



Science-Fiction Fanzine

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## Happy Purim – פורים שמח

Arthur Clarke once wrote about a story that was published in a science fiction magazine in the early 1930s, which talked about heart transplants.

A reader who was a medical man wrote to the magazine that heart transplants would never be possible. He explained that the nerves and blood and veins and arteries going into and out of the heart were so complicated that it would never be possible to perform heart transplants. The idea of a heart transplant, the writer said, is just science fiction; it will never be fact.

Yet we know that it is done today, successfully, although rarely (because of a lack of hearts for such transplantation).

What was done to me six weeks ago is almost as complex. I was attached to a heart lung machine which provided my body with the blood and its oxygen needed for life. Open heart surgery. My heart was stopped. I was dead.

My ascending aorta (the aorta is the upper part of the heart which sends blood to the left and right side of the body) had become enlarged. In

addition, the innermost layer of the three-layered aorta had separated, leaving only two layers to hold the blood in (aortic dissection). There was danger of bleeding, and quick death.

One of the reasons for the enlargement of the aorta was that the aortal heart valve was no longer closing properly, so blood was constantly leaking into the aorta.

I was immediately hospitalized. After a few days of careful investigation, my enlarged ascending aorta was replaced by a Dacron aorta.

The leaky aortal heart valve was replaced by a pig heart valve (no, that's not forbidden by Jewish Halacha).

A long period of recovery is now going on. But I am gradually getting stronger.

But during the first weeks, when I could do almost nothing for myself, I spent much of my time reading science fiction.

So this issue will be devoted to short reviews of some of the sf books I read – and am continuing to read.

### Short Book Reviews by Aharon Sheer

*Quofum* by Alan Dean Foster (2008), 279 pages.

In this future history (hundreds of years in the future) various aliens have faster than light travel. A

Commonwealth has been established between humans and aliens that are like praying mantises. Standing on

their back feet they are about two-thirds the height of a human. These are the Thranx.

A strange planet has been discovered, called Quofum. Sometimes it is in place in its solar system, but sometimes it seems it is not there.

An exploratory ship is sent there to study it. Several human biologists, and a thranx biologist. On Quofum they find intelligent aliens. And then different intelligent aliens – so different that they could not be from the same evolutionary line – are encountered. While all of Earth's animals and plants have numerous

common characteristics, several of these Quofum alien peoples have completely different chemical makeup. They don't share biological bases. One kind has a carbon-based chemical makeup. Another has a silicon-based chemical makeup. Could they have come from different worlds? The biologists are astounded by the variety and differences of the life on this planet. When they get back to civilization, their studies are going to make them famous! But for a reason that is rather unlikely, they end up stuck on Quofum. Ah, well. Good for reading when you are sitting on an easy chair and not going anywhere.

***Hospital Station* by James White (1962), 191 pages.**

James White (1928 – 1999) didn't like the fact that so many science fiction novels were about wars between man and aliens. He wanted to show humans and aliens cooperating. So he invented a medical facility in space, which accepts and treats patients from numerous planets, with numerous different kinds of biologies. Similarly for the doctors and nurses. One alien may live at very high temperatures so a human doctor or nurse must wear a protective suit. Some aliens live in a water environment. Others are oxygen breathers like us. One may be enormously large – like an elephant. Another might be like a fluttering bird (but empathic). To treat such a variety, the doctor can download the

knowledge of a native doctor of the same type (an educator tape). But this poses a problem because what you download is the native doctor's entire personality. Once the patient is treated, most doctors will erase the knowledge. But the best may carry the memories of as many as 10 different alien doctors.

This is the first in the *Sector General* series, which eventually included 12 novels, each with the same main characters. I've read several *Sector General* novels. This is not the best – it is an introduction. Some of the later novels are more complex, presenting a variety of strange (alien) medical problems.

***River of Gods* by Ian McDonald (2004), 583 pages.**

Recommended and loaned to me by Sara Beck. This is a predictor of what life may be like in modern India around 100 years after its founding (2047). It's filled with Indian words. The India described has split into 12 semi-independent states, perhaps as India was before England forcibly united it in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Wars between the states occur. A billion and

a half people. Some of the characters are Western scientists. Things get sort of silly with the discovery of an artificial asteroid which shows pictures of a few people living on Earth. Yet the satellite is billions of years old.

The other silly thing is the development of super-intelligent distributed artificial intelligences, banned in the West but not in India.

The fascinating part is the description of the future India, which has the ring of probably true about it, because it is so reminiscent of India

today, yet with changes. Good for reading when you are sitting on an easy chair and not going anywhere.

***Waiting*** by Frank M. Robinson (1999), 356 pages.

Years ago Robinson wrote a terrifying novel called ***The Power***, a novel of telepathy and the ability of one man to force people to do what he wants them to do. I'm not a fan of horror novels (although I was really impressed by ***The Power***). This book is science fiction, based on the idea that in parallel with the development of Homo sapiens sapiens, another hominid developed. In contrast to humans, which 35 thousand years ago started an enormous development in using language, art, music, technology, and warfare, these hominids did not become musical or literary or artistic. Instead they developed telepathy, and the ability to communicate by it. They don't need spoken language, although they have learned to use it. They can also influence humans via telepathy to do what they want. 35,000 years ago, the humans attacked and killed any of these intelligent hominids they found. Since then these hominids have hidden

and lived and mixed with humans (only a detailed medical exam can tell them apart -- and that they avoid). They are a different species but close enough to mate with humans and have children – except the children are sterile. What distresses these hominids is that humans are destroying their mutual world. Pollution, over-population, destruction of resources. They would like to get rid of the humans and take care of the world in a sensitive way.

Whenever any human discovers that these hominids are living among us, hominid killers are sent out to eliminate those humans who have discovered the truth. And the hero is a human who has discovered the truth. So they are trying to eliminate him and are killing systematically those of his friends who also know or suspect the truth. I liked this book, as unlikely the story is.

***The Precipice*** by Ben Bova (2001), 422 pages. Book 1 of the ***Asteroid Wars***.

What I like about Ben Bova is his descriptions of living and working in off-Earth environments. In the two Mars books that I read, ***Mars*** (1992) and ***Return to Mars*** (1999), he describes living and working on Mars. To make things interesting, he seems to take the approach "if anything can go wrong, it will". Thus the characters deal with numerous potential problems of living on Mars.

This book first describes life in a Moon colony. Later on a nuclear powered ship goes to the asteroids, and we see some of the characteristics of asteroids.

Unfortunately Bova has a fixation

on very wealthy people. Several of his books (but not the Mars books), like this one, have very wealthy villains. Cruel, unscrupulous, selfish rich people. I prefer Warren Buffett. I doubt if Bova has known such people personally (although – who knows?), but they make nasty villains. This book also has one such. Well, that is not the part of this book that I like. But the good stuff is very good.

The title of the book, ***The Precipice***, refers to the possible collapse of Earth's economy as a result of Global Warming. This collapse, which has already happened in this book, is the justification for travelling

to the asteroids in an attempt to bring large quantities of minerals to Earth to

aid in Earth's economic rebuilding.

***Hidden Place* by Robert Charles Wilson (1986), 212 pages.**

This is Wilson's (b. 1953) first novel. It was nominated for the Philip K. Dick Award for Best novel, 1986. (Some of his later novels have been various prize winners.) What I liked about this book was Wilson's description of life in the U.S. Middle West during the Great Depression. The life described is realistic, the characters convincing. The fantasy part is that two of the characters are actually from a universe parallel to the Earth. Jumping from one universe to the other is not easy. In the parallel universe people have two parts. When

they jump to Earth they split – one part becomes like a human female, one like a human male. In order to go back to their own universe (which has physical laws unlike those of Earth) they have to reunite. Unfortunately, when they jump to Earth, they cannot even guarantee they both parts will end up in the same continent. Why do they come? Curiosity, learning. We learn little about their universe, but their trials and troubles on Earth (where they are seen as humans) are difficult and gripping.

**I also read in Robert Heinlein, *Expanded Universe* (1980).**

**This was from pages 547- 549:**

**Natal horological astrology --**  
Baseline: fifty-odd years ago astrology was commonly regarded as a ridiculous *former* superstition, one all but a tiny minority had outgrown. It is now the orthodoxy of many, possibly a majority. This pathological change parallels the decay of public education.

Stipulated: Ancient astrologers were scientists in being able to predict certain aspects of descriptive astronomy such as eclipses, positions of the sun, moon, and naked-eye planets, etc. Whether or not they believed the fortunetelling they supplied to their kings, patrons, or clients is irrelevant. The test of a science is its ability to predict; in the cited phenomena the Chaldean priests (for example) performed remarkable feats of prediction with handcrafted naked-eye instruments.

It has long been known that Sol is the heat engine that controls our weather. Recently, with the discovery of solar wind, the Van Allen belts, et al., we have become aware of previously unsuspected variables

affecting us and our weather, and successful predictions are being made empirically -- no satisfactory theory.

"What sign were you born under?" -- I don't recall having heard that question until sometime after World War Two. Today it is almost impossible to attend a social gathering (including parties made up almost solely of university staff and spouses) without being asked that question or hearing it asked of someone else.

Today natal horological astrology is so widely accepted that those who believe in it take it for granted that anyone they meet believes in it, too -- if you don't, you're some sort of a nut. I don't know what percentage of the population believe in natal horological astrology (sorry about that clumsy expression but I wish to limit this precisely to the notion that the exact time, date, latitude, and longitude of your birth and the pattern of the Sun, Moon, and planets with respect to the Zodiac at that exact time all constitute a factor affecting your life comparable in importance to your genetic

inheritance and your rearing and education) -- I don't know the percentage of True Believers but it is high enough that newspaper editors will omit any feature or secondary news rather than leave out the daily horoscope.

Or possibly *more* important than heredity and environment in the minds of True Believers since it is seriously alleged that this natal heavenly pattern *affects every day of your life* -- good days for new business ventures -- a bad day to start a trip -- and so forth, endlessly.

The test of a science is its capacity to make correct predictions. Possibly the most respected astrologer in America is a lady who not only has her daily column in most of the largest newspapers but also annually publishes predictions for the coming year.

For ten years I clipped her annual predictions, filed them. She is highly recommended and I think she is sincere; I intended to give her every possible benefit of doubt. I hold in my hand her predictions for 1974 dated Sunday January 13, 1974:

Here are some highlights: "  
 ...Nixon ...will ride out the Watergate storm ...will survive both the impeachment ordeal and the pressures to resign ...will go down in history as a great president ...will fix the responsibility for Pearl Harbor" (vindicating Kimmel and Short) ..."in ...1978 ...the cure for cancer will be acknowledged by the medical world ...end the long search." (1974) "The dollar will be enormously strengthened as the balance of payments reflects the self-sufficiency in oil production."  
 "The trouble in Ireland will continue to be a tragic situation *until 1978.*" (Italics added - R.A.H.) "Willy Brandt" (will be reelected) "and be in office for quite some time to come. He will go on to fantastic recognition about the middle of 1978." (On 6 May 1974 Brandt resigned during a spy scandal.) She makes many other predictions either too far in the future to check or too vaguely worded....

You can check the above in the files of most large newspapers.

### Quote of the Month:

Hospitals for old people on the Moon? Let's not be silly -- Or is it silly? Might it not be a logical and necessary outcome of our world today? Space travel we will have, not fifty years from now, but much sooner. It's breathing down our necks. As for geriatrics on the Moon, for most of us no price is too high and no amount of trouble is too great to extend the years of our lives. It is possible that low gravity (one sixth, on the Moon) may not lengthen lives; nevertheless it may - we don't know yet - and it will most certainly add greatly to comfort on reaching that inevitable age when the burden of dragging around one's body is almost too much, or when we would otherwise resort to an oxygen tent to lessen the work of a worn-out heart. By the rules of prophecy, such a prediction is *probable*, rather than impossible.

Robert Heinlein, from *Expanded Universe* (1980), page 321-2.

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