pages.

Although I liked all of the books by Douglas Adams, and the TV series too, this book contains more than I ever wanted to know about Adams (who was 6' 5" tall – 1.96 meters) and his various works. Among other things it includes the first story Adams ever published (at age 12) which is quite good – I couldn't do better, and I've tried. This book tells in great detail the details of the development of the original radio series (and all the other things Adams tried to do during the same period), and the books, and the TV series, and the computer games (and all the other things Adams tried to do during the same periods). Fascinating if you are greatly interested in such detail. There are interviews with everyone that Adams ever seriously worked with (including Adams himself; this is "Official" as it says in the title). I found it impossible to sit down and read this book from cover to cover at one sitting, or even at ten sittings, although I did read this book from cover to cover. To give you an idea of what you are not getting into if you read this book, here is the *best item* in the entire book (in my opinion):

"SLARTIBARTFAST

"Slartibartfast was actually a favorite character of mine in the first book, though I think I slightly misused that character in the third book. One thing I don't think I explained in the script book was that I was also teasing the typist, Geoffrey's secretary, because the character had actually been on stage for quite a long time before you know what his name is. I was teasing the typist because she'd be

typing out this long and extraordinary name which would be quite an effort to type and right at the beginning he says, 'My name is not important, and I'm not going to tell you what it is'. I was just being mean to Geoffrey's secretary." (p. 165)

Although the quote above uses the word "book" Adams is obviously referring to the radio show (maybe a radio script is called a "book" in professional language?), and the Geoffrey referred to is Geoffrey Perkins, the producer of the first radio series. At any rate, if this is the *best item* in the entire book, you can imagine what the rest of the book is like. Perfect for a teenage maniac lover of *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. (Author Neil Gaiman himself was barely out of his teens when he wrote this – he was born in 1960 – but he has since become quite famous in his own right.)

Expendable by James Alan Gardner (1997), 337 pages.

Gardner was discussed in an Author Review by Amnon Stupp in the January 2004 *CyberCozen*. I receive monthly catalogs from two different science fiction specialty book stores, one in the U.S. and one in the U.K., offering books by numerous different authors, and after publishing Amnon's review, each month I would look to see if one of these two book stores was offering anything by Gardner. Nope. Never. Gardner, who by 2002 had published at least five sf novels, was not listed as of interest by either of these two specialty bookshops. Nor is his name mentioned in the Clute and Nicholl's *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, which was published in 1995, by which time Gardner had already published numerous science fiction short stories, and had even won a couple of prizes for them. So finally I asked Amnon if I could borrow something by Gardner, and so this is a review of Gardner's first novel, *Expendable*. My first impression was that this was a sensibly humorous (black humor) sf novel. The humor is in the situation, and not in gag lines. And I liked that approach. The hero of this book is one of a group of space Explorers. Their job is to land on hostile planets. They make first contacts with alien cultures. They call themselves "Expendables". The Explorer heroine tells us:

"Upon graduation, Explorers were fitted with permanent throat transceivers that transmitted continuously on planet-down missions....

"Some of the transcripts I listened to ended abruptly. We called those transcripts 'Oh, Shits' because the Explorers often said, 'Oh shit,' just before their throat mikes went dead. You always wondered what they saw just before they stopped transmitting. You seldom found out." (p. 5)

For example,

"...A few hours before the Landing on Melaquin, Plebon sent me a message.... He was afraid he wouldn't come back.'

"Did he?'

"The party went no-comm in less than ten minutes.'

"That's what "expendable" means.'

"It was a phrase we Expendable Crew Members used among ourselves: *That's what Expendable means*. It was better than 'I'm sorry to hear that' or 'I understand your loss.' These were things people said to distance themselves. And no Explorer was distant enough." (p. 35)

Part of the background of this book is the "League of Peoples". These are superpowerful aliens that keep a close eye on anything happening on planets with intelligent life. As

soon as a planet develops interstellar transport technology that might bring its people into contact with peoples of other star systems, the League gets involved:

“The League of Peoples utterly forbade lethal weapons of any kind on board starships, and as far as anyone knew, the ban had never been broken. No one could say how the League did it....

“Certainly, the League seemed to pick up intentions clearly enough. After all, you can kill a person with almost anything, from laser drills to a plain old brick; but the League permitted such things to pass freely through their quarantine, because they weren’t intended as weapons. On the other hand, if you had murderous thoughts about strangling someone with your shoelace.... Well, if you if you had murderous thoughts at all, you’d never leave your home planet ever. Somehow, the League simply *knew*.

“Always.” (p. 40)

An example is an alien society known as the “striders” that twice – the first time by accident – caused the death of some human Explorers. It turns out that their mere physical contact with a human kills the human. The first time, said the League, it was an accident. The second time the aliens should have known better.

“Their entire governmental system was declared non-sentient: negligently careless. The whole damn race was grounded – barred from interstellar travel until they reorganized into a more conscientious society. A few of them tried to defy the ban ... and for the next few years, our fleet kept finding strider ghost ships drifting through space, every strider aboard killed the second they tried to leave their home star system. Not a mark on their bodies. Just dead. The League has no qualms against exterminating non-sentients to protect the rest of the galaxy.” (p. 60)

Or consider the following discussion about picking a landing place for the Explorers. The heroine recommends landing on the top of a cliff. Prope, the ship captain, argues with her:

“‘What if something unspeakable charges the party and knocks you off the cliff?’ Prope asked.

“‘If we see something unspeakable, I for one will *jump* off the cliff,’ I answered. ‘Our tightsuits will protect us from the brunt of the impact, and the long leap is a nice fast escape route.’

“Prope’s expression showed what she thought of people who would jump off a cliff rather than face something unspeakable; but she held her tongue.” (p. 78)

The above examples are intended to show the quality of humor in the book, and at this point in reading I was quite enthusiastic and anxious to read further. Unfortunately, it was all downhill from there. It went from the above black humor to just plain tragedy to travesty and to boredom. While there are some strange and remarkable ideas, I did not enjoy them and they certainly did not make me laugh.

The only thing I can say in the book’s favor is that it is the author’s first novel, and from the praise of Amnon Stupp for some of the later novels, I will nevertheless try at least one more (which Amnon has already lent me).

Two Books by Joshua Dann

Second Contact by J. D. Austin (2001), 199 pages.

J. D. Austin is the pseudonym for author Joshua Dann. Humor in sf is a rare commodity. This is a light, humorous book, and as such I enjoyed it. However, it is often difficult to know when the author is joking, and when he is just stupid. For example, the first line of the book starts, "Millions of years ago, when the Earth was primarily a primordial ooze..." Surely the author means "billions of years ago"? "Millions of years ago" there were primordial men walking around, and they were not sunk up to their necks in ooze.

At some point in our future, men of Earth have discovered a star which has a planet with intelligent life so close to Earth that a spaceship can be sent in a few weeks to visit it. The first contact with alien life starts with the Earth ship sending an intelligent communications package. This package is intended to teach the aliens about Earth life, and the English language, and introduce them to great Earth literature, such as Shakespeare's plays, and great Earth musicians, such as Frank Sinatra. This first contact ends with the spaceship from Earth being shot at, and fleeing back to Earth for advice. Most of the rest of book is devoted to the second visit to the planet. Here is an example of a typical paragraph:

"Everyone else crowded in at the portholes for their first look at an extraterrestrial space vehicle.... All had grown up on popular fiction and expected a darkly dramatic spacecraft with sharp, swept lines and aggressively pointed engine pods. But the Vidarean ship was a about exciting to look at as a Ford Taurus." p. 122

Now wait a minute! Are we supposed to believe that at some point in the future when the Earth can send a space ship to another star, people will still know what a Ford Taurus is? Is this humor, or just stupidity? On the next page we find this:

"The crew had not known what to expect, but the sight of two rather normal looking people was initially disappointing. They walked on two legs, had two regular arms, and had a head and body all very much in proportion. They were hardly lizardlike or grasshopperish, or even a skewed, bizarre version of humans. All they were was foreign rather than extraterrestrial..." p. 123

Oh, come on! *Babylon 5* had better aliens! It's true that these aliens have blue hair and green skin, but that just makes the similarities all the more absurd. They can even drink the same alcoholic beverages.

It turns out the planet is called Kivlan. They have no space program, and have never encountered beings from another planet. But the Kivlanians are talented, and using the communications package the first spaceship brought, many of them have learned English. This provides the following remarkable conversation:

"How did you learn our language so quickly?"

"It is a Kivlanian gift," he replied. "Early in our history we were made aware of the importance of communications – and the tragedy of miscommunication. Everyone on our planet speaks at least three or four languages." p. 127

Now come on! If the Kivlanians have never met any non-Kivlanians, how are they supposed to know that their facility for languages is a "gift"? Why should they think that in an interplanetary comparison their language ability would stand out? I can see a

Swiss gentleman on Earth saying to a visitor that learning several languages is a Swiss gift – comparing himself to mono-lingual Americans or Russians. But who do the Kivlanians have to compare themselves with? It's as if Earth people, coming on their first visit to an extraterrestrial planet, were to declare, "Playing games with balls is an Earth gift. All people on Earth play games with balls." How would the Earth people know whether people on other planets play ball games or not?

There a lot of other things I found puzzling in this book. Yes, it's humorous, yes it's silly, yes it kept up my interest (and my skepticism) from beginning to end. I guess I'd have to read other books by the same author to decide if everything he writes is so dumb.

Timeshare: Second Time Around by Joshua Dann (1998), 247 pages.

The Timeshare company has been set up to allow people to visit the past. The hero of this book has the job of making sure that such people do not make any serious mistakes, like killing their own grandfather. There is something charming about the idea of a person making a serious study of the past, and then going back to visit and see what it was really like. He has the advantage of knowing how things are really going to come out, so he can give discouraged people encouragement, if he likes. This book takes place in 1926, and the travelers meet many famous people of that time, including some of the biggest criminals (Al Capone, Bugsy Siegel), and some of the best writers (Dorothy Parker), future actors (Ronald Reagan), and even the President of the United States (Calvin Coolidge). But this is certainly not just a historical novel set in 1926. This is not only because the travelers jump forward to our own future from time to time (which allows some satire on where America is going), but also because the travelers' knowledge of what is going to happen gives them quite a different perspective from that of the locals. The overall approach is humorous. There are sarcastic comments on the discomforts of life in 1926 (no hours' long airplane trips, you have to spend days on the train), and on the unfairness of life for the blacks (a black performer may not be allowed to sit down with the audience in a place in which he is the star performer), and on communist witch-hunts. It's fun to read, even if it is not so well thought. In fact it reads as if it was casually written straight off from beginning to end, and then sent to the publisher. But is it science fiction? Personally, I consider time travel to be fantasy. And this book (which is a sequel to Dann's book *Timeshare*) does not make even the faintest attempt to provide a scientific underpinning to the idea. Maybe the first volume in the *Timeshare* series does better? If you like lightweight fun, this is nice; but if you are looking for *science* fiction, don't bother to read this book.

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