



Science-Fiction Fanzine

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The Israeli Society for Science Fiction and Fantasy

בקרוב יתקיים כנס "בדיון 2012"!

"בדיון" הוא כנס חד-יומי, שמשלב בין המדע הבדיוני ובין הקהילייה האקדמית בישראל. נושא הכנס השנה הוא "מדתות העבר לדתות העתיד", ויתקיימו בו שני מושבים: המושב הראשון יעסוק בדתות ובזרמים נידחים מהעבר, שנוצרו או התפלגו מהדתות שאנו מכירים: כתות תמוהות, מסדרים ביזאריים ומיסטיקנים שלא יביישו את ספרי הפנטזיה ההזויים ביותר.

המושב השני יעסוק בדתות העתיד: תחזיות לאור מצבן היום, ייצוגים שלהן ביצירות מדע בדיוני שונות, **מהמנון לליבוניץ**, **היפריון** או **חולית**, וכמובן, הגלגולים האפשריים שעשויות הדתות לעבור בהשפעת לחצי הטכנולוגיה המשתנה.

כל מושב יעמוד על שלוש הרצאות בנות 20 דקות, ולאחריהן דיון בן 20 דקות ושאלות מהקהל. נשמח להצעות להרצאות בכנס ולרעיונות. אנא שלחו את אותם עד יום ראשון, 15 באפריל, לכתובת: bidyon@strawjackal.org

מועדון הקריאה של חודש אפריל יוקדש לספרה של אורסולה לה-גוויין "צד שמאל של החושך". מועדון הקריאה בבאר שבע יתקיים ביום ראשון, 29.4.12, בשעה 20:00 באוניברסיטת בן-גוריון, בניין 54, חדר 207 (חדר הסמינרים של בניין פיזיקה, סמוך למרכז הספורט ולגשר המוביל לתחנת הרכבת). מנחה: [יוסף/ה מקישון](#).

מועדון הקריאה בת"א יתקיים ביום שני, 30.4.12, בשעה 19:30, ב"קפה גידי", פרישמן 20 א', תל-אביב. מנחה: [יוסף/ה מקישון](#).

לצורך היערכות למספר המשתתפים, יש להירשם מראש דרך הדואל של המנחה ולציין לאיזה מפגש אתם מתכוונים להגיע. כמו כן רצוי להביא למפגש עותק של הספר. מועדון חודש מאי יעסוק ב"מלחמת העולם Z" מאת מקס ברוקס. מפגשי מועדון זה יתפרסמו בהמשך באתר האגודה.

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

Book Reviews by Aharon Sheer

Grass by Sheri S. Tepper (1989), 449 pages.

This is a long and complex novel. It was nominated for both a Hugo award and a Locus in 1990. I reviewed Tepper's novel *The Fresco* in the June 2004 *CyberCozen*. Although Tepper only started writing as a mature adult (b. 1929, her first book was in 1983) she has a long list of almost forty novels to her credit. This one is the first of a trilogy.

There are a number of threads in this novel. Earth itself has become impoverished by overpopulation and the destruction of essential resources, and is dominated by a cruel religion, an extreme development of Catholicism. Catholicism as we know it is still practiced (the "Old Catholics") but Earth is dominated by an absolute dictatorial religion, called "Sanctity".

Humans have settled on many worlds. On many of these worlds they have found ruins of an extinct race of aliens, the "Arbai". There are ruins, hieroglyphs, statues, but nothing is known about their ways of life or what happened to them long ago.

Humans on all the worlds are suffering from a plague. It begins with sores that get steadily worse, until finally the diseased person dies. No cure has been found. It seems that all of humanity on all the worlds settled by humans will eventually be doomed.

Any young person whose family has died from the plague is taken into Sanctity where he becomes an acolyte, forced to do whatever he is told to do. Yet Sanctity officially denies that there is a plague. People may get sick and die, but what's new about that?

One response to the plague is a cult of people who think that eventually all the people will die, and then there will be a rebirth in which only the good people will come back to life. Resurrection. These people do not want to see the plague cured.

The story takes place mostly on planet named "Grass". The planet has enormous fields of grass, occasional trees, occasional swamps, and occasional areas more like Earth. Most humans have settled in one of the Earth-like areas, which they call "the Commons". The Commons have a space port, hotel, businesses, restaurants, artisans and workshops, doctors, technicians, scientists, all the characteristics of what we might see as a normal life. But those living in the Commons cannot walk out. The area is surrounded by impenetrable swamps. Anyone who tries to go through the swamps and get to the grassy areas will not survive.

But they do have aircars. Built and maintained by those living in the Commons (no doubt with spare parts sent from other human settled worlds).

So it is possible to settle in the grassy areas. There are estancias in the grassy areas, each settled by an extended aristocratic family. The name of each person is x bon y, where "y" is the family name, "x" the personal name. Hence they are called "bons" by those in the Commons. It was not clear to me how the bons support themselves. They bring in servants from the commons, who are invariably polite and helpful (although they have a very low opinion of the people living in the estancias). How do the bons pay the servants? Where do they get their food? People from the Commons built and maintain their large homes. How is that paid for? I did not see an answer to this.

Grass has a year which is many Earth years long, because the planet circles its sun in a very eccentric orbit. Summer and fall are long and pleasant, winter is long and extremely cold, and eventually spring comes again.

The main activity of the estancias is the "Hunt". It cannot be carried out in the winter, but it is an essential activity in the remaining seasons. They use large native animals as if horses: Hippae. The Hippae are so difficult to learn to ride that each person who wants to go on a Hunt must spend many hours on a simulator, learning how to ride and stay on their mounts. The mounts are dangerous. If you fall off, you are likely to be injured, perhaps crippled for life. Even sitting on the mount is problematic, as the back of the neck has sharp-pointed spines. If the rider accidentally leans too far forward he may be seriously injured. In addition to the Hippae as "horses", some local animals are used as "hounds", and the hunted fox is another local animal, called a "foxxen". The Hunt ends when the foxxen has been found by the hounds and killed by the hunters.

Going on the Hunt is the ultimate test of worthiness for the bons. The weak or inferior refuse to go on the Hunt. And of course the cripples from earlier Hunts are left out.

So Grass is divided into two main sets of people, the bons and those who live in the Commons. Each looks down upon the others.

Now comes the complication. It seems there is no plague on Grass. The people on Grass do not have a cure, they just don't get sick. Not only that, if a sick person from a human world visits there, when he leaves, he no longer has the illness. So a group of humans are sent from a human world to Grass to investigate this. They must do their investigation in secret since Sanctity, the dominant human religion, denies that there is such a thing as the plague. The people who come to study this matter on Grass live in an area of the Commons, but visit the estancias by aircar and some even join in the Hunts.

The feeling I get is that Sheri Tepper must have been raised (on

Earth) as a Catholic. The catechism, the right and only proper ways to think, are imposed by the religious hierarchy. By taking Catholicism to its extreme in Sanctity, Tepper shows her hatred and rejection of Catholicism, -- or so it seems to me.

The main difficulty I had in reading this is the large number of characters. With the people of Commons, plus the delegation from off Grass which has sent to secretly study why there is no plague on Grass, plus the Fathers and Brothers of Sanctity in the Commons (one of whom has been sent to study the Arbai ruins on Grass), and the various estancias with their families of bons, it was hard for me to keep track of who is what. Tepper's male characters are all male chauvinists while the females are mostly caring and good people. Still I found the novel fascinating. The ending is more fantasy than sf, but even there she has an sf twist to explain the plague and why it does not harm people on Grass, and what happened to the Arbai.

***A Knight of Ghosts and Shadows* by Poul Anderson (1974), 184 pages.**

This is one of the six novels in Anderson's *Flandry of Terra* series. There are also a number of short stories placed in Flandry's universe. The series starts with Dominic Flandry as an 18-year-old ensign, and continues with successive books as Flandry gets older and more mature, and advances in position and influence. The series is set in the 31st century, during the waning days of the Terran Empire. About a hundred thousand worlds belong to the Terran Empire. Of course only with faster-than-light travel is it possible to have such an empire, although keeping it together with such a great variety of aliens and alien social systems is difficult. One of Flandry's major concerns in the

later books is how to keep the decadent Terran Empire from collapsing.

In several of the books the villain is Aycharaych ("HRH", perhaps "his royal highness", however, the "ch" is a non-human guttural). Aycharaych is a powerful controlling telepath, able to influence villains to act against the interests of the Terran Empire. The Terrans have even had to develop a mindscreens against Aycharaych's telepathic powers.

In this book Flandry is middle-aged, but still very active. He has left children behind him on numerous planets over the course of the years. But he does not know his children, nor did he have any hand in their raising and education. In this book a 26-year old son shows up. He reminds Flandry

of the lover, his son's mother, whom he has not seen for more than two decades.

We expect an adventure in which Flandry acts with his son to foil some plot. But in fact, the son only appears at the beginning, and only reappears at the end of the book. In the middle much takes place, and of course Flandry as usual, has a love affair with

a beautiful young woman. He even plans to break his long career as a single man, and get married and settle down and raise a family. Of course that plan will never succeed – how could the series continue?

The story is complex, too much so to summarize easily. A good read, but not a great novel.

***Quantico* by Greg Bear (2008), 459 pages.**

Greg Bear is a very good science fiction writer. He wrote what I think is one of the best sf books in recent years, *Darwin's Radio*, a near future novel with some genuine scientific speculations. But some of his recent books are more near-future horror or thrillers. They have some sf in them, but there is no sense of wonder. This book has a message: high-tech terrorism is getting easier as technology develops. There is more and more risk that a small number of people, or even one individual, will be able to pull a terrorist attack in which thousands might die.

Bear is worried about eco-terrorism, animal-rights terrorism, right-wing Christian terrorism, anti-abortion terrorism, and Jewish terrorism.

The central figure of the book is an FBI candidate under evaluation and training at a U.S. Marine Corps base called Quantico. This is in Virginia, near Washington, D.C. Inside this enormous base is a training town, Hogantown, which is an imitation active town, designed to train FBI agents for detailed work in urban areas. The hero is William Griffin, the son of a life-time very successful FBI agent, who wants to follow in his father's footsteps, but is perhaps not quite good enough. His previous experience was as a cop in New York City.

One objective of the book is to show how the FBI works, its

connections with other police agencies, the rivalries between various (numerous) agencies (at one point William is picked up by a competing agency and tortured and beaten to try and make him confess that he has had sex with his female colleague; we are not told why), the bad name of the FBI, political opposition to the FBI, etc. One of the true historical cases is that of someone who in 2001 sent letters containing anthrax spores to various people, five of whom died.

“‘Anthrax is everywhere,’ Fergus said. ‘But this particular stuff is special. Current thinking is, it's our own domestic blend. One secret we've kept from John and Jane Q Public for a long time, is how many places in the U.S. used to work with anthrax. Agricultural schools, weapons research during World War 2 -- hell, back then every pharmaceutical company and university with a war contract worked with anthrax. Just inside the United States, we've traced leftovers to abandoned warehouses, old college labs, scientific supply houses. Nothing shocks me anymore.’” [p. 252]

At the time this book was written, the 2001 case was still unsolved, and in this book the FBI would like to solve it, and William is involved in that effort. Could other people do the

same perhaps with a major group of people attacked? Although the FBI is trying to find the 2001 anthrax sender, they find a new group which is using a different kind of biological threat, a very scary one.

Chapters take place in various countries such as Guatemala, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia.

Where is the sf in this? One is his proposed new biological threat, which has been carefully modified so that the reader will not be able to do it himself. It is also in Bear's predictions about future technology for use by police forces.

One example is his description of a body suit for someone who is trying to neutralize a bomb:

"Me first,' he told Watson.

'Stay out of my spray line.'

"Below glossy nested plates and front pads, the Ang-Sorkin suits were jacketed with water-filled micro-piping that networked around the exposed front surfaces and exited through sealed blow holes along the back. The shock front of an explosion, as it met the smooth plastic curves of the front pads, would find little purchase. Particles carried by the blast, including shrapnel, would dimple the plates and possibly even pierce them -- but all but the largest and sharpest pieces would be stopped by an underlying layer of monocarbon fiber. What gaseous force -- and force from shrapnel -- did not flow around the suits and faceplate -- still a major proportion of the blast pressure -- would

compress the micro-piping beneath those layers and heat the water to steam, which would then jet from the rear of the suit in hundreds of gaseous needles. Within six or eight inches, those water needles would be sharp enough to cut holes in human skin or pierce another suit. You always stayed out of someone's spray line.

"Bomb suits had become very sophisticated." [p. 104]

Bear even has an appendix about it. He says that most of the technology the FBI uses in the book is already in use in some police forces, or fully developed and will soon be put into use. Few of his ideas are speculations about future technology. So essentially this is a near-future thriller with almost no science fiction in it. He also has a bibliography about the FBI, police work, and a variety of other things relevant to this novel.

Notice that in the list of possible terrorists that Bear gives, one group is missing. In fact in the world today the largest number of terrorist attacks is of Muslims against other Muslims. The next largest is of Muslims against non-Muslims. Other kinds of terrorism, as distressing as they might be, are insignificant in comparison. But Bear does not mention Muslim terrorism at all. Perhaps he is afraid that some smiling, hospitable, friendly, peace loving Muslim will try to kill him if he does?

I didn't care for it much, but some readers obviously have liked it.

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