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The Israeli Society for Science Fiction and Fantasy

אייקון 2011 יוצא לדרך!**הנושא השנה: התחדשות**

הפסטיבל השנתי של האגודה יוצא לדרך זו השנה ה-15. פסטיבל "אייקון 2011" – החגיגה השנתית של מדע בדיוני, פנטזיה ומשחקי תפקידים יתקיים גם השנה בחול המועד סוכות, בתאריכים 16-18 באוקטובר 2011. הכנס מופק על ידי שני הארגונים המובילים בארץ בתחום המדע הבדיוני והפנטזיה: **אגודה ישראלית למדע בדיוני ולפנטזיה** וה**עמותה למשחקי תפקידים בישראל**. נושא הפסטיבל השנה הוא "התחדשות".

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

Book Review by Aharon Sheer

Spin by Robert Charles Wilson (2005), 458 pages.

The last book I reviewed by Robert Charles Wilson (b. 1953) was ***Chronoliths***, in March 2004. I should read some other recent books by this author.

This was Best Novel in The Hugo Awards of 2006. It won the Geffen Award as the Best Translated SF Novel in Israel for 2006. ***Spin*** is the first book of a trilogy that continues in ***Axis*** and will finish with ***Vortex*** (unfinished). This is a big enough and complex enough book that it is hard to summarize. To tell you all about it would require just writing the book – you might as well read it. Still I can try.

My first impression was that this is a mainstream novel with an sf background. We have the story of three people, plus some additional members of their families who pass through. We follow the three for years as their lives crisscross. Some years they never meet, others they are together all the time. If this were all it was, there are lots of mainstream novels like it, and I wouldn't have read it.

Jason and Diane are brother and sister. Two years separate them in age. They are the two children of E.D. Lawton, a successful hi-tech businessman, and his alcoholic wife Carol. Jason has been chosen by E.D. to be his protégé, his successor. But then we have Tyler. Roughly the same age as Jason, Tyler is not the son of a successful businessman, he's the son of the cleaning lady, Belinda, for the Lawton family. The three are close friends all their lives. But it's Tyler who is the narrator of this novel.

It seems that Tyler's father was a good friend of E.D. in their younger days, but Tyler's father was a reckless man, and was killed in a careless accident. After the father's death, E.D. invited Belinda and her son Tyler to live in the little house at the side of the large Lawton property, and every day she came over to take care of the Lawton house.

Diane and Jason went to the best of private schools, had all the most expensive and fancy of toys. Tyler went

to public school, and had whatever his mother could afford to buy him, which was not all that much. Still every day after school Tyler was at the Lawton house playing with Diane and Jason.

In the long run, Jason becomes the big genius in the Lawton company, and E.D. pays for Tyler's medical school education. Eventually Tyler becomes Jason's personal physician.

Boring? Not if you like that kind of thing! Diane marries into a religious cult, Tyler has a secret crush on her all his life, Jason is bitter toward his demanding father, the real backbone of the Lawton family is Tyler's mother Belinda, etc. Why would anyone care?

Whoops! When the three kids are around 12 to 14 years old, the stars go out.

"English-language media called it 'the October Event' (it wasn't 'the Spin' until a few years later), and its first and most obvious effect was the wholesale destruction of the multibillion-dollar orbital satellite industry. Losing satellites meant losing most relayed and all direct-broadcast satellite television; it rendered the long-distance telephone system unreliable and GPS locators useless; it gutted the World Wide Web, made obsolete much of the most sophisticated modern military technology, curtailed global surveillance and reconnaissance, and forced local weathermen to draw isobars on maps of the continental United States rather than glide through CGI images rendered from weathersats. Repeated attempts to contact the International Space Station were uniformly unsuccessful. Commercial launches scheduled at Canaveral (and Baikonur and Kourou) were postponed indefinitely.

It meant, in the long run, very bad news for GE Americom, AT&T,

COMSAT, and Hughes Communications, among many others." [p. 19]

But the loss of Earth's satellites was lucky for E.D., whose company makes high-atmosphere balloons. Suddenly E.D.'s balloons are providing all the high atmosphere radio communications. E.D. becomes very rich, and very influential. But what about the sun?

"Everything about the sun we could see with the naked eye suggested the same yellow class-G star we'd been blinking at all our lives.

"What it lacked, however, were sunspots, prominences, or flares.

"The sun is a violent, turbulent object. It seethes, it boils, it rings like a bell with vast energies; it bathes the solar system in a stream of charged particles that would kill us if we weren't protected from it by the Earth's magnetic field. But ever since the October Event, astronomers announced, the sun had become a geometrically perfect orb of unwaveringly uniform and unblemished brightness. And news came from the north that the aurora borealis, product of the interaction of our magnetic field with all those charged solar particles, had shut down like a bad Broadway play.

"Other lapses in the new night sky: no shooting stars. The Earth used to accrete eighty million pounds of spaceborne dust annually, the vast majority of it incinerated by atmospheric friction. But no more: no detectable meteorites entered the atmosphere during the first weeks of the October Event, not even the microscopic ones called Brownlee particles. It was, in astrophysical terms, a deafening silence.

"Not even Jason could offer an explanation for that." [p. 24]

But how did the Spin happen? Who put the Spin there? Aliens, presumably. But why? People called them *Hypotheticals*. The Hypotheticals did it.

What do they want, where are they, who are they? There is just no one out there to talk to. Around the end of the book we find out that they are *alien*.

Still, people begin studying the Spin. At first it's assumed that it blocks all communication in both directions. Wrong. They send up a rocket that goes into orbit around the Earth intended to be there for a week, but it comes back – the same second it is sent up. But it really did spend a week orbiting Earth!! Time moves slower on Earth than in space outside. Why? I'm not sure we ever know. But this gives scientists ideas. If hundreds – thousands – millions – of years will pass on Mars while only a few years will pass on Earth, why not terraform Mars – a long process on Mars but not on Earth – and then send humans to live on Mars. A mind-blowing idea, which is carried out. These are the kinds of ideas that made this book worth reading!

Jason explains it:

"We would begin with a series of synchronized launches containing payloads of engineered bacteria. Simple ion engines and a slow glide to Mars. Mostly controlled crashes, survivable for unicells, and a few larger payloads with bunker-buster warheads to deliver the same organisms below the surface of the planet where we suspect the presence of buried water. Hedge our bets with multiple launches and a whole spectrum of candidate organisms. The idea is to get enough organic action going to loosen up the carbon locked into the crust and respire it into the atmosphere. Give it a few million years -- months, our time -- then survey the planet again. If it's a warmer place with a denser atmosphere and maybe a few ponds of semiliquid water we do the cycle again, this time with multicelled plants engineered for the environment. Which puts some oxygen into the air and maybe cranks up the atmospheric pressure another couple of millibars.

Repeat as necessary. Add more millions of years and stir. In a reasonable time -- the way our clocks measure time -- you might be able to cook up a habitable planet.'

"It was a breathtaking idea." [p. 66]

Mars is terraformed while earth sends exploratory ships out from time to time to see how things are going. Tyler, Diane and Jason watch one of the launches:

"The sky, of course, was dark, but the TV in the hotel room (we had turned it up to hear the countdown) was talking about the Spin barrier, and Diane looked into the sky as if it might have become miraculously visible, the lid that enclosed the world. Jason saw the tilt of her head. 'They shouldn't call it a barrier,' he said. 'None of the journals call it that anymore.'

"Oh? What do they call it?"

"He cleared his throat. 'A "strange membrane".'

"Oh no.' Diane laughed. 'No, that's awful. That's not acceptable. It sounds like a gynecological disorder.'

"Yeah, but "barrier" is incorrect. It's more like a boundary layer. It's not a line you cross. It acquires objects selectively and accelerates them into the external universe. The process is more like osmosis than, say, crashing a fence. Ergo, membrane.'

"I'd forgotten what it's like talking to you, Jase. It can be a little surreal.'" [p. 151]

Once Mars is livable – like the top of a mountain on Earth, then people go to settle there. And Mars will develop its own societies and science. Then another Spin envelops Mars; Mars disappears from sight.

But in the meantime, what happens on Earth?

"The whole world was reeling with anxiety. What had once looked like our best shot at a survivable future, the

terraforming and colonization of Mars, had ended in impotence and uncertainty. Which left us no future but the Spin. The global economy had begun to oscillate, consumers and nations accumulating debt loads they expected never to have to repay, while creditors hoarded funds and interest rates spiked. Extreme religiosity and brutal criminality had increased in tandem, at home and abroad. The effects were especially devastating in third world nations, where collapsing currencies and recurrent famine helped revive slumbering Marxist and militant Islamic movements.” [p. 190]

Eventually a Martian comes to visit earth, carrying with him numerous volumes of advanced science as developed independently on Mars. For instance, basically, Martians do not live longer than humans on Earth -- they have not evolved into something else, they are still as human as humans are on Earth. But they have developed a medical treatment which can extend a human’s life span by decades.

“And beyond adulthood, the elective age: the Fourth.

“Centuries ago, Martian biochemists had devised a means to prolong human life by sixty or seventy years on average. But the discovery wasn't an unmixed blessing. Mars was a radically constrained ecosystem, ruled by the scarcity of water and nitrogen. The cultivated land that had looked so familiar to [some humans] was a triumph of subtle, sophisticated bioengineering. Human reproduction had been regulated for centuries, pegged to sustainability estimates. Another seventy years tacked onto the average life span was a population crisis in the making.

“Nor was the longevity treatment itself simple or pleasant. It was a deep cellular reconstruction. A cocktail of highly engineered viral and bacterial entities was injected into the body.

Tailored viruses performed a sort of systemic update, patching or revising DNA sequences, restoring telomeres, resetting the genetic clock, while lab-grown bacterial phages flushed out toxic metals and plaques and repaired obvious physical damage.” [p. 230]

Naturally the U.S., where the Martian lands (why?), keeps all the advanced technology a secret for itself. (The author is a Canadian, naturally.) Would Earth want to be flooded with longer-living people when it can barely support its current overpopulation? What if the new Martian science would make it possible to develop new weapons with which Russia or China could defeat the U.S.? So most of the secrets of the Martians remain U.S. secrets.

I find the idea of keeping Martian technology secret offensive. The author is obviously one of those left-wing fantasists who hates the right-wing and thinks they will keep everything for themselves. But really you can't keep these things secret. If some people know, everyone will know. Didn't the U.S. atomic bomb project in the 1940s have Klaus Fuchs transferring atomic technology to Russia? And nowadays with the internet (even if it goes by balloons in addition to under the sea, instead of by satellites), it will be very difficult to keep secrets from other countries. We have had extensive industrial spying networks for decades – from long before the internet, and this novel is set only a few years in the future. Will people then be less clever than they are now?

So the whole world will quickly know all the Martian secrets. But that's not what happens in this book.

As a “mainstream novel” there are other strange things. Jason, it seems, never has a girl friend. But then neither does Tyler. For a few months it seems that Tyler has found one, the secretary in

his medical office. Remember that among other things he is Jason's personal physician, working for one of the big companies set up by E.D. But then it turns out that she is a spy paid by E.D. to find out Jason's medical secrets, and she walks out of Tyler's life with lots of money from E.D., and barely a

friendly word. It seems unlikely that Tyler would have gone all the way through years of medical school without ever taking up with a woman friend. But, well, this is sf, and not really a mainstream novel. No sex.

It kept me interested to the end.
Recommended.



Drawing by Miriam Ben-Loulu (January 1995)

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