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The Israeli Society for Science Fiction and Fantasy

מכונת הזמן – לוח אירועי מד"ב ופנטסיה

האתר "מכונת הזמן" הוא יוזמה עצמאית של יעל פורמן ואור ביאליק, שמטרתה לרכז את כל אירועי המד"ב, הפנטסיה, הקומיקס ומשחקי התפקידים המתקיימים לאורך השנה. הגולשים מוזמנים לעדכן את הלוח באירועים חדשים לפי קטגוריות. לפרטים נוספים, ראו: <http://sfevents.mad-logic.com/calendar.php>

חוג מדע בדיוני ברחובות – SFIR - Rehovot Science Fiction Club

פעילויות התא מתקיימות בימי א' בשעה 20:00 בפקולטה לחקלאות ברחובות, חדר 2, בבניין ליד הבריכה. הפעילויות ללא תשלום.

לרגל סיום שנת הלימודים, התא יצא לפגרת קיץ. הפעילות צפויה להתחדש באוקטובר 2006.

מידע נוסף ניתן לקבל באתר התא (<http://sfir.tk/>) או בדוא"ל sfir42@yahoo.com.

דגנת הכתיבה ברחובות

דגנת הכתיבה הרחובותית מקיימת מפגשים; לפרטים נא לפנות ליולי גנטמן בכתובת ygantman@yahoo.com

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

Short Book Review by Aharon Sheer

Tarzan of the Apes by Edgar Rice Burroughs (1912), 219 pages.

To my surprise, this turns out to be a science fiction book. Imagine giant apes that have a primitive language, but are not human beings. They stand on two legs, but look like gorillas. They are even taller than humans (seven feet tall on their short legs), but are much more massive. They had "enormous shoulders ... bunched and rounded with huge muscles." [p. 80] They live in the jungles of Africa. And imagine that in 1912, tribes of such apemen still survived in Africa. (Perhaps they were subsequently wiped out by tribes of black men.) Black men were driven into the ape's living areas by the expansion of the white men's conquest of the black men's living areas, where the black men were forced into slavery by the white men. The black men tried to escape

slavery by moving into the more difficult jungle areas occupied by these apes.

The story starts as a young Britisher (with his wife), being carried by ship to Africa to investigate suspicions of slavery, are abandoned on a jungle coast of West Africa by a mutinous ship crew. The young man is able to build a sturdy cabin, and hunt for food, and protect himself and his wife from jungle dangers. He is able to use his rifle to drive away the apes, who after that avoid the cabin whenever they see this man. Still hoping for rescue, the wife gives birth to a baby boy, and raises him for a year. They have books and paper, including children's books for their growing son. But then illness strikes and the man and woman die within a day of each other, leaving only the baby alive.

And in parallel we learn of the rough cruel tribal life of the intelligent talking apes. Kala, a mother ape, has lost her recently born baby through the cruelty of her ape mate, but finds the newly orphaned human baby boy and adopts it. Thus we have a human child raised by talking apes, which enables the child too to learn to talk, while protected and taught how to survive in the jungle by its adoptive ape mother. And so the human child Tarzan learns to live in the jungle, leaping from branch to branch of the thick jungle trees as his 'mother' does, travelling through the tree-tops.

“Only in a dim, vague way Kala had explained to him that his father had been a strange white ape, but he did not know that Kala was not his own mother.” [p. 42]

Tarzan, the intelligent son of English aristocrats, has the good luck to discover his parents' cabin, which the apes avoid. From the children's picture books in the cabin he is able to connect the printed words which appear together with pictures of things familiar to him, and to connect the words in his ape tribe's spoken language with the printed symbols. So he learns the basic idea of reading, seeing each set of letters like a pictogram representing a word in ape language. Thus he learns English writing, pronounced in ape!

The invasion of a black tribe changes his life. He realizes that they are humans like those in the picture books, and that therefore he is in some way related to them. But their life style is so different from that of the apes, as well as from the life pictured in the books! Because of his skill in the jungle trees, which is new to these black tribesmen, he is able to secretly enter the newly built

village and steal things that he sees the tribesmen using. Thus he acquires a knife, and a bow and poison-tipped arrows. Thanks to the knife, Tarzan can now defeat the strongest of the apes in his tribe, if they attack him, and to declare himself the ruler of the tribe.

“Withdrawing the knife that had so often rendered him master of far mightier muscles than his own, Tarzan of the Apes placed his foot upon the neck of his vanquished enemy, and once again, loud through the forest rang the fierce, wild cry of conqueror.” [p. 82]

For no ape, no matter how strong, can survive the attack of a knife. And Tarzan is quicker than they are, and more intelligent.

Although I had long ago seen the movie, *Tarzan of the Apes*, and was familiar with the general story, I really enjoyed reading this book. It is an adventure story for teenagers; it is exciting and fast moving. It has its humor too, as the author throws in comparisons, for example, between Tarzan's taste in food and that of his aristocrat cousin in England. Tarzan's eventual encounter with both decent and cruel white men adds to the interest of the story, as Tarzan learns to decide who he is, and to which group he really belongs. It's a great tale, and this book is only the first of a long series of books, in which Tarzan goes back and forth between the life of the English-speaking intelligentsia and life in the jungle. I enjoyed the first two-thirds of this book very much (the jungle part), and recommend it highly to my oldest grandchild.

Book Review by Aharon Sheer

Vitals by Greg Bear (2002), 393 pages.

After reading and enjoying Greg Bear's SCIENCE fiction novel *Darwin's Children* (reviewed by me in *CyberCozen* February 2006), I looked forward to reading *Vitals* too – recommended by Bill Silverman. Alas, while this is in a way a SCIENCE fiction novel, I should have been clued in by the fact that there is no scientific appendix. Because this is mainly a HORROR novel in the style of Stephen King. While those of you who love Stephen King may think this is a good thing, I was not so happy with it.

The book starts out very nicely, with the biologist scientist hero, Hal Cousins, going on a well-funded oceanographic voyage. The objective of his scientific research is to find the Fountain of Youth, in this case at the bottom of a very deep sea trench off of Seattle Washington. The idea is that there might be ancient and very hardy microbes deep in the sea that preserve characteristics which could help lengthen human life spans. These microbes may have survived in remarkable conditions of temperature and pressure for millions of years, and retained the unusual characteristic that they do not die.

The book soon has a beautiful, almost poetic description of things seen at the bottom of the sea from inside a deep-sea vessel:

“...at irregular intervals along the network of spreading trenches, massive underwater geysers spewed roiling plumes of superheated water, toxic sulfides, and deep-crust bacteria. Minerals in the flow accreted to erect chimneys around the geysers. Some of the chimneys stood as tall as industrial smokestacks and

grew broad horizontal fans like tree fungi. Sulfurous outflow fizzed through cracks and pores everywhere. Magma squeezed out of deeper cracks like black, grainy toothpaste, snapping like reptiles in combat. Close by, at depth, through the hydrophone, you could hear the vents hissing and roaring. Wags had named one huge chimney ‘Godzilla’.

“Gargantuan earth music.

“Down there, the water is saturated with the deep's chemical equivalent of sunshine. Hydrogen sulfide soups feed specialized bacteria, which in turn prop up an isolated food chain. Tube worms crest old lava flows and gather around the vents in sociable forests, like long, skinny, red-tipped penises. Royal little white crabs mosey through the waving stalks as if they have all the time there is. Long, lazy, rat-tail fish – deep water vultures with big curious eyes – pause like question marks, waiting for death to drop their small ration of dinner.” [p. 10-11]

Poetry that only an oceanographer could love – like praising the beauty of a steel mill. So the story starts like it's going to tell us of the excitement of the science this guy is going to be doing.

“Nearly every dive in these areas found xenos – xenophosphores, the single-celled tramps of the seafloor, some as big as a clenched fist. Xenos are distantly related to amoebae and resemble scummy bath sponges. They use sand as ballast, glue their

waste into supports, and coat their slimy exteriors with debris as they roll around on the ocean floor. Their convoluted, tube-riddled bodies hide many passengers: isopods, bacteria, predatory mollusks. True monsters, but wonderful and harmless.” [p. 15]

Hal Cousins’ approach to immortality does not involve downloading a man’s consciousness to a computer (as has been “done” in a variety of science fiction novels). “The mind *is* the body,” Hal says.

“Downloading the brain’s patterns isn’t enough. Everything you know and think is embedded in your neurons, but your consciousness is in the cells of your entire body. Your mind is really a complex of brains, with major contributions from the nervous and immune systems. The flesh is intelligent, all flesh, and all of it contributes to your personality at one level or another.” [p. 28]

And Hal’s dream: “I can begin to increase our life span in the next few years, with minimal intervention. If you and I want to stay young and healthy longer, our only hope is medical maintenance, keeping our bodies vigorous. Specifically, mitochondrial chromosome adjustment.” [p. 29]

So we have a scientific thriller – looking around on the ocean floor for ancient cells that might give us a clue as to how to we might help our own bodies’ cells live longer. And there are many wonderful deep-sea sights described and discussed. Fascinating. Exciting discoveries. Possible answers to big questions.

But then comes the first of the madness. Hal’s pilot on his Deep Sea Vehicle (DSV) goes crazy during the dive,

tries to crash the vehicle. Hal has to knock the pilot unconscious in order to get back safely to the ocean surface.

When Hal’s DSV comes up from sea bottom, their support ship does not respond. It turns out that the doctor on the ship started shooting. Killed two people. Fortunately he was overcome by others before it was too late. Finally Hal is rescued.

Hal manages to get ashore with some of his deep sea biological samples intact.

Again we get some scientific excitement as Hal works in the lab on his surprising and very important deep-sea samples. Hal tells it:

“Most modern cells are microscopic and need only one nucleus, the central computer and factory that contains the chromosomes. These cells were much larger than most modern cells. I supposed, in my intensity of speculation, that each of the components would have many nuclei, as xenos do, to speed creation and delivery of the necessary gene products – ribosomal RNA, proteins, etc. – across its comparatively far-flung cytoplasmic territory....

“But when we carefully plucked a cell from the feather-fan colony, froze and micro-sliced it, then mounted it for the lab’s little electron microscope, Dan reported that there were no nuclei whatsoever. The cell was a blob of jelly with unbounded circular chromosomes floating in a thick but simple membrane, and that in itself would make it a variety of bacteria or archaea, neither of which sequester their DNA in nuclei....

“The sampled cell was as big as the tip of my pinky....

“The frond, then, was neither plant nor precisely animal, nor did it belong to any of the remaining three kingdoms of modern biology....

“There are no nuclei and no mitochondria in these cells. They are very primitive....

“It’s what I’ve been dreaming about for years....” [p. 81-82]

Wow! The first step in finding that Fountain of Youth. Really exciting?

Nope. That’s the end of the science in this book. Now starts the horror story. The rich man funding the whole business decides to stop funding. The lab is attacked at night and all the samples destroyed. Hal moves away. His new rented house is burned down. He is attacked by mad dogs on the street.

There is a world conspiracy to prevent him from doing his research. His brother, also a biologist, working in the same line, is murdered.

Hal’s brother discovered that the Russians, in the 1930s, developed a method of controlling people’s minds using bacteria. Infect a person and he will do whatever you tell him to, without knowing why. Read to such an infected person a series of numbers, and his body’s bacteria will understand that this is a code telling him what he must do. But he will not consciously know what the code means.

In 1938-9 the Russians set up a model city, named 38-J, occupied by dissidents and political prisoners. The residents were provided with special infected food.

“A few weeks after the special food arrived, the inhabitants of 38-J were walking naked in the streets, fornicating in public. Human meat – mostly children –

was being sold in the butcher shops. Beria brought in truckloads of guns and gave them to every citizen. He showed off by walking unguarded through the streets in a town filled with armed dissidents and political prisoners who should have hated his guts.

“Squads took instructions by phone, or from planted neighbors, and hunted down people who visited the library, who were bald or bow-legged, who carried their babies in public. Some were told to go out and whistle and others were told to go out and shoot all those who whistled.

“In 1940, Beria decided to shut it down, a big success and nearly everybody dead.” [p. 156]

After the Second World War, this wonderful bacterial mind-control technique was moved to the United States. With the full cooperation of the U.S. top-secret security agencies. (No doubt George Bush used their help to get and stay elected?) And now they are going after Hal Cousins and his friends and family.

The whole rest of the book is filled with the hopeless and helpless efforts of several heroes to keep from getting infected, or to throw off the mind-controlling infection, to do something about this horrifying world-wide conspiracy. Is there any hope for right-minded Democrats to overthrow the Republican mind control? You’ll just have to read the book to find out. I could hardly finish it. Disgusting, unless you like horror novels.

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