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**Book Reviews by Aharon Sheer**

*Native Tongue* by Suzette Haden Elgin (1984), 301 pages.

This book was recommended by Shmuel Kahn. I had never heard of it, nor of its author, and my first impressions as I read it were very negative. But, in the end, I enjoyed it very much. Born in 1936, the author has a Ph.D. in Linguistics from the University of California, San Diego, which she received in the 1960s. Besides science fiction, Elgin has written many popular non-fiction books about using language.

This book, as the title suggests, has a strong basis in linguistics. Elgin is an ardent feminist, a strong aspect of this book, and even constructed a language (a "conlang", or "constructed language"), called **Láadan**, and published a grammar and dictionary of it in 1985. In *Native Tongue*, **Láadan** is presented as a language for women only, allowing women to express women's thoughts which in male-created languages such as English cannot be properly expressed.

*Native Tongue* takes place in what might be called a parallel history of the Earth. In this parallel Earth, in 1987 scientists proved that women are intellectually inferior to men, and in response to this new knowledge, the United States passed a constitutional amendment in 1991 prohibiting women from holding elected or appointed public

office, from working in scholarly or scientific professions, or even doing any kind of work outside of the home without the written permission of her husband, or other male guardian.

As constitutionally inferior beings, women are treated with open contempt and ridicule by all males, except for the rare one who does not openly show his contempt and ridicule, even though he clearly feels that way.

The story takes place starting in 2205. As I read the beginnings of this novel, I felt I was reading a book written by someone mentally ill. All of the men (with only one exception in the entire book) as presented as intellectually stupid louts, gross, crude, and clearly subnormal in intelligence, roughly as we see a Red-Neck caricature. (It is interesting to note that Elgin grew up in the Ozarks in Arkansas, and after retiring from her professorship in Linguistics in San Diego California, in 1980, went back to the Ozarks to live. So maybe she is neither satirizing men in her book, nor exaggerating, but simply describing men as they are where she grew up and where she lives today.)

In contrast to the men in the book, all of the women in the book, with only one exception, are thoughtful, kind, highly

intelligent, reserved, controlled, constantly on guard in their language and word, friendly, and helpful to all. So repulsive is the contrast between the men of Elgin's book and the women, and the contrast of both to the basic idea of the book -- that women have been proven to be subnormal in intelligence -- that I felt that I was reading the writings of a woman mentally ill. However, the book got better as it developed, and eventually I was able to accept the women of the book (and the one man of normal intelligence) as people whose lives and activities could be of genuine interest.

In the 23rd century, Earth has interstellar travel, and has settled large numbers of Earth-like planets. As a result, the Earth no longer has overcrowding or any shortages of resources. Any family that feels something lacking in their lives can simply to move to a new planet, where all of their needs will be satisfied. How is the possible? With the help of numerous alien beings from numerous planets who can and do provide Earthmen with technology and resources that can benefit mankind. Negotiating agreements and treaties with these numerous aliens requires humans who can speak the alien languages, and can act as translators.

These human translators, these essential linguists (known as "Lingoes") who can communicate in these alien languages, are trained in a unique way, as described in this book. Whole communities of linguists have been developed whose whole way of life is dedicated to learning other languages, and then working as translators. And how do they do it? They have Interfaces, rooms in two parts. In one part is a human baby or small child, with a normal oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere. In the other part is an alien adult, in his or her normal, perhaps chlorine-based atmosphere, or whatever. While the alien cannot live in the human side of the Interface, and the human not in the alien side, they can talk

to each other, and watch each other, and perform parallel activities. Since infants and small children can learn multiple languages as if each is their native language, the Lingo children, through contact with aliens from early childhood, become native speakers of the alien languages. And every Lingo child is taught to speak, read and write two alien languages, and several human languages. So it is quite normal for Lingo children to go from one human adult to another, practicing Hungarian or Navajo or Japanese or any of various human languages, or to an alien Interface or to an older human who already knows that alien language, learning each language as if their native tongues.

An example of the schedule of James X, a typical 14-month infant, is given. "... the infant will have extensive exposure each day to two Alien languages, to the primary native language of the Household (which will be English, French or Swahili) and to sign language. But this is by no means all. Great care is taken to see that the adults directing the [physical] exercise sessions speak some different Earth language to the children -- in James' particular case that morning session involves Japanese and the afternoon Hopi [, an American Indian language]. That is, James X must deal with daily language input in at least six different languages -- and the answer to your inevitable question is no ... this does not cause James any difficulty. Initially there may be a brief period of confusion and minimal delay in language development; however, by the age of five or six he will have native speaker fluency in all those various tongues." [p. 83]

There are of course many human examples of children learning multiple languages, but the basic flaw of the Interface idea, I think, is that children learn not only from watching and observing adults, but also from physical contact with adults, and working together with physical objects used in common.

The alien in the Interface, if the atmosphere is really hostile to humans, will not be able to have such shared physical contact and shared use of objects, which might make language learning much harder. Elgin does not discuss this problem in her book. However, since babies learn much by observing what others do, and mirroring it, perhaps Elgin is right that to learn from the Alien it is enough to observe and copy what is done and what is spoken by the chosen alien.

One point Elgin makes is that the aliens must be humanoid. Head, mouth, eyes, hands, feet. It is impossible, she says, to communicate with non-humanoid aliens. Non-humanoid aliens are just too different for humans to be able to learn their languages. But within that limitation, the Lingoos have become essential to Earth's economy and interstellar expansion.

Elgin describes a negotiating session with a relatively new alien species, the Jeelods. The only existing human native speaker is eleven year old Nazareth Joanna Chornyak, who "was the only living Terran who could speak the Jeelod's language with even minimal fluency. There were two Chornyak infants learning it from her, of course, so there'd be someone to step into her shoes at a later date and to serve as a formal backup. One of them was nine months old, and the other was going on two... there wasn't much you could expect of them in the way of negotiating skills for quite some time to come." [p. 27]

And then we have the third aspect of this book: the Lingoos are universally hated by the non-Lingoos. It is widely believed that the Lingoos are enormously wealthy, living lives vastly better than

those of the few humans still on Earth. This jealousy and hatred of the Lingoos has led to riots and attacks against them, and in fact the Lingoos are forced to live in extremely crowded mostly underground fortresses, as protection against attacks against them. From their fortresses, Lingo translators are transported for grueling long workdays as crucial but hated essentials to Earth's continued expansion in space.

The main emphasis in this book is on the lives of the women Lingoos, from early childhood when they start learning multiple languages, through their marriage and necessary childbearing years – for there is a constant need for more translators and the women Lingoos must give birth to as many of them as possible, through the years after menopause when they continue to work as translators but live in Barren Houses (no men allowed entrance, but the female children visit often) restricted to those women who no longer bear children, until old age and decrepitude. Repressed and ridiculed by the stupid men, these highly sophisticated and intelligent women have a rich and special life of their own, but with much personal suffering at the hands of the men. That suffering mainly ends when they finally go to a Barren House, although they still are required to translate as long as they are able to, and still have no independent life privileges.

I cannot tell the whole story of this fascinating and complex book of satire and cruelty. I'm certainly grateful that *Native Tongue* takes place in a parallel world, and that our world has nothing in it anything like the state of women in this parallel world.

*Seeker* by Jack McDevitt (2005), 373 pages.

Jack McDevitt is one of my favorite authors, although I have not been able to persuade many people to read his books. Many of his books deal with future archeology – perhaps not a subject that

much interests sf readers. See my reviews of *A Talent for War* (1989), reviewed in the December 2001 *CyberCozen*, *The Engines of God* (1994) and *Eternity Road* (1997) reviewed in December 1998,

*Deepsix* (2001) in June 2002, and *Chindi* (2002) in October 2004.

McDevitt's world in this novel (and several others) takes place 9,000 years from now. About our time (roughly), interstellar travel was invented using faster-than-light starships, and mankind spread out through numerous star systems, setting up colonies on the many earth-like planets scattered through space. 9,000 years is a long time. Civilizations rose and fell, worlds had wars and famines, whole societies collapsed and rose again. On Earth today we've had perhaps 4,000 years of technological civilizations, but archeologists have only been studying this history for about two hundred years, and there is plenty of work for archeologists who continue to discover new evidence of past history. 9,000 years from now, with multiple worlds settled (including moons and asteroids), there will be a lot for archeologists to explore.

What about alien life? Only one intelligent life form has been found: the Mutes, who are a telepathic species that do not speak with sound. Fortunately, they do not compete with humans for worlds, for humans find them repulsive and distressing, and the feeling is mutual. They appear only briefly in this book, but the contact is fascinating.

"[The Mutes] are telepaths, and there's something about their physiognomy that creeps people out. Not to mention the fact that they can see into your mind.... What humans and Mutes need is not understanding, but distance. *We're just not designed to get along....* Mutes didn't really look that bad. They were humanoid, but there was something insectile about them.... Red eyes, fangs, claws, and a smile that suggests you're next on the menu." [p. 147]

The essential conflict explored in this book is the desire of professional archeologists to do all the exploration, and put the findings in museums and universities, versus the desire of private

collectors to own samples of works of art and culture from past civilizations to decorate their own homes. This conflict exists today, with many explorers ("grave-robbers") all over the world hunting for unique ancient objects to sell to high-paying buyers, versus bitter complaints from poorly funded professionals who see the sites they want to study raided and decimated. On the other hand, those amateur thieves sometimes find sites the professionals overlook, opening up new finds for serious study.

After 9,000 years, there are a lot more places to look than there are today, and a lot more people looking. Alex Benedict is one of these "grave-robbers", with a high intuition for looking in places where no archeologist would think to look, and finding things. His assistant is Chase Kolpath, a woman who (suitably) chases all over, gathering information for her boss. Together and/or separately they travel to potential sites, customers, and sources of information. Chase is the first person narrator of *Seeker*. Alex and Chase are what one might call honest grave-robbers: They don't just take some of the nicest items to sell to their private customers, they also notify the archeological authorities (and pay all their taxes) so that the museums will get a good choice too.

McDevitt poses a problem for Alex and Chase to solve, and then follows them through their adventures. I enjoy the characters and the future world described, although I must admit it is much too like the current upper-middle-class United States to be really convincing. Social life (including male-female relations in a world of reliable contraceptives – Chase the narrator is a woman), restaurants, hotels, travel systems, all are remarkably like what we have today, just more technologically advanced. The cheaper restaurants have intelligent robots that welcome you, take your orders, and bring your food. The high-class restaurants have humans to welcome you, make

recommendations and take your orders; but robots still bring the food and clean the tables. McDevitt (presumably raised as a Catholic and hating it) has eliminated religion entirely from his future world. It just does not exist.

Perhaps McDevitt likes things just as they are, and is confident that things will stay that way (at the top of the economic pyramid) forever. One improvement: there are almost no criminals or mentally ill, medicine having found ways to help people with their problems. In extreme cases, a criminal's mind may have to be erased, and he will have an entire new false past memory implanted. The newly created personality is almost always an honest and decent person.

One game McDevitt likes to play is with artificial intelligence (AI). Nobody answers his own phone – everyone has designed an AI to represent him, and protect him from nuisances. Getting around someone's AI to be able to talk to him personally can be a problem. The AIs also provide useful services, such as highly intelligent data searches. Your AI can also create an avatar, useful for exploring the past. Would you like to converse with some famous person from the past? Based on known historical records and books, an avatar can be called up who will carry on a convincing conversation, looking and talking just as historically known, and saying and thinking what the original person might have said. Many famous people of the past had avatars set up before they died, but your home AI can create a new one for you if you ask. Carrying on a conversation with a long-dead personage can be a useful technique for exploring historical events – a technique charmingly used in this book. Here's a discussion

from the book about America in the Third Millennium on Earth (the years 2000 to 2999, the historical era of interest in this book). The speaker in italics is Jacob, Alex's AI; Kay Wallis was the leader of an anti-governmental organization that wanted to leave Earth at that time and settle on a new planet:

*"... they lived in a society that was nominally a republic .... It controlled the churches, and used the schools to indoctrinate rather than teach. Patriotism was defined as unwavering support for the leader and the flag.... [Kay] Wallis laid out their objections to various governmental policies in **Glory Run**. Basically, they were concerned that each generation was subjected to a series of ideologies.... She spells everything out. Get the religious groups under control. Reign in the corporate types. Recognize that dissent is healthy. Provide a level playing field so no one is disadvantaged."*

"If American society – that was America, right? – Yes, if American society was so oppressive, how'd she get it published?"

*"It was published in China,"* said Jacob, *'one of the last strongholds of democracy on the planet.'* [p. 41]

"Seeker" was the name of one of the spaceships which Kay Wallis's followers used to leave Earth. They were never heard from again. What Alex and Chase are seeking is to find out what happened to Seeker.

Although I enjoyed most of this book, I was disappointed by the violent (although ultimately happy) ending. I think I would recommend other books by McDevitt before this one.

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