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**The Israeli Society for Science Fiction and Fantasy
In October: ICON2004**

The **ICON2004 Festival** will take place **October 3-5 (Succot vacation)** at the **Cinemateque** in **Tel Aviv**. This year's topic is "Life and Death". **Guest of Honor** will be author **Guy Gavriel Kay**, one of the most successful and appreciated fantasy writers. Detailed information in Hebrew is available at the **ICON** site: <http://www.icon.org.il>

באוקטובר: אייקון 2004

פסטיבל אייקון 2004 יתקיים ב-3-5 באוקטובר בסינמטק תל אביב. נושא הפסטיבל השנה הוא "חיים ומוות", ואורח הכבוד יהיה לא אחר מאשר גאי גבריאל קיי, אחד מסופרי הפנטסיה המצליחים והמוערכים ביותר כיום. תוכנית הפסטיבל נמצאת באתר הרשמי של הפסטיבל: <http://www.icon.org.il>

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The First Two-thirds of Neal Stephenson's *Baroque Cycle*

A review by Sara Beck Svetitsky

In my short review of Stephenson's 1999 *Cryptonomicon* in this fanzine (February 2002), I praised the book but decided that it isn't really, really Science Fiction. Everyone I know agrees that *Cryptonomicon* isn't really, really Science Fiction. This did not stop it from being nominated for the Hugo (a science-fiction award) for best novel. I interpret this as a statement by the sf community that Stephenson belongs to us by right, no matter if there is actual sf in the book at hand. Which is why I am now reviewing *Quicksilver* (2003) and *The Confusion* (2004), the first two novels of the *Baroque Cycle* (the third novel, *The System of the World*, is due out in a month) for an sf fanzine, even though they are, frankly, historical novels. Is everything clear?

The *Baroque Cycle* is in some obvious ways a prelude to *Cryptonomicon*. First, many of the characters are the ancestors of the *Cryptonomicon* cast. The 17th century forbears of the Waterhouse and Shaftoe clans are the two main viewpoint characters, and the attentive reader will also notice the several-times great grandfathers and mothers of Goto Dengo, Avi Halaby, von Haklehaber, and possibly some of the unexplained minor roles in *Cryptonomicon*. Enoch Root also appears, and people do notice his unusual longevity although it is not (yet) explained. (Actually, Enoch Root may be the one claim all these books have to sf-status). Second, the books have the same themes: cryptography, gold, and above all, wisdom in its many manifestations.

The *Baroque Cycle*, according to the author, is actually one very long book

split up into three for publishing convenience. *Quicksilver* suffers rather from this, as it has all the stage-setting and character-introducing material and it can be heavy going. *Quicksilver* starts in Massachusetts in 1713, where Enoch Root comes to recruit Daniel Waterhouse to return to England and mediate between Newton and Leibniz in their great dispute. We then see Waterhouse's life and relation with Newton in a series of flashbacks which deposit us back in Europe in the 1650s-1680s, the setting for the rest of the book. I found the introductory flashbacks to be distracting, but once we settle in England the book improves. Daniel Waterhouse is Newton's roommate, a member of the Royal Society, and from a fiercely Puritan family. Stephenson uses him to explore the workings of extraordinary genius, the functioning of a group of very bright and dedicated people with common goals, and the inescapable, omnipresent influence of religion. This was a time of extraordinary, revolutionary change in England and Waterhouse is our key to it all; the Puritan-Cavalier social rifts, the tension over the role of the monarchy, and the birth of modern physics. Through Waterhouse we see Hooke, Halley, Fatio, Pepys and of course Newton. I think that they are all portrayed very well, except possibly Newton who may be too big to write about. Stephenson knows smart people, he knows how they talk and how they work together and what motivates them, and he handles this material very well.

The scene then shifts to mainland Europe where we meet the other two major characters, Jack Shaftoe (King of the Vagabonds, as well other nicknames which decency forbids me to write here) and the beautiful (of course), dangerously

intelligent (this is Stephenson) Eliza, who was kidnapped from her native Qwhlm by corsair slavers and who by the end of the book is a Countess, friend to all the intelligentsia of Europe, correspondent of Leibniz, and on her way to inventing modern finance. What sets this off from so many historical novels is that Jack and Eliza are not just there to have a romance (in fact, for technical reasons they cannot). They are our guides to the misery and poverty of Europe in the grip of its religious wars, just as Waterhouse is our guide to England in the Enlightenment. The old society has broken down, and never worked that well anyway; where is the new society going to come from? Shaftoe ends the book chained to an oar in a Barbary corsair, and Daniel tied to a chair, about to undergo lithotomy. I won't go into the assassination attempt on King William, Enoch Root and the saltpeter mines, or Judge Jeffries; let me just say that the book does not lack for action. But with all the fighting, Stephenson still makes it clear that the really important revolution goes on in people's minds.

I enjoyed *Quicksilver* because the characters are remarkable and the writing skillful, but as a book standing alone it was awkward and unbalanced. A large cast of characters, historical and fictional, were introduced, there was much racing around Europe to set up odd situations, but it didn't really come together. In *The Confusion*, in contrast (and in contradiction to the title), everything blends into a story that moves smoothly, beautifully, and very fast. In this book the stories of Waterhouse and his circle, and Shaftoe and his, are told as alternating chapters from independent books (called *Juncto* and *Bonanza*, respectively) and this technique works very well (much

better than the flashbacks in *Quicksilver*, in my opinion). The Waterhouse side includes historic events like the establishment of the Bank of England and getting Newton into the Mint; the Shaftoe story is less true to history but it is a lot more fun. Shaftoe gets himself off that oar and with the Cabal, an extremely odd group of ex-oarsmen, steals a boat-load of silver in the Mediterranean and takes off for the East. The resulting adventures are funny, moving, scary, and, this being Stephenson, very well-informed on the details of life in 17th century Hindustan, Manila, Nippon, and Mexico City. The high point is certainly the extended chapter in which our heroes fight their way through the streets of Cairo, against an almost equally bizarre selection of enemies. The odd group of eccentrics performing extraordinary feats in an extreme and desperate situation recurs in Stephenson but this is definitely the best case and an instant classic.

The two stories are linked by Eliza, who is manipulating the economies of England and France and who was behind the Cabal's heist of the silver. The plots begin to come together when we find that the silver Shaftoe's Cabal stole, which to

their surprise was gold, is not just gold but the alchemical gold of King Solomon. Newton, the last alchemist, wants that gold. Louis XIV, the King of France, wants to ruin the coinage of England and thinks he can use Shaftoe to do it. Which sets us up for the last book.

So the first book introduces a huge and complicated cast of characters and sets up the drama, and in the second the plot moves fast, the characters grow and change noticeably, and the size and importance of the conflict becomes clear. The first book has many good parts but tends to be confusing and the second is a breath-taking and poignant adventure. Individual Stephenson novels, fans agree, all have an extended and confusing introduction and a brilliant middle, so the *Baroque Cycle* so far is living up to this pattern. Fans also agree that the endings of Stephenson books are sometimes very good and sometimes quite weak, sometimes moving and sometimes completely ad hoc. So I am a little nervous about the ending of this very long novel, that is to say the *System of the World*: it may be brilliant, and it may a mess. I have my order in already at Amazon....

Editor's Note: *Cryptonomicon* was also reviewed in the April 2002 *CyberCozen* by Aharon Sheer.

Some Books by David Gerrold Reviewed by Bill Silverman

I have been waiting impatiently for the concluding books in David Gerrold's *War with the Chtorr* (1983 -) series. The series is exciting and intellectually provocative, with one of the most detailed approaches to ecological warfare to be found in Science Fiction. Alas, they are still "forthcoming".

So I bought two of his recent books to slake my thirst for his brand of often intelligent tales: *The Man who Folded Himself* (1973) and *Leaping to the Stars* (2002). Again, alas! They are both Heinlein ripoffs. Don't get me wrong! On balance I like Gerrold's stories, especially *When Harlie was One* (1972). But these stories are hacked out without his usual attention to detail nor his (usually) inimitable characters.

Leaping to the Stars appears to be the third juvenile in a series (*The Dingilliad*) loosely based on the above-mentioned *When Harlie was One*. The plot is Heinleinesque, without the Master's spirit or drive or fascinating characters. The prose is generally insipid - I caught myself yawning at several points. If you want good juvenile sf in the great tradition, stick with Heinlein.

The Man who Folded Himself is structurally almost identical to Heinlein's short story "All You Zombies" (1959), at about three times the length and one tenth the intellectual and literary excitement. I suppose that it's a worthwhile endeavor to recast that classic time travel story as a multi-worlds tale, but this one seemed terribly self-indulgent as well as a cheap solution to the problems of temporal paradox. Well, I say that about most multi-worlds stories, with the exception of Keith Laumer's *Imperium* novels (1962 – 1990).

Give them both a pass! But on the other hand, if you haven't read *The War with the Chtorr* series, pick up *A Matter for Men* (1983; rev 1989) at ONCE. I dare you to read just one!

Editor's Note: *The Man who Folded Himself* was reviewed in CyberCozen April 1998 by Aharon Sheer.

Quote of the Month:

"Even now amazing discoveries are staring at you all the time, right under your nose. The difficulty lies in realizing this. For example, in recent decades all medical students were taught that ulcers are caused by stress, which leads to excessive acid production that erodes the mucosal lining of the stomach and the duodenum, producing the characteristic craters or wounds that we call ulcers. ... But then a young resident physician in Australia, Dr. Bill Marshall, looked at a stained section of a human ulcer under a microscope and noticed that it was teeming with *Helicobacter pylori* -- a common bacterium that is found in a certain proportion of healthy individuals. Since he regularly saw these bacteria in ulcers, he started wondering whether perhaps they actually caused ulcers. When he mentioned this idea to his professors, he was told, 'No way. That can't be true. We all know ulcers are caused by stress. What you are seeing is just a secondary infection of an ulcer that was already in place.'

"But Dr. Marshall was not dissuaded and proceeded to challenge the conventional wisdom. ... out of sheer desperation, Marshall swallowed a culture of the bacteria, did an endoscopy of himself a few weeks later and demonstrated that his gastrointestinal tract was studded with ulcers! He then conducted a formal clinical trial and showed that ulcer patients who were treated with a combination of antibiotics, bismuth and [a bactericide] recovered at a much higher rate – and had fewer relapses – than did a control group given acid-blocking agents alone.

"I mention this episode to emphasize that a single medical student or resident whose mind is open to new ideas and who works without sophisticated equipment can revolutionize the practice of medicine."

From *Phantoms in the Brain* by V.S. Ramachandran and Sandra Blakeslee, p. xv

Short Book Review by Aharon Sheer:

The Man Who Counts by Poul Anderson (1958, with restored text and new introduction 1978), 209 pages.

Starting in 1492 with Columbus' visits to the Americas, Europe started a great age of exploration. Numerous strange and exotic societies were discovered (and often destroyed), and new plants (tomatoes and potatoes are just two examples) and animals

(and diseases) were brought back to Europe. These wondrous explorations have been the inspiration for numerous series of science fiction novels. Just give us faster-than-light travel, and we can visit planets strange and wonderful, meet exciting aliens, and bring wonderful pets home to our children. While many authors just play on the idea of an earth-like planet with an exotic alien society and some unusual animals, Poul Anderson was one author who often tried to build not only an alien society but also a world physically quite different from earth. Unlike Anne McCaffrey, who once started a novel with the wonderful line "Dawn came up on the planet" -- as if dawn does not come up somewhere at any given moment on any planet that circles a sun -- Poul tried to build worlds different from our earth. In the 1978 introduction to this 1958 novel, Poul explains his approach:

"Planet-building is one of the joyous arts, if you have that sort of mind. The object is to construct a strange world which is at the same time wholly consistent, not only with itself but with what science knows of such matters. Any extra-scientific assumptions you make for story purposes -- e.g., faster-than-light travel -- should not be necessary to the world itself. So, taking a star of a given mass, you calculate how luminous it must be, how long the year is of a planet in given orbit around it, how much irradiation that planet gets, and several more things. (Of course, I simplify here, since you ought also to take account of the star's age, its chemical composition, etc.) These results will be basically influential on surface features of the planet, kind of life it bears, evolution of that life, and so on endlessly. There is no rigid determinism: at any given stage, many different possibilities open up. However, those you choose will in their turn become significant parameters at the next stage ... until at last, perhaps, you get down to the odor of a flower and what it means to an alien individual."

As for the world building, there is some here. The planet has only light elements, so the intelligent native beings on it can have wings and can fly. Numerous aspects of their society, including what their life cycle is like, and how they make war, are dependent on these facts. And the visiting aliens (the human heroes) can take advantage of these facts when it is urgent to do so.

This novel is in the "Polesotechnic League" series, which assumes that any planet that has intelligent life will also have beings with an interest in trading things they have for things you have. Its hero is a rich, fat, hedonist businessman named Nicholas van Rijn, who is not afraid to mix with the alien natives, learn their languages and their customs, and their politics too. Van Rijn can bluster, lie, cheat, politic, and get the aliens to respect him, and to like him, and to cooperate with him. He is an interstellar businessman, and a good one. This book is a fun book, and an interesting one, and one of a long series of such books that Poul wrote.

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