



Science-Fiction Fanzine

Vol. XX, No. 10; October, 2008

The Israeli Society for Science Fiction and Fantasy

Rehovot Science Fiction Club - SFIR – קהוג מדע בדיוני ברחובות

כל פעילויות התא הרחובותי מתקיימות בימי א' בשעה 20:00 בפקולטה לחקלאות ברחובות, חדר 2 (הבניין שליד הבריכה). הכניסה לכל הפעילויות אינה כרוכה בתשלום. לפרטים נוספים, כתבו אל (Sfir42@yahoo.com). אין פעילות בחופשה.

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

Comments on Jack Cohen's Lecture, by Miriam Ben-Loulu [Conclusion] (from *CyberCozen* April 1996)

At the January meeting when I asked Dr. Jack Cohen how one could know whether aliens were intelligent, I wasn't asking a facetious question. The subject of intelligence (usually defined as capability, as opposed to performance) is a sore subject to anyone connected with education. In San Diego (home of Sea World, Scripp's Institute of Oceanography, the San Diego Zoo and Wild Animal Park) there was a big scandal because the city's special classes for the educable mentally retarded were full of black and brown children (a situation only slightly better than if the children had been found to be black and blue). The minority groups raised their voices and the classes were closed on the basis that the intelligence tests were culturally oriented.

Some tests have tried to eliminate cultural bias by basing the test on problem solving. This didn't solve the problem. In this sort of test the problem and possible solutions are shown in pictures and the child chooses the best way to achieve the aim without worrying whether it is morally acceptable or not. For example, a boy wants to get to the other side of a high fence with a locked gate. The choices are: 1) try to kick the fence down 2) pull up a crate and climb over the fence 3) sit down and cry. But what is the intelligent answer? If a child fears climbing he will not choose 2). If he likes climbing, but he will have to jump down on the other side and fears jumping, he will also avoid 2). If he fears being called a "crybaby" he will avoid 3). If he is weak and spindly he will avoid 1) but if he is strong and violent he will choose 1). So not only does culture affect intelligence tests, but the individual's personality affects even problem solving

processes. Therefore we can't really measure intelligence even among humans.

We now accept that dolphins are "highly intelligent". This is a relatively recent development. My great-grandparents would have considered them unintelligent fish --- if they even heard about them.

But what we really mean is that dolphins are more intelligent than fish and less than man. So we can compare even if we can't measure; or can we? If intelligence varies within a species as it does in man, do we have dolphins who are more intelligent than mentally retarded humans and others who are mentally retarded and have less intelligence than an average fish (which type of fish? what size?)??? Are there "under achievers" among dolphins? And if we can't test or really compare intelligence on our planet, how are we going to do so with aliens? (One wonders how aliens would test our intelligence!) Suppose that somehow we would compare our intelligence with theirs and that the "first contact" is made with a group of aliens that are moronic in comparison with us (as many of the early BEMs ["Bug-Eyed Monsters"] were) and that all subsequent policy decisions were based on this observed level of intelligence, presuming this to be representative of the species... and then it turns out to be a group isolated from the others of their species as being sub-standard (as we humans isolate the mentally retarded). So many possibilities and so many more questions than answers when we talk about intelligence.

Short Book Reviews by Aharon Sheer

The Tenth Planet by Dean Wesley Smith and Kristine Kathryn Rusch (1999), 264 pages.

I enjoyed this book immensely. An interesting idea, a few nice characters. A page-turner. The only problem was this: as I approached the end of the book, I realized that there was no possibility this story could be finished in the few remaining pages. Aha! It's the first volume of a three book series! No mention of THAT on the cover. So now I have to read the two remaining books. (Yes, I bought them.)

Archeologists digging in sites thousands of years old sometimes find layers of ash. Perhaps it's from an invading force that burned out the local village? Or maybe there was a forest fire? Or perhaps an enormous volcanic eruption covered the area in ash? Figuring out

what caused that layer of ash can add a lot of interest to the archeologists' work. Look at the "Burned House" in Jerusalem as an example.

But what if an archeologist discovers that there are large-scale areas of thin ash in sites scattered around the world? And what if studies show that these areas, all of which have common puzzling characteristics, come at fixed intervals of 2006 years, going back for tens of thousands of years?

One poor archeologist fell into an unintentional trap when studying these ash layers. He examined their microscopic characteristics, and discerned a fine structure that suggested the remains of nano-machines in the ash. Since the ash is

from many thousands of years ago, this seems like a mistake. He publishes his observations, careful not to speculate on the meaning of what he has found. He just describes it. Sadly for him, some smart newspaper guy starts writing articles about the "crazy scientist" who found "nano-machines" in many-thousand-year old ash. The poor archeologist, who was careful not to say any such thing, finds himself ridiculed by the whole scientific world. His reputation is ruined. Yes, he can still take undergraduate archeology students out to look at ancient Indian sites (being careful not to offend any of the local tribes). But no respectable archeologist will work with him. He can no longer get any serious grants to study anything other than the most local sites in his university's area.

Now add the Tenth Planet. It seems there is a Tenth Planet (when this book was written in 1999 they hadn't yet stopped counting Pluto as the Ninth Planet), with a very long eccentric orbit, that orbits close to the sun, passing by the Earth every 2006 years, and then goes back out again. Whereas on its previous visits no humans were aware of its visits, this time there are satellites in space, probes circling other planets, shuttles leaving the Earth. The planet is peculiar. It does not reflect energy of any kind. It can only be detected by the fact that it blocks out the view of more distant objects in space, such as stars. The Tenth Planet absorbs all energy. Its presence is first discovered on Earth when it goes by a probe circling the planet Uranus and simply absorbs all of the probe's energy, leaving it non-functioning. Transmissions from the probe simply dry up and stop within a second.

Later on, as the planet approaches Earth, a shuttle is sent up to look at it. All the energy of the shuttle is absorbed, leaving the people on the shuttle dead.

As readers, we are also informed of the conversations of the alien beings on the Tenth Planet, about which the people

on Earth know nothing. For the planet is a giant artificial space ship, which has been circling Earth for millions of years. As it approaches the sun, its occupants wake up and begin acting. Fortunately for Earth, the beings of the Tenth Planet can not survive on an oxygen-based planet. That would be poison for them. So they are not going to take over the Earth. However, the aliens can use organic material from Earth. So, on each bypass of Earth they send down large numbers of nano-machines which process organic matter over large areas, and then collect the resultant processed matter and return it to the planet. There are two opportunities to do this: once on the way toward the Sun, and once on the way back out again. They have always been careful to harvest only restricted areas on Earth, a few hundreds of millions of square kilometers, in different places, so as not to destroy too much of life on Earth. The aliens are aware that there is primitive intelligent life on Earth, and they try to minimize the damage they do. In addition, they gather as much energy as they can, so that their planet will survive the almost two thousand years they will be a long way from any source of usable energy. So they must hibernate until the next approach to the sun.

On this pass, however, the humans can try to fight back. They can study the invaders. The archeologist who first wrote about what these ash layers contain is suddenly respectable. His observations have been proven correct. He is invited to join a large team studying the approaching planet. His reputation is recovered.

Earth people can try to attack the invading vessels, sent from the planet to drop the nano-machines, and later to harvest them. Earth people can even destroy some of these vessels. But this infuriates the aliens. The aliens have always tried to minimize the damage to intelligent life on Earth, and this is the response? Well, they are going by the Earth now on their way around the Sun,

but what will happen when they start their way back? They are angry! At this point the first volume of *The Tenth Planet* ends, leaving us to get the next volume to find out if Earthmen are going to survive the aliens' trip back around the sun.

Some of this seems silly:

Why should the sun-approaching Tenth Planet bother to collect all of the precious energy from an Earth-sent probe circling Uranus, when the Tenth Planet will soon be going close by the Sun, where it can collect vast quantities of energy from the Sun itself? Similarly, why suck all of the energy from a space shuttle? The quantities that can be gained

are minute compared to what they will get from their approach to the sun.

If oxygen-based life is poisonous to the aliens, how can they use Earth-based organic matter? Where did the aliens come from originally? Why have they been circling the Earth in an enormously long elliptical orbit for millions of years? Why not pick a closer orbit? For that matter, since they can hibernate, why not try for another star, with perhaps a planet more suited to their needs?

Well, perhaps we will find out in the next volume, *The Tenth Planet – Oblivion*.

Balance of Trade by Sharon Lee and Steve Miller (2004), 413 pages.

In the March 2006 *CyberCozen* I reviewed an earlier book by this strange married couple, who live childless with their cats in Maine. The earlier book, *Local Custom* (2000), also takes place in the Liaden Universe[®], and it was a fascinating romantic novel.

This book is a coming-of-age story. The hero, Jethri Gobelyn, is the 17 year old third child of Terran traders in the Gobelyn family, and he was born and grew up on the trader spaceship, *Gobelyn's Market*. Being third child is a problem: a pair of parents in a spaceship should have two children. One child will be married to someone in another trader family, to cement family and trade relationships. The other child will go to a *shivary*, an occasional Terran trader celebration in which young people try to meet, and fall in love and marry. Thus both family ties and genetic diversity are encouraged. What do you do with the third child? Apprentice him to another trader ship, where they need an extra person. His family cannot keep him.

In this far future universe, Terrans have spread to numerous planets, maintaining a common language and a common cultural system and a common interstellar trading system. But there is another human race which has also spread

to numerous planets, also travels in faster-than-light ships like the Terrans, and also maintains an interstellar trading network, and those are the Liadens. Separated from Terrans for untold generations, the Liadens have developed their own language and their own culture, and the meeting between Terrans and Liadens, and their relationships, has not been simple.

The Liadens seem to be modeled by the authors after traditional Japanese culture in many ways. They have a highly stratified social system. Their language has various modes of speech by which people talk to one another. Superior, inferior, introduction, equal, mercantile, and many others. Every Liaden must master all the modes that he will need (not all will need the mercantile mode). Furthermore, communication is not only by word by also by gesture. And in Liaden, as in Japan, the bow is used as a means of communicating the relationships between people. As in Japan, the wrong bow can convert a polite greeting into a rude expression of contempt. How you hold your hands when you bow may clearly express your opinion that the person you are bowing to is someone that social obligation requires you to bow to, but in fact you consider the other person

to be a nonentity. Naturally, besides language and gesture there are many other subtle aspects of Liaden relationships which every Liaden must master.

Jethri, as the son of the Gobelyn trading family, must carry on trading activities with Liaden. Usually such trade is done in an additional language called Trade (although there is also a pidgin language). But Jethri is fascinated by the Liaden, and has studied their customs and language as best he can on a Terran ship. He has traded with them, and watched how they behave and work. And then – through a complicated event – he makes a very favorable impression on a Liaden trader. And she asks to take him to be her apprentice. She likes the idea of bringing a worthy young Terran trader to her Liaden world, and teaching him the niceties of Liaden language and life. And Jethri, having reached the age of 17, in any case has to leave his Gobelyn ship and be apprenticed to some other ship. Why not to the Liaden? He's delighted at the opportunity.

To make things difficult, Liaden are much shorter than Terrans. They probably also look somewhat different, although I did not find this explained in the book. But Jethri, in a Liaden world, will look like a Terran no matter how well he speaks Liaden and dresses as a Liaden. Somewhat like a European growing up in Japan may speak perfect Japanese and know all Japanese customs perfectly, yet he will be seen everywhere as a European.

Thus the book is a fascinating and detailed introduction to the Liaden world from inside. Family relationships, individual relationships, life on a Liaden spaceship, and life on a Liaden planet. Of

Warning: I reviewed another book in the Liaden Universe[®], *Plan B* (1998), in the November 2007 *CyberCozen*, which I didn't like.

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course making mistakes is part of learning how to become a part of a radically different society.

There is one aspect of Liadens that I personally do not care for: some of them have psi powers. Some are telepathic. Others are Healers, some able to heal mental problems, others physical problems. For example, a rare Healer may be able to convert a cut in the body into a scar within minutes. On the other hand, as far as I know none of the Terrans have psi powers. Since both Liadens and Terrans are humans, even though they were separated for numerous generations, I find it unlikely that Liadens developed psi powers while Terrans did not.

One thing the authors have ignored is food. Considering the wide differences between food preferences on Earth today between different peoples, I would expect that Jethri would find Liaden food quite different from what he has been used to eating all his life. Yet he cheerfully joins Liaden meals without a thought about what strange things the Liadens eat. This seems to me unlikely.

While part of the book concentrates on Jethri's experiences in the Liaden environment, part of the book switches back and forth between what Jethri is doing, and what is happening to other Gobelyn family members. So there is a tension between the radically different lifestyles of Jethri's Terran family and the Liaden world. This adds interest, although the switch may be upsetting.

The story is enjoyable, detailed, fast-moving, and fun. It's a book which is always a pleasure to pick up and read more in. The Liaden Universe[®] is recommended.