



Science-Fiction Fanzine

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### The Israeli Society for Science Fiction and Fantasy

**"בדין 2010"**

כנס הספרות הספקולטיבית של האגודה, בשיתוף עם התוכנית הרב-תחומית במדעי הרוח באוניברסיטת בר-אילן ובחסות הוצאת גרף, יתקיים גם השנה כחלק מאירועי שבוע הספר העברי. כולכם מוזמנים לבוא: יום חמישי, 3 ביוני 2010, בספריית "שער ציון – בית אריאלה", בתל אביב, החל מהשעה 17:00. הכנס יוקדש השנה לנושא "דרקונים".

פרטים נוספים באתר הכנס <http://fiction.sf-f.org.il> (תוכניה מלאה תעלה בקרוב).

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

### Movie Review by Reuven Frank:

**2012**, USA (2009). The film stars John Cusack, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Amanda Peet, Oliver Platt, Thandie Newton, Danny Glover, and Woody Harrelson. Directed by Roland Emmerich, 158 minutes. Rated PG-13 for intense disaster scenes and some language.

**Plot:** The sun's neutrinos attain finite mass and begin affecting the earth like microwaves with catastrophic consequences. (Sorry folks, no spoilers.)

**Review:** The film certainly lives up to its hype regarding things "never before seen on a movie screen". The special effects are indeed spell-binding. I only wish the film's unfolding of its premise was equally "binding."

I mean, how many times can you watch an RV leap a chasm created by an earthquake?

The "science" and idea of the movie are basically sound, tying in the "predictions" of the end-of-the-world in Mayan calendar, as well as other doomsday predictions, is well done. It's just a shame the plot is so shallow.

It seems to me the main purpose of the filmmakers here was to get as many special effects onto the screen as possible.

The film is billed as "the triumph of the human spirit", and does almost "take wing" occasionally along the way only to lapse back into vapidness again.

For those who loved *Independence Day* and *The Day After Tomorrow* (same director), it depends: If you loved them for the look, you're in for a treat. If you came to see them to see humans working together for a common goal, you're likely to be disappointed.

### Book Reviews by Aharon Sheer

***The Road to Mars [A Post-Modem Novel]*** by Eric Idle (1999), 309 pages.

Author Eric Idle was one of the six original members of *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, which was a BBC television comedy series which started in

1969 and ran for 45 episodes over four years. So unique was the humor of this group that the adjective "Pythonesque" was invented for it. Douglas Adams, who

later on wrote *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, which started life in 1978 as a BBC radio comedy, earlier wrote and appeared a few times in this TV series, and was strongly influenced by its humor. One might compare the two books this way: *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* is a book about two fairly ordinary people who find themselves in a variety of very strange science-fiction situations, whereas *The Road to Mars* is a book about two weird comedians who find themselves in a variety of fairly ordinary science-fiction situations. Both books have a highly intelligent robot as one of the characters, but *The Road to Mars'* robot, Carlton, is in some ways the hero of the book. Carlton, like Data in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, is a robot that wants to be human, or if you like, is like Spock in *Star Trek: The Original Series*, a being lacking emotions that wants to understand what humans find funny about humor.

The two comedian heroes are Muscroft and Ashby, Lewis Ashby being the tall thin serious straight man of the comedy team, while Alex Muscroft was the short, fat enthusiastic one. Carlton was their servant, constant companion, and at times their protector.

"The chess machines had long since demolished mankind's supposed superiority in chess. Could a machine now be programmed to be *funny*? I don't mean could it be force-fed gags to spout on verbal cues – that's easy enough – but could it actually be programmed to understand what it was doing, to *think* funny, to create fresh comedy?..."

"Carlton attacked these questions with all the vigor and freshness of a computer." [p. 5]

The story takes place two hundred years in our future, at a time when men have settled on a variety of planets and moons in the solar system. Muscroft and Ashby make comedy appearances in the Circuit:

"The Circuit. Endless mining stations, space platforms, the satellites of Saturn and Jupiter. Nothing exciting. Somewhere a million miles away, the Planet Disney. Way beyond that, Mars: the home of showbiz, with its endless eager audiences. Something to aspire to. Make it there, you hit the jackpot." [p. 8]

However, Muscroft and Ashby never made it to Mars.

"Carlton had booked them into a gig on Rhea [one of the moons of Saturn], a bleak world of constant hydrogen drizzle, a damp, dark, soggy environment full of surly miners and their pale families. A place of little hope, mining settlements and container people, redeemed only by an unsurpassable view of Saturn and its rings occupying almost a quarter of the sky." [p. 9-10]

(One of the background problems described in this book is that the first miners were brought to Rhea on a two-year contract at very good pay. It was only after the miners had been on Rhea for some time that they discovered that the "years" referred to in their contracts referred to Saturn years, which were actually 29.5 Earth years. The bitterness this entailed is part of the non-funny background of Muscroft and Ashby's later travels through the Solar System.)

When the comedians travel from gig to gig in the Solar System, one of the things they have to deal with is time; it takes a long time to get from one place to another:

"To sit on a space-craft while it inches along the 400-million mile [640 million kilometers] time line between Saturn and Jupiter is to be aware of just how much time there is in the Universe, let alone how much space. Space and time are not at all the same thing, as anyone who has sat between a fat man and a bore can attest. One occupies space, but oh, what acres of time the other one wastes...."

"Occasionally they swam in the gravity pool, under the great dome of the

stars, and then sat in the steam room tossing around a few comedy ideas, at which point Carlton would tune in and take notes. He downloaded these notes while they slept, puzzling his blond head for hours over what they were doing. What made them think frogs were funny? Why did they always laugh when they said 'tits'? What exactly was so hilarious about passing gas from the lower intestine? Carlton's trademark eyes, one green one brown, focused intently on the problems of comedy, and the basic question, *what on earth was it?*" [p. 16-18]

And, to change the subject, here are the author's comments on twentieth century TV:

"Women have emotion; men have sport. That's how it was for centuries. But all this changed at the end of the twentieth century. Emotions suddenly went public. They became compulsory for men. Getting in touch with your female side was the magazine cliché. The sorry spectacle of males in tears was everywhere. If you wanted so much as to sell a book, then you had to cry on a talk show. Athletes were nothing if they hadn't been seen weeping on TV, basketball stars wept buckets, soccer stars sobbed on the field, comedians cried copiously, presidents could hardly address the nation without tears in their eyes. If you couldn't hack it, then you'd better damn well fake it, brother, for this was Reality TV.... *How do you feel?* people were asked moments after they had scored a goal or been told their family was lost in a plane crash. Prodding and jabbing. *How do you feel?* Primed and prepped. *How do you feel?* Until the tears would flow and the poor victim received his benediction from the blond show queen....

"News at eleven – sex, scandal, and weather. It was of course the total breakdown of privacy. Private life – that was such a Victorian concept anyway, and

it went straight out the window with TV and the computer." [p. 66-67]

Carlton is a Bowie model computer. Not all robots appreciate that.

"He went over to the deskbots. 'Is the building clear?' he asked.

"'You're supposed to have left,' said one of the 'bots. 'Why have you not obeyed instructions?' They thought he was a human.

"'Doesn't apply to us, does it?' he asked, grinning that he'd fooled them.

"'I guess not,' said the robot. 'You a Bowie then?'

"'Four-point-five,' he said proudly.

"'Could have fooled me, brother,' said the deskbot, making a weirdo gesture alongside his head to his companion. Carlton was incensed. Why did they always do this?

"'Bowies are always strange,' said the other deskbot.

"'Listen, the first computer to paint was a Bowie. The first computer to beat a human at golf was a Bowie – Arnold Bowie over two hundred years ago. The first completely successful massage computer was Tracie Bowie, a 3.6. The first automatic theatrical agent was a Bowie. Bowies have always been pioneers – they lead the world in robotics, cheese-making, viticulture, disco, and ballroom dancing.'

"'You finished?'

"'Yeah.'

"'Well, you'd better leave before you're an ex-Bowie,' said the deskbot." [p. 98-99]

The early part of the book has a lot of jokes and humorous quotes. Later on the story gets more serious as bitter people begin getting involved in some nasty actions.

*The Road to Mars* kept my interest. It's not as good as *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, not by a long-shot, but still it was one of the more readable and enjoyable books I've read recently.

***The Gripping Hand*** by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle (1993), 413 pages.

One of the best science fiction books ever written was ***The Mote in God's Eye*** by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle (1975). This book is the sequel. The problem I had with this book is that I did not remember many of the complex details of the original book, which had a fascinating race of alien beings called "Moties". I would have liked to have an appendix (which doesn't exist) to remind me. So I had to gradually rebuild my picture of them from bits and snippets scattered throughout the book. Most of these aliens, for one thing, are not bilaterally symmetric. They have three arms, and the third arm has a hand called "the Gripping Hand", hence the name of the book. These aliens are made up of several different subtypes. One subtype is nicknamed "Engineers". Here's a description of what the Engineers can do:

"It isn't that their technology is so much better than ours, as that their instinct for technology is beyond anything we know. Humans are better at *science*, but once the principles have been discovered, the Moties – the Browns, anyway, the Engineers – are better at turning them to practical use than any humans who ever lived.

"Example. They'd never heard of the Langston Field [shield technology] when we arrived at Mote Prime, and before we left their system they'd made improvements we never thought of!" (p. 29)

Then there are Warrior-class Moties, who are better fighters than any human being can be. And there are Masters who make the decisions and tell the others what to do.

But most interesting are the Mediators, who are a sort of super-translator-diplomat type. The Mediators learn you and your language. They learn to read your body language and your moods. They understand you as well as you understand yourself, perhaps better,

for they can guess at your subconscious impulses better than you can. The Motie Mediators are extremely likable.

"Every so often I have to remind myself that everyone who thinks he likes Moties actually likes Motie Mediators. They're the ones who do all the talking. But the Masters make all the decisions, and they only talk to and through Mediators." (p. 122)

All the different subtypes work together, with a biological life-cycle that that has for millions of years had disastrous results. In that life cycle, the aliens alternate between being male and female. A female dies in agony if she cannot get pregnant, and give birth. After giving birth, she then becomes male. A male must impregnate, and then goes back to being female. They are highly intelligent, reproduce rapidly, fill up all available land, fight terrible wars, wipe out most of their population, and then start all over again. They've been doing this for so long they've learned to build well-protected museums so that the few survivors of the next system-wide war can learn how to restart from something more advanced than the Stone Age.

The original book started with a bright green spot of coherent light (the "mote") appearing in a distant pair of stars. The light is obviously artificial, and of such large energy that its creators must control enormous energy resources. The pair of stars is surrounded by a nebula so that it looks like a pair of eyes in a hooded face, and hence the bright green spot is nicknamed "The mote in God's eye". The aliens from this star system are hence called "Moties". Humans have developed a space travelling civilization, and built up a strong and reasonably united Empire. In the first book, representatives of the Empire traveled to the Moties' system. In that one visit to the Motie system Empire people learn of the Moties' life-cycle and long and disastrous history.

In this future, interstellar travel depends on using scattered points in space, called "Jump points", which provide a kind of opening that enables travelling enormous interstellar distances instantly (although it may take months of ordinary space travel to go from one Jump point to another). The bad luck of the Moties is that their nearest Jump point is within a red giant, which has prevented them from discovering this travel principle. Earth, having discovered what powerful and dangerous creatures the Moties are, has set up a blockade around the Moties' nearest Jump point, thus preventing them from leaving their system.

In this book, a new Jump point has opened near the Motie system, which means that it is going to be difficult – probably impossible – to keep them locked up. If the Moties get out, they will probably end up destroying most of mankind, as they have in the past destroyed their own civilization again and again. What to do?

Well, earth scientists took a few Moties back to the Empire with them,

studied them, and discovered a way to modify their life cycle. Thanks to a virus, Moties will be able to extend their life-span without repeatedly getting pregnant and having babies. But if the Moties can break out of their prison via the new Jump point, maybe they are not going to accept changes in their biology. They have the whole of the Galaxy to spread out in. Why not just spread out, take over the Empire and wipe it out, and go on to take over the rest of the Galaxy?

The book is fascinating but primarily because of all the ideas that were presented in the first book. The little additional points are not all that good. The characters (many of whom were in the first book) are pretty good, but where they are new they just make following the story more complicated.

If you read the first book, I recommend rereading it before reading this one. (I did not do that, since I do not have a copy of it.) If you did not read the first book, read it first. (This book was published in the U.K. as [The Moat around Murcheson's Eye](#).)

### Quote of the Month

"Faster-than-light travel is always kind of hand-waving in science fiction. I thought, 'There's got to be a theoretical way to at least make it plausible.' So I figured out a mathematical way you could do faster-than-light travel. It involves making your speed a complex number, which means physically we don't know how to do it, so it's not something we could build now – it's a game you play with mathematics. But I wrote it up in a paper and sent it to the *American Journal of Physics*, telling them 'This is a mathematical game I gave my students in class.' They published it! ('Complex Speeds and Special Relativity', in the *AJP* 4/96.)"

from an interview with physicist and sf writer **Catherine Asaro** in *LOCUS* November 1999, p. 76.

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