



Science-Fiction Fanzine

Vol. XVIII, No. 7; July, 2006

### The Israeli Society for Science Fiction and Fantasy

**פאן.קון 2006** פאן.קון, כנס חובבי המד"ב והפנטסיה השנתי, יערך כמדי שנה בסוף יולי – ביום חמישי, ב' באב, 27/7/2006, באודיטוריום רוזין שברמת אביב, מחצות היום עד חצות הלילה בתוכנית – גרסת הבמאי של **גיבור על גלגלים**, כולל קומנטרי; פשלות, פספוסים ופאדיחות מכנסים שהיו (ולא היו); למה לא לקרוא גיימן; למה כן לקרוא גיימן (וגם לעמוד בתור לחתימה); שירע בציבור – אירוע פילקים על טהרת העברית; מלך הטרויוויה למנהלי עמותות ועוד ועוד.  
פרטים נוספים, הוראות הגעה ועדכונים שוטפים – באתר הכנס: <http://icon.org.il/fancon2006>

### 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.

מידע נוסף ניתן לקבל באתר התא ( <http://sfir.tk/> ) או בדוא"ל [sfir42@yahoo.com](mailto:sfir42@yahoo.com).  
16/7/2006 – סרט: "הקוסם מארץ עוץ" (The Wizard of Oz)  
23/7/2006 – סרט: Heavy Metal  
30/7/2006 – מפגש סיום שנה: סרטונים משעשעים ופיצה

### דנת הכתיבה ברחובות

דנת הכתיבה הרחובותית תקיים מפגשים בתאריכים הבאים:  
לפרטים נא לפנות ליולי גנטמן בכתובת [ygantman@yahoo.com](mailto:ygantman@yahoo.com)

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

## Book Review by Aharon Sheer

*Wheeler's* by Ian Stewart and Jack Cohen (2000), 505 pages.

A few years ago biologist Jack Cohen and mathematician Ian Stewart wrote a fascinating, entertaining, intelligent, amusing, educational, exciting, and remarkably science-fictionary serious popular science book called *The Collapse of Chaos* (1994). The book was a big success. Jack Cohen, who has given biological advice to science fiction writers such as Larry Niven, Jerry Pournelle, Robert Sawyer, and Brian Aldiss (among others), has had his ideas used as the basis for several science fiction novels. In *Wheeler's* Stewart and Cohen decided to try their hand at writing their own sf novel. (They did it again in 2004 with another novel called *Heaven* which has not yet come out in paperback. And in 2002 they also wrote another sf popular science book, *Evolving the Alien: The Science of Extraterrestrial Life*, which regrettably has also not yet come out in paperback.)

*Wheeler's* has ancient and alien-biology intelligent life-forms on Jupiter, whose technological capabilities are astounding. The Jupiterians cannot imagine that life of any interest could involve on a horribly hot oxygen-atmosphere planet like Earth (which they

call "Poisonblue"), so redirecting a wayward asteroid in Earth's direction (in order to be sure it won't threaten Jupiter again in the future) is, for them, a nice simple solution to the problem of making sure the asteroid won't bang into their own planet. This provides some of the tension of the novel; although we really don't believe Stewart and Cohen will let the Earth be totally destroyed.

The novel takes place about two hundred years in our future. It contains a variety of speculations about what might happen to Earth society in the next two hundred years. For example, they speculate on an anti-technology revolution Earth in the late 21<sup>st</sup> century, when people get tired of having their lives directed by intelligent software that makes too many (often stupid) decisions for them.

"In the twenty-third century everyone knew the dangers of smart technology. The main one was that it wasn't, smart, that is. Any manager knew that the main problem wasn't machines, but people. People are smart, they have ideas of their own. Unfortunately, they aren't always the ideas that the managers would like them to have. So making machines more like people was *dumb*.

"This had become obvious in 2072...."

After a major disaster occurred as a result of too-smart computer systems making conflicting and nonsensical decisions, "All over the globe, smart machinery was smashed, piled high in the streets and set on fire, or shoved off cliffs...." [p. 47-48]

The result was a tremendous drop in the world population, as masses of people violently returned to a simpler, low-technology life-style. This was called "The Pause".

But, earlier, space had been colonized, with an industrial infrastructure on the moon, and the asteroid belts developed for human life.

On Earth much of "post-Pause ... technology was a weird mixture of hi-tech and low-tech. Computers did what they were told and not much more, but they did it with blistering speed. Machine designers did all they could to keep people in the loop, either in control or with the substance of control: human psychology was considered a major design factor. A suitably qualified human could always overrule a machine." [p. 50]

It took many years before Earth reestablished contact with the space societies.

And what was life on Jupiter like? Living blimps floated in the Jupiter atmosphere. They were extremely long-lived (some were hundreds of millions of years old). "The life cycle of a blimp was complex and poorly understood, even by the blimps themselves after a billion years of speculation and research. The main reason for their ignorance was that several early stages of development took place two thousand miles down in the high-pressure abyss of Second-home's oceans, at the upper phase boundary where a gaseous mixture of hydrogen and helium gave way to liquid hydrogen and the pressure was unbelievable. Here neither blimp nor symbiaut artifact could penetrate." [p. 59-60]

"Second-home"? It seems that Jupiter is not the original home of the Jupiterians. They came from another planet from another star, long ago. "Symbiauts"? Metallic robots grown by the Jupiterians to carry out a wide variety of duties, both on and off Jupiter.

Should I warn you that what seems like hundreds of pages of this book are detailed description of the biology and life-style of the Jupiterians? The authors get carried away by their flights of extra-terrestrial biology fancies. A little too much for me, but one doesn't have to read every word.

For example, what do they do with a new baby blimp, once it survives its early centuries and rises to a level where it can gain some attention? "...the surgeons advanced. Symbiaut assistants sampled genetic imprints from the outermost sacs, comparing them to the city's records, seeking profiles that were most needed or that hinted at unusual gifts. Unwanted sacs were sculpted away by the skilled surgeons, who took care to maintain the structural integrity of the sacs that remained. The carving of a True Adult was a matter for experience and compromise....

"Outside a small crowd of blimps had gathered, the juvenile's prospective squod or socioeconomic bonding group. They listened in to the young mind's strong but uncontrolled squark emissions, tapping directly into its untrained sensorium, their excitement growing as the new citizen successfully surmounted each of the fifty-five traditional stages of awareness and thirty-four cusps of sentience.

"A small region of the blisterpod's rind crumbled, and the newly offcast construct emerged into the pale light of the Secondhome day ... and seized up.

"Baby's first symbiaut." [p. 65-69]

One of the heroes of this book is a woman named Prudence who prospects in the asteroid belt. Originally from Earth, she has a sister in a nature reserve on Earth, whose remarkable autistic son Moses proves an important element in this novel. Moses can talk to animals. Not only to cows and pigs, and dogs and cats, but also to bees and cockroaches. I must admit I did not understand how communicating with cockroaches could be possible.

Prudence herself, in her travels, discovers alien artifacts on Callisto, one of the major satellites of Jupiter. These artifacts – as we will learn – are metal symbiauts from Jupiter. No one can imagine that such objects come from Jupiter!

How do they know these artifacts are alien? They have wheels, but the wheels do not come in symmetric pairs. "...humans have a very strong innate preference for symmetry. It comes from a sexual selection mechanism: women prefer to mate with men whose faces are nearly symmetric.... Humans always design wheeled objects with the wheels in opposite pairs." [p. 131] Naturally, people call the symbiauts "wheelers" – hence the name of this book.

And here's a comment about computers: "Whoever had predicted that computers would eliminate paperwork had been about as much on target as the caveman who argued that fire was dangerous and would never catch on. The Xnet was so insecure that anything sensitive was prepared on isolated computers and printed out on paper. It was just as quick to scan printed output back in again, anyway, if need be – and paper lasted longer than magnetic film and was easier to store, as well as being more secure." [p. 209] Those lines could have been written today, and not in 2210!

And here's a technical discussion as humans begin to scientifically study the symbiauts: "... the bottom line is that this is an atomic structure found in regions of germanium alloy behind the wheeler's 'headlights'. The structure seems to be a squark generator, and very probably a squark receiver, too.... It turns out the wheelers communicate by using supersymmetric quantum-chromodynamic waves, not electromagnetic ones. Well, not exactly sQCD *waves* – more like modulated soliton collectives of sparticles." [p. 247]

Which also means that humans have been wasting their time for centuries trying to detect alien radio messages (SETI). The aliens don't use radio – they use squarks.

Once Earth realizes that the aliens are on Jupiter, and that they are the ones who have redirected an asteroid so that it will smash into Earth, it is necessary to communicate to the Jupiterians that this is a mistake. Now who could possibly be able to talk to a being as alien as a Jupiterian blimp? You guessed it – Moses, the autistic nephew of Prudence! And one problem is that the extremely long life-span of the blimps makes them not very receptive to the pressing problems of Earth beings. I'm estivating now, come back in a few hundred years!

The book has some other ideas which are mentioned in passing. "We know of a variety of life-forms and pseudo-life-forms. Humans. Blimps. Wheelers. Magnetotori. Plasmoids. So: what do they have in common?..."

"They are alive...."

"They exploit a universal principle. You might call it the cracks in the second law of thermodynamics, but that would be to dignify a serious misconception. The true principle is much simpler. *Biology corrupts physics....*

"We must not think of life as some exotic form of matter that requires extremely improbable events to come into being. Life is a universal process – reproducing, self-organizing, self-complicating...." [p. 498-499]

*Wheelers* is not a conventional science fiction novel by any means. It is a cross between speculative science and space opera. Did I enjoy it? Yes, and no. Some of it was just too unlikely (communicating with bees and cockroaches). Some of the characters were not at all convincing. Some people and their behavior was also just too unlikely. I didn't believe in them. But there sure are lots of things to keep the reader's attention. I will certainly try their latest sf novel, *Heaven*, when it comes out in paperback, and their latest popular science book, *Evolving the Alien: The Science of Extraterrestrial Life*, many of whose ideas certainly appear in *Wheelers*, when it comes out in paperback. Or maybe I won't wait that long....

### Quote of the Month: *The Tragedy of Yellowstone Park*

"Yellowstone Park ... was the first wilderness to be set aside as a natural preserve anywhere in the world. The region around the Yellowstone River in Wyoming had long been recognized for its wondrous scenic beauty. Lewis and Clark sang its praises. Artists like Bierstadt and Moran painted it. And the new Northern Pacific Railroad wanted a scenic attraction to draw tourists west. So in 1872, in part because of railroad pressure, President Ulysses Grant set aside two million acres and created Yellowstone National Park.

"There was only one problem, unacknowledged then and later. No one had any experience trying to preserve wilderness. There had never been any need to do it before. And it was assumed to be much easier than it proved to be.

"When Theodore Roosevelt visited the park in 1903, he saw a landscape teeming with game. There were thousands of elk, buffalo, black bear, deer, mountain lions, grizzlies, coyotes, wolves, and bighorn sheep. By that time there were rules in place to keep things as they were. Soon after that, the Park Service was formed, a new bureaucracy whose sole job was to maintain the park in its original condition.

"Yet within ten years, the teeming landscape that Roosevelt saw was gone forever. And the reason for this was the park managers -- charged with keeping the park in pristine condition -- had taken a

series of steps that they thought were in the best interest of preserving the park and its animals. But they were wrong...

"... the early park managers mistakenly believed that elk were about to become extinct. So they tried to increase the elk herds within the park by eliminating predators. To that end, they shot and poisoned all the wolves in the park. And they prohibited Indians from hunting in the park, though Yellowstone was a traditional hunting ground.

"Protected, the elk herds exploded, and ate so much of certain trees and grasses that the ecology of the area began to change. The elk ate the trees that the beavers used to make dams, so the beavers vanished. That was when the managers discovered beavers were vital to the overall water management of the region.

"When the beavers disappeared, the meadows dried up; the trout and otter vanished; soil erosion increased; and the park ecology changed even further.

"By the 1920s it had become abundantly clear there were too many elk, so the rangers began to shoot them by the thousands. But the change in plant ecology seemed to be permanent; the old mix of trees and grasses did not return.

"It also became increasingly clear that the Indian hunters of old had exerted a valuable ecological influence on the park lands by keeping down the numbers of elk, moose, and bison. This belated recognition came as part of a more general understanding that native Americans had strongly shaped the 'untouched wilderness' that the first white men saw - or thought they were seeing -- when they first arrived in the New World. The 'untouched wilderness' was nothing of the sort. Human beings on the North American continent had exerted a huge influence on the environment for thousands of years -- burning plains grasses, modifying forests, thinning specific animal populations, and hunting others to extinction.

"In retrospect, the rule forbidding Indians from hunting was seen as a mistake. But it was just one of many mistakes that continued to be made in an, unbroken stream by park managers. Grizzlies were protected, then killed off. Wolves were killed off, then brought back. Animal research involving field study and radio collars was halted, then resumed after certain species were declared endangered...

"So what you have ... is a history of ignorant, incompetent, and disastrously intrusive intervention, followed by attempts to repair the intervention, followed by attempts to repair the damage caused by the repairs, as dramatic as any oil spill or toxic dump. Except in this case there is no evil corporation or fossil fuel economy to blame. This disaster was caused by environmentalists charged with protecting the wilderness, who made one dreadful mistake after another -- and, along the way, proved how little they understood the environment they intended to protect."

From **State of Fear** by Michael Crichton (2004), p. 532-535

*For Comments:* 13 Pinsker St., Rehovot 76308. Email: [asheer@netvision.net.il](mailto:asheer@netvision.net.il). Tel: Aharon Sheer 08-947-1225  
 Editor: Aharon Sheer. Logo by: Miriam Ben-Loulou  
 For mail delivery of **CyberCozen**, please donate 30 shekels per YEAR; For airmail to US \$15; If Aharon Sheer can hand-deliver it, 15 shekels. For **free email delivery** write to [asheer@netvision.net.il](mailto:asheer@netvision.net.il) (specify XP Word format, or PDF format).  
 Copyright © 2006  
 All Rights reserved to specified authors and artists.  
 כל הזכויות שמורות למחברים וליוצרים, כפי שצוינו.