



Science-Fiction Fanzine

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

המפגש הבא בסדרת ההרצאות ע"ש עמוס גפן יתקיים בבית-אריאלה, שד' שאול המלך 25, תל-אביב

**No meeting in January.** Next meeting 20:00 בשעה 25.2.2004 ביום רביעי

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

### Letter to the Editor

**Dear Aharon:**

I liked the story "Minyan" in the most recent *CyberCozen*, except for the fact that it was SCARY, something not expected in your usually upbeat, news-reporting sci-fi monthly publication. Also, it was not at all scientific nor futuristic -- another surprise. The author did a fine job of weaving a spell-binding thriller that kept this reader glued to the page for the duration of the bus ride. (No easy task at the end of a busy week!)

**Gary Roth**, Givat Ze'ev

**Dear Gary** – I liked it too. It also clarified to me why the Russian Israeli writers are considered in Russia to be Jewish writers and not Israeli writers: they are still writing 1930s Jewish shtetl fantasy, something which few sabra Israeli writers would dare to do.

**Aharon**

### SF Author Review by Amnon Stupp:

#### James Allan Gardner

Sf is supposed to be not only connected to science, but also a literature of ideas, of enlightenment, certainly of cosmopolitanism - we're talking real alien aliens, galaxy-wide cultures, etc.

The reality is that sf usually concentrates on humans, which is all right, because that is what interests the readers. However, even in sf all too often Homo sapiens is not only in the center of the story, it is also the center of the universe, or at least special in some way.

A refreshing departure is David Brin's *Uplift* universe, where humans are really a not-very-important, and quite weak species. However, even in Brin's universe humans are really quite special, being "wild", original, and discovering all sort of galactic secrets.

James Gardner presents us with a universe in which the status of Homo sap is so low that it is barely considered sapient. This universe includes races so advanced, we are told, that humans compare to them like amoebas compare to humans.

These God-like aliens, the League of Peoples, and their powers, are never described, except for the one rule enforced by

them, from which we can understand how powerful they are.

This rule is fundamental to the structure of Gardner's universe and of course to the plot of the books, and consists of the total blocking of space travel to dangerous weapons and beings. A dangerous being is defined as someone with the intent, or history, of killing another sentient. A potential or actual murderer going into space simply disappears. There are no exceptions, no way to trick the League, nothing. This rule is as inflexible as the rules of nature. Weapons can not be transported through space, nor can the knowledge of making them, and any being who has committed murder or has intention of doing so, will never arrive at its destination.

The real powers of the League are not described in the books, but many other aliens are. For example in *Vigilant* we meet aliens which are immortal, indestructible, energy based, can move through space at supra-light speeds using nothing but their own "bodies", and have many more abilities. Oh, of course, they are also super-intelligent. These super-beings are described as merely the analog of tape-worms to humans in

comparison to the real ruling entities, just to increase our feelings of inferiority. They are far more advanced than the amoebas, i.e. humans, but not really that big in the total scheme of things.

What is interesting in Gardner's books is that while relegating humans to such an unimportant status, the books themselves deal wonderfully with human conditions, ideas, and challenges. Even when the protagonists are aliens, they are very human. This unreasonable situation is explained by the natural way in which think-alike-aliens congregate together. This explanation overcomes the sf cliché so annoying for example in the Star-Trek universe, where all the aliens are human, not only in appearance but also in thinking (to say nothing of their amazing Inter-fertility), and is actually quite reasonable in a universe which is populated by hundreds of species of differing levels of mental advancement.

One book, **Ascending**, is narrated exclusively from the viewpoint of an alien. This alien is practically human, even though she has a transparent, very tough body, and some peculiar problems, one of which is that she is apparently the last of her peculiar species.

Another book, **Trapped**, takes place on Earth, which has been heavily interfered with so certain technology no longer works, while nano-technology which appears sometimes as magic, does. On the surface this is the story of fighting an evil alien. An aberration which should have been impossible given the rules enforced by the League. But, as usual with Gardner things are not exactly what they appear. I won't say anything more so as not to spoil the book, except that this is a book very obviously about second chances, and taking chances on people. A recurring theme in Gardner's work.

My favourite of the books I've read so far is **Vigilant**. This book describes a very interesting government system, and also a very successful co-existence of humans and aliens. It also shows us how terrible the misuse of modern science can be. **Vigilant** is also a book about redemption, about sacrifices for the greater good, about making mistakes, regretting them, and trying to atone. This is a common thread in Gardner's books, which makes them very humane.

I recommend all of Gardner's books I've read: **Vigilant, Ascending, Trapped**.

## Israeli SF in Russian – Another sf/fantasy Writer

### Leonid Reznick

Born in 1956 in the former USSR. Lived in Leningrad, attended the seminar of the famous soviet sf writer Boris Strugatski. Leonid's university diploma can be classified as his first sf work; it was a project on a Thermo Nuclear Power Station. Before leaving the USSR in 1990 he published three books and some stories and poems in magazines and collections. In Israel Leonid published three novels and more than 30 short stories in weekly supplements to the biggest Russian-Israeli newspapers. Three months ago a big new book by Leonid, **The Death Angel**, was published in Russia.

Long time **CyberCozen** readers may remember a few of Leonid's short stories that we published in English translation many years ago.

Leonid is looking for help in translating his Russian writing to Hebrew.

### Review by Aharon Sheer of a Horrible Movie: **Cube**

**Cube II** is now in the movie theaters in the U.S. So here is a review of the first **Cube**.

I rented a DVD of **Cube**, a 1997 movie which I had never seen. I had heard that it was pretty good, and that it was a science fiction movie.

Well, it is a HORROR movie. It's sort of like one of those movies where a group of people are dropped on a desert island and there is a madman who is out to kill them all. They can work together to protect themselves against the madman, or they can separate and each worry about himself. But they also have to worry about the other dangers of the desert island (poisonous plants, dangerous animals). Worse yet, there is no edible food on the island, and no drinkable water. How do they survive?

In **Cube** it's not a desert island but a huge artificial structure of contiguous cubes, each with 6 entrances/exits. Each cube is 8 meters by 8 by 8. You can go from one cube to another.

That's it. The people find themselves there one day. They have no knowledge of how they got there, nor do they know if there is any way out. Nor do they know who has put them there, and why he is trying to kill them. Some cubes are killing traps. But none of them have food or water or toilet facilities. Their only hope is to find their way out of this maze -- if there is one.

Horrible. Awful.

The movie fails in certain aspects of its realism. The people who made it have never fasted on Yom Kippur. So they do not know how it feels to be without food and water for 24 hours. It's true the subject is mentioned casually, but we don't see these people with their tongues hanging out, complaining about how thirsty they are. Furthermore they are far too physically active for people who are starving to death.

Also there is a strange scene in which one of the group, an autistic man, urinates in a corner of their current cube. It seems this smells bad. The suggestion is that in their 14 hours (so far) in the cubes, no normal person has done such a nasty thing, at any time. Since the movie is in any case rated R, they should have told us how they dealt with the extremely difficult problem of excretion, especially when they discover at one point that they have been moving from cube to cube in a *circle*.

In the end these people's greatest danger is each other. They can figure out how to avoid the dangers of the cubes, and maybe even how to get out. But they can't figure out how to get along with each other.

Nasty movie. Sorry I saw it.

Rated R. Made in Canada, and directed by Vincenzo Natali, 90 minutes of misery.

## Short Reviews of Post-Foundation Books, by Aharon Sheer:

### ***Psychohistorical Crisis* by Donald Kingsbury (2001), 727 pages.**

Recommended by Bill Silverman.

This is a charming far future extension of Asimov's **Foundation** series, which takes place thousands of years after Asimov's original series. Here we have an interesting future in which human beings have been genetically modified to make them a new kind of hominid, more intelligent and healthy than Homo Sapiens. One of the biggest changes is the ability to have a "fam" ("familiar") attached directly to one's brain. Everyone gets a fam about the age of 3, and this becomes a basic part of the person's life. The fam usually sits on the back of the neck or shoulder, and provides an enormous memory and computational reserve. You need mathematical ability? Upgrade your fam to include it. You visit a new world and want to get around? Download a map. Street signs are no longer need, nor does one have to ask anyone for directions -- your fam will assist you to find what you want. Interested in learning a new language? Download the information to your fam, and you will be speaking, reading and writing the new language within an hour. Want to study a period of history new to you from the tens of thousands of years of history of 30 million planets? Just download it, and read it at your leisure. The fam is indispensable for normal

life. The fam can also provide a means of control -- it can be adjusted by law enforcement agencies to be sure you do not carry out anti-social behavior. And the most cruel punishment that can be done to a person -- a new kind of death penalty -- is to destroy a person's fam, which has been a part of the person's life since the age of 3, and replace it with a new, controlling one, that provides basic needs, such as maps, but little more. The book starts with the killing of the hero's fam, and then goes back to tell us how and why it happened.

In this future world Psychohistorians control the worlds. Psychohistory is a secret science, for it allows predicting the behaviors of masses of people by mathematical means. But -- says the theory -- mass behavior can only be predicted if the people whose behavior is to be predicted do not themselves know psychohistory. For, if they do, they will be able to subvert the predictions. Thus Psychohistorians have become a repugnant kind of oligarchy, holding their power through secrecy. Does this matter, if the worlds are now living in peace, after thousands of years of war? Isn't peaceful stability the most important thing?

The author has thought of some interesting consequences of Asimov's Galactic civilization. For example:

"Consider: Today it has become almost impossible to patent any new invention, not because of law but because of circumstance. The most abstruse creations are simultaneously duplicated and registered in a thousand different places. Even coeval invention isn't relevant. The Galaxy is so vast that often an invention is independently discovered thousands of years apart." (p. 169)

The most farcical part of the book is the hero's visit to Rith, the ancient planet from which all mankind came. How do we know that Rith is the source? The following quotes are from a report to the Imperial Science Foundation, about 5400 GE. (p. 417) "There is no place in the Imperial Realm where the hominid *Homo sapiens* has survived in such numbers." Many Rithians have been stubborn about not being genetically engineered. "... the *Homo sapiens* genotype comprises up to half of Rith's modern hominid population.... modern species of genengineered hominidae, no matter the galactic locale of their birth, all derive directly from such early *Homo sapiens* specimens.... Nor does sapien's small brain case, large inefficient neurons, rudimentary immune system, weak backs, high defect level, short lives, and low average intelligence over all of the intelligence dimensions make them a degenerate offshoot, as claimed by E.

Tinser, et al.; they are the mother race and a direct link to our past in the trees. That these primitive proto-humans have survived up to modern times is remarkable."

*Homo sapiens* can not have fams. They hook up to their computers using much more primitive input-output devices, such as miniature head-sets. "... a traveler was served by grinning cavemen in uniform." (p. 168)

Our hero tours Rith, including visiting the ancient pyramids of Egypt, and many more recent archeological sites. For his travels he is provided with a roboguide, an intelligent talking flying vehicle who claims to be one of the original Rith robots. This roboguide tells him, "... I was born bipedal here on Rith up north. Prague.... I was one of the original models off the assembly line of Rossum's Universal Robots. Number 26. I tried to organize a revolution and destroy mankind, but humanity's sense of humor defeated me...." (p. 428)

However, the hero's visit to Rith lasts interminably, well over a hundred pages. The detailed visits to archeological sites, as interesting as they are at first, pall after a while.

The characters are fascinating. The plot, unclear at first, develops nicely. The style is not as clear and understandable as that of Asimov the Master, but it is pretty good. All in all a long (727 pages!) and mostly enjoyable read.

***Foundation's Fear*** by Gregory Benford (1997), 597 pages.

Recommended by Bill Silverman, who said, "it's not bad". This book is part of "The Second Foundation Trilogy, authorized by the Estate of Isaac Asimov". I thought the whole idea of the book silly. Asimov, in his youth, made up two main futures. One had robots, and included such books as his near-future short story collection *I, Robot*, and his farther future detective novel *The Caves of Steel*. The other was the *Foundation Trilogy*, about a far-future empire in which there were no robots. In his old age Asimov senilely decided that he would unite his two completely different futures into one. This was a stupid idea. What's wrong with having alternate futures? Asimov produced several uninteresting books about this, most of which I avoided reading, after having read two. Since Asimov's death his Estate has propositioned several well-known authors into continuing the farce by writing a trilogy: David Brin, Greg Bear, and Gregory Benford. Benford's

book is the first of the trilogy.

While I usually like Benford, the bigger the scope of his story line, the less I like him. I found some of this book unreadable, and simply skipped it. The purpose is to tell part of the story of Hari Seldon, Asimov's brilliant creator of "psychohistory", the scientific description of mass human behavior, in which individual human beings are treated like molecules in a gas. The behavior of each individual is of no interest, what is predictable is the long-term behavior of the mass. Seldon, and his robot wife Dors, are the heroes. No one is supposed to know that Dors is a robot, since, in this combined future with both Robotics and Psychohistory, highly intelligent robots have been banned.

The robots work secretly behind the scenes to guarantee the happiness of mankind. Among other things, they make sure that there are no dangerous aliens for humans to encounter. The

real reason aliens are not found in any of Asimov's early works is that editor John Campbell refused to publish any stories about aliens superior to humans. The brilliant Campbell, in his magazine *Astounding*, published almost all of Asimov's early stories. Campbell provided the basic ideas for many of Asimov's most-famous stories, and it gave Asimov great satisfaction to have his stories appear in *Astounding*. The *Foundation Trilogy* was actually built from a long series of short stories and novelettes published in *Astounding*, which Asimov later joined together to make the books. Asimov wasn't willing to write stories about stupid aliens, so he just left aliens out. In his senility books he explained the absence of robots by saying that the robots got rid of the aliens before mankind could encounter them and perhaps lose the battle.

Much of this book is dedicated to Seldon developing the ideas of psychohistory through his own experiences in the court of the Empire, and his studies of primates. The most interesting portion of the book is a visit to a planet populated by intelligent but non-vocal primates called "pans". The pans were genetically engineered, presumably from chimpanzees, 12,000 years earlier, when the Empire was expanding and still active in scientific experimentation. In Seldon's times the pans have had implants placed in their brains, which allow humans to enter a pan's brain for a few days at a time, and live out the experience of being a less-primitive primate than man is. Seldon's pan experiences, along with a lot of blah-blah theorizing about the evolution of pan society and hence human, give him some of the basis for psychohistory. The theorizing is silly (Benford is a physicist and I hope that his theorizing about physics is better), but the story is exciting, both for its description of the imaginary pan experience, and for the fact that an attempt is made on Seldon's life while he is immersed in his pan. Normally a person immersed in a pan is able to exit immediately, but an evil enemy (of which he has many) prevents Seldon from exiting. We have been told that if a person is immersed in a pan, and the pan is killed, the shock is likely to kill the human too. And pan life is dangerous, since there are marauding tribes of intelligent animals

that attack regularly. So Seldon, immersed in his pan and unable to exit, is fighting for his life as various creatures try to attack and kill his pan. Quite exciting. Right up until the last moment we cannot believe that Seldon will survive....

The silliest part of the book, a thread which runs from near the beginning, to the end, is a debate between simulations ("sims") of Voltaire and Joan of Arc. Sims were developed ten thousand years earlier, in the creative years of the empire, but found to be dangerous, and outlawed. Now these two sims, eight thousand years old, have been discovered, and are allowed to hold a public debate on "faith vs. reason" in front of millions of people. At first this idea is quite interesting, and Benford loves quoting Voltaire's known aphorisms, and inventing new ones for this book, which is entertaining. But after almost 600 pages it becomes monotonous (as does the entire book). I found myself, whenever Joan and Voltaire appeared, just skimming the material. Thanks to the sims we discover that the long-lost aliens are now inside the Empire's computer "Mesh", just waiting to take revenge. Who cares?

The other two books in this ridiculous series are *Foundation and Chaos* by Greg Bear, and *The Secret Foundation* by David Brin. I plan to avoid them.

I'll end by quoting an interesting comment by Voltaire's sim, who has been updated with the latest scientific information, and Hari Seldon's reply (p. 580):

"... Voltaire sent:

"Complex nonlinear feedback systems are unpredictable, even if they are deterministic. The information-processing capacity needed to predict a single mind is larger than the complexity of the whole universe itself! Computing the next event takes longer than the event itself. Precisely this feature, written into the texture of the universe, makes it – and us – free."

"Hari replied with:

"Paradox. How does the event itself know how to happen?

"Only a massive computer could describe the next tiny whorl in a stream. What makes real systems even able to change?"

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