



Science-Fiction Fanzine

Vol. XIX, No. 4; April, 2007

### The Israeli Society for Science Fiction and Fantasy

ארבע העונות: מפגש אביב בנושא אלכימיה: 26 באפריל

האלכימיה עומדת בבסיסו של המדע המוכר לנו כיום. משאת נפשה הייתה גבוהה מאז ומתמיד כגובה החלום האנושי: נעורי נצח ועושר מידי וקל. רבים חושבים שהאלכימיה פסה מן העולם, אך לא כך הוא. האלכימיה לא אבדה, אלא קמה שוב לחיים מהאפר כמו עוף החול. החלום האלכימאי קיים גם כיום, וניצב כמו תמיד, רם וגאה, מביט בתקווה אל עתיד הולך ומתקרב בו החלום יהפוך למציאות. ההרצאה תעסוק בתולדות האלכימיה במקומות שונים בעולם, תדון בקשיים הניצבים בפני החלום האלכימאי ובדרכים השונות שבהן ניסו לפתור את הקשיים הללו בספרות הספקולטיבית, בפולקלור, במגנה ובאנימה ובסוגי מדיה נוספים. לבסוף תיחשף התקדמות האלכימיה בהווה והעתיד הקרוב. את ההרצאה יעבירו יו"ר האגודה קרן אמבר ולירון אפריאט, ממקימי אמא"י. ההרצאה תתקיים בבית אריאלה, ביום חמישי, 26 באפריל, בשעה 19:30. עלות ההרצאה: 10 שקלים. חינם לחברי אגודה.

### Rehovot Science Fiction Club - SFIR – חוג מדע בדיוני ברחובות

ימי א' בשעה 20:00 בפקולטה לחקלאות ברחובות, חדר 2, בבניין ליד הבריכה. הפעילויות ללא תשלום. 22.4 - אין פעילות

29.4 - הרצאה: האם יש חיים תבוניים ביקום? מרצה: איתמר רוט.

תא אנימה - ימי ג' בשעה 20:00 (אותו מקום)

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

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

## Letters to the Editor

Aharon,

I just received the March issue of *CyberCozen*. I enjoyed your review of *Have Space Suit - Will Travel* by Robert Heinlein. I was interested to learn where the term "Soda Jerk" came from; I had always sort of wondered. In regard to conditions vis a vis 1958 and the present. 1. None of the drug stores I patronize in LA have a soda fountain. Come to think of it, I guess I have not seen one for years. They still may exist in small towns such as Ojai or Santa Paula, but I usually don't go into drug stores there. 2. As you say, \$500 wouldn't go very far towards college tuition these days, especially at the high class private universities. 3. I haven't seen a slogan contest for years. 4. I have a feeling the UCLA students living in my building wouldn't have seen a slide rule or know what to do with it. (I still have three or four. I used them a great deal in high school. My high school physics and chemistry teacher was a great one for solving problems by proportions, and I occasionally use a slide rule for that purpose.) At least my high school in Ventura offered better science and math courses than Kip's high school in Centerville. I did well in the former, but not in the latter. I would have done much better if calculators had been available in those days.

I notice that in the last few *CyberCozens*, practically all the articles have been written by you. Is interest dwindling?

I am not familiar with the **Grolier Encyclopedia of Science Fiction**. I shall have to look into it. Perhaps they have one at a local bookstore that I could peruse before buying one.

**Ted Henderson**

**Ted** – The **Grolier Encyclopedia of Science Fiction** is on CD-ROM. It's the multimedia version of the book **Encyclopedia of Science Fiction** by Peter Nicholls and John Clute. Whether the CD version is still available I don't know.

**Aharon**

**Dear Aharon,**

As I have mentioned, I started to read science fiction, as such, in the early 1950s. Naturally, Heinlein was one of my favorite authors, and naturally I read everything by Heinlein I could get my hands on. Somehow I never got **Have Space Suit - Will Travel**. I enjoyed your review immensely, but since I'm not likely to read it, I hope you will privately reveal the surprise ending to me.

The name John Varley sounds very familiar and I'm sure I must have read *something* by him but I can't remember what. From your review, the book, **Red Thunder**, is enticing, to say the least. I really would like to read it.

The only sf I've read lately are the novels of Stephen Fry, the famous British actor AND author. I've read four of his five novels because I haven't been able to get **The Liar**. One of his novels, **Making History**, is *practically* sf – a scientist finds a way to prevent the birth of Adolph Hitler! Intriguing.

Be well. Wishes.

**Clara Rimon**

**Clara** – I've mailed you both **Have Space Suit - Will Travel**, and **Red Thunder**. Enjoy. **Aharon**

## Book Review by Aharon Sheer

**Starfarers** by Vonda N. McIntyre (1989), 280 pages.

I enjoyed this book. It's by an author new to me, born 1948. She made a lot of money writing novelizations of **Star Trek**. The great advantage of doing that is that the money frees her from economic worries and allows her to write other books of her own choice.

**Starfarers** is the first of a series of four books about a huge faster-than-light starship, called *Starfarer*. The series takes place about a hundred years in our future, in a world in which there have been many societal and technological changes. One of the background things is that Russia has been taken over by the Mideast Sweep (presumably this is a Muslim sweep, although that is not mentioned in this book).

One of the fascinating technological changes is that there was a period – now past – in which groups of humans changed themselves using genetic engineering. The “divers” are one such group, people who have modified themselves so that they can live in the ocean, having both gills and lungs, as well as in the air. The divers have close relationships with whales and dolphins. For reasons not explained here, such genetic modification is currently frowned upon, but the divers are an active existing group which has developed its own life style and personal relationship customs. We are introduced to the divers via a normal human, J.D. Sauvage, who uses an artificial gill that attaches to her back, enabling her to join the divers and study them. J. D. is an expert on alien contact, preparing for a trip in *Starfarer* which hopes to make contact with aliens that might be found in another star system. So her investigations of the divers are part of her way to prepare for dealing with any alien species that might be met by *Starfarer*.

“Three orcas breached, one after the other, bursting free, turning, splashing hard and disappearing beneath the slate-blue water. A moment later

they leaped again, heading in the opposite direction. The white spring sunlight glazed their black flanks and the stark white patches on their sides.

“Walking down the path to her cabin, J.D. watched the beautiful, elegant creatures, and wondered how she could even consider leaving them.

“... Five or six divers, sleek in the water, swam with them....

“She sent a signal to her metabolic enhancer and scrambled down the bank. A rush of heat radiated from beneath the small scar on her side. The enhancer kicked her metabolism into high gear. Stripping off her clothes, she left them in a pile on the rocks and waded into the frigid water. She gasped when the water reached the level of her nipples. She hesitated, shivering, then plunged underwater.

“When she surfaced, Zev [one of her friends among the divers] bobbed in front of her. A wave slapped her face, reminding her that she was in an alien element....

“‘We came to talk to you,’ he said. ‘Will you come?’

“‘Of course,’ she said. ‘But I have to get my lung.’

“He swam with her to the anchored platform. The orcas and the other divers accompanied them....

“At the platform she put on her swim fins and let the artificial lung slide onto her back. Warm, a little slimy, it spread itself across her shoulders. She slipped her mask on. By the time she had cleared it, it had connected with the lung. She breathed in the musky, warm, highly oxygenated air.

“J.D. sank beneath the choppy waves. The peacefulness of the sea enfolded her, and the alienness and fear vanished. She was at home.” [p. 43-44]

How can a spaceship travel faster than light? Here the author has the help of physicist Dr. John D. Cramer, who is also an sf writer: *Twistor* (1991), *Einstein's Bridge* (1997). Here the crazy idea is that the space ship uses a giant superstring which just happens to be found between the orbit of Earth and Mars. When the ship does so, it quickly goes through a transition period, after which it is at the other end of the superstring – orbiting the star Tau Ceti, many light years away from Earth. The flight can then be reversed, but it can take quite a bit of time (years) before Starfarer returns.

One of the heroes is Victoria MacKenzie, a physicist.

“Cosmic string had fascinated Victoria from the time she was a child. It drew her to astronomy, thence to physics.

“Cosmic string, a remnant of creation, formed a network throughout the galaxy. The strings vibrated in a cycle measured in eons, a cycle now taking a strand past the solar system and within reach of earth’s current technology.

“The cosmic string made *Starfarer* possible. The starship would use the moon’s gravity to catapult it toward the string. Then it would grasp the string with powerful magnetic fields, and tap the unlimited power of its strange properties. *Starfarer* would rotate around the strand, building up the transition energy that would squeeze it out of Einsteinian space-time and overwhelm the impossible distances between star systems. When it returned to the starting point of its rotation –

“It would not return to its starting point. From the point of view of those left behind, the starship would vanish. It would reappear . . . somewhere else.

“That was the theory. Victoria had spent the better part of her career working on that theory....

“[J.D. asked] ‘What do you think of the idea that the string is a lifeline?’

“Victoria chuckled. ‘Thrown to us by a distant civilization? I think it makes a great story.’” [p. 35]

Then there are sensory artists, people whose bodies have been modified to make them supersensitive to all kinds of sensory inputs. These inputs are recorded and can be downloaded, thus allowing others to experience the same sensations, but without entering the difficult or dangerous situations which the sensory artist has chosen.

The design of *Starfarer* is influenced by the ideas of Dr. Gerard K. O’Neill, the founder of the Space Studies Institute. The ship is enormous, kilometers long. It rotates around its long axis, making possible artificial gravity via centrifugal force. People live and work on the inner surface of the space ship, and can look up and see tiny people walking upside down on the opposite side. The ship contains a complete environment, plants, animals, and weather. Children are not (yet) allowed. Nor are there dogs and cats, although they do have miniature horses as sorts of pets, running around freely. The little horses are considered as not potentially noxious, the way cats and dogs can be.

The ship also has stupid robots, known as AS (artificial stupids), who do various cleaning tasks. And there is a universal Web, called Arachne, which anyone can hook into at any time to get information or to help in doing computations. The ship has a complex ecology and air and lighting system, which has to be managed constantly. There are even professional gardeners, as well as geneticists.

The author has fun describing a new kind of (childless) family. The members are two men and a woman (Victoria MacKenzie), all important people in the ship’s crew. There was originally a fourth partner, a woman, but she died in an accident (not described). The three have sex with each other regularly. Such a foursome (momentarily threesome until they get a fourth) is considered a very old-fashioned, conservative way of living in this future world, but other forms of family life are not described.

Here’s a conversation a journalist has with Victoria about her family:

“... ‘You’ve got to admit that polygamy is unusual.’

“‘But my family isn’t polygamous.’

“‘What, then?’

“‘The technical term is “family partnership”. It isn’t as rigorously defined as polygamy. A family partnership is gender-transparent. It doesn’t require a particular mix, like several members of one gender and one member of the other.’

“‘But that’s what yours has.’

“Victoria forced herself to answer without hesitation. ‘It does right now. But it doesn’t have to.’...

“‘Besides, the last time someone wrote about our personal lives, we got insults from weirdos who think we’re reactionary, even stranger messages congratulating us on our traditional values, and a handful of people who thought they’d fit right in.’” [p. 63-64]

And then there's a description of a shower taken on the transport that carried Victoria to *Starfarer*:

"Zero-g showers amused her. The water skimmed over her, pulled across her body by mild suction at one side of the compartment. When she was wet, she turned off the water and lathered herself with soap, scraped off most of the suds with an implement like the sweat-scraper of an ancient Greek athlete – or a racehorse – and turned the water on again till the last of the soap washed away. It felt like standing in a warm windy rain. When she finished, she was covered all over with a thin skin of water. She scraped herself off again, got out of the shower and closed the door, and turned the vacuum on high to vent the last of the water out of the compartment and into the recycler. Her whole body felt tingly and refreshed." [p. 65]

So what's the story? The background material is fascinating, but what's the plot? It seems the U.S. has a new President (this was before George Bush II) who is an America Firster. He thinks that sending this giant government-sponsored ship to other stars is a big waste. He wants to equip *Starfarer* with nuclear weapons, and have it orbit the Earth over the lands of the Mideast Sweep. Some people think that that might be seen as an act of war, and end up with a global disaster. On top of that, the new Pres wants the divers to be sea spies for the U.S. The divers respond to that by moving to Canadian waters where – hopefully – the U.S. won't touch them.

The *Starfarer* scientists want to ignore the President and head off to the stars – and quickly, before it's too late. So all those who want to make the trip have to come up to the space ship, and those on the ship who don't want to make the trip have to leave, and quickly. We get acquainted with how these Starfarers make their democratic decisions, especially in the face of the people who supply the salaries and want to change their goals. All in all it's an exciting book, continually varying and with a variety of complex people whose interactions are of constant interest. Not a great book, but a good read. I hope to read some of the other books in the series: **The Starfarers Quartet**, the story of alien contact specialist J.D. Sauvage and her colleagues in rebellion aboard the campus starship *Starfarer*, which begins with *Starfarers*, continues with *Transition* and *Metaphase*, and concludes with *Nautilus*.

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