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Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society  
Club Notice - 11/17/95 -- Vol. 14, No. 20

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

Unless otherwise stated, all meetings are in Middletown 5T-415  
Wednesdays at noon.

DATE	TOPIC
11/15/95	Book: BEYOND THIS HORIZON by Robert A. Heinlein
12/06/95	Book: MIDSHIPMAN'S HOPE by David Feintuch
01/03/96	Book: BRICK MOON by Edward Everett Hale ("Steampunk")
01/24/96	Book: THE MAN WHO FOLDED HIMSELF by David Gerrold

Outside events:  
The Science Fiction Association of Bergen County meets on the second Saturday of every month in Upper Saddle River; call 201-933-2724 for details. The New Jersey Science Fiction Society meets on the third Saturday of every month in Belleville; call 201-432-5965 for details.

MT Chair: Mark Leeper MT 3F-434 908-957-5619 [m.r.leeper@att.com](mailto:m.r.leeper@att.com)  
HO Chair: John Jetzt MT 2E-530 908-957-5087 [j.j.jetzt@att.com](mailto:j.j.jetzt@att.com)  
HO Co-Librarian: Nick Sauer HO 4F-427 908-949-7076 [n.j.sauer@att.com](mailto:n.j.sauer@att.com)  
HO Co-Librarian: Lance Larsen HO 2C-318 908-949-4156 [l.f.larsen@att.com](mailto:l.f.larsen@att.com)  
MT Librarian: Mark Leeper MT 3F-434 908-957-5619 [m.r.leeper@att.com](mailto:m.r.leeper@att.com)

Distinguished Heinlein Apologist:  
Rob Mitchell MT 2D-536 908-957-6330 [r.l.mitchell@att.com](mailto:r.l.mitchell@att.com)  
Factotum: Evelyn Leeper MT 1F-337 908-957-2070 [e.c.leeper@att.com](mailto:e.c.leeper@att.com)  
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1. People who know me know that I have a lot of different weird interests. Of course there is science fiction, there is humor, there is travel. I am into exotic cuisine and philosophy, the philosophy of religion. What is the deepest interest? What would I spend the greatest part of my time on if I were independently wealthy? Actually, not many people know that because it doesn't come up all that often. For me the most fascinating and rewarding subject is mathematics. There is a pristine purity and truth in

mathematics. The answers are the same no matter who is finding them assuming they follow the rules. The only subject more basic than mathematics, possibly, is logic. Third place probably goes to physics, but you need matter for there to be physical truth. Mathematics and logic exist independently of matter. Oh, you can

apply mathematical reasoning to understanding matter. The behavior of matter may even suggest some new mathematics. It might get people thinking about mathematical structures, but the mathematics really exists independent of the matter, just waiting to be discovered.  $1+1=2$  all over the universe. Or more accurately, given the same set of axioms we have, anywhere in the universe  $1+1=2$ . With or without matter the mathematics is out there waiting to be discovered.

But it is a curious thing how humans try to anthropomorphize mathematics. That is what I conclude from a story in the latest October 28th SCIENCE NEWS. It seems that, against expectation, there is an expression for pi that is an infinite series largely in terms of reciprocals of powers of two. This means you can figure out relatively easily the trillionth digit in pi without first figuring the 999,999,999,999 digits that come before it. Uh, not quite. You can compute the digit base two. Or you can do three similar calculations and find the trillionth digit base eight. And you'd think that people would be happy with that. They aren't. They don't want to figure the digits base eight. They really want to be able to figure the digit in base ten. There might be a mathematical prize in it if they could find the same result base ten. No prizes for base eight. Fame and glory for base ten. Why base ten? Well, you and I tend to think in base ten. Why is that? Because by an accident of nature, we evolved with five fingers on each hand. Well, four fingers and a thumb. What an inconvenient number! What can you do with tens? They make our computers run slower because it is a lot harder to compute in base ten than in base eight. But because our rodent-like ancestors had a particular shape to their forepaws we think that ten is an important number, even mystical. That is why we have the Ten Commandments; critics list their top ten films each year; Letterman has his lists of ten; Bo Derek is considered (by some---mostly her husband) to be a ten. All this is because of the shape of a forepaw. (In Derek's case,

the shape of other body parts.) Anatomy really is destiny.

The problem is that neither eight nor sixteen has much appeal to us as humans. As humans we are all hot on the numbers three and ten. And seven just sends us into paroxysms. Seven Dwarves, seven Deadly Sins, seven days of the week, the seven voyages of Sinbad, SEVEN BRIDES FOR SEVEN BROTHERS. You think eight gets attention like that? Only in computer circles. Eight has had to earn its way. Seven is the darling of humanity. Sixteen barely gets noticed, in spite of being the only number that has an A and a different B so that it is equal to both A-to-the-B \*and\* B-to-the-A. But I digress.

I wonder if some time in the far future we will realize we have been fixated too long on the mystical number ten and start thinking in eights and powers of twos. Fat chance. We can't even convert to metric with its consistent use of one number, even if it is ten.

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Well I think we should plan ahead. Start thinking in eights today.

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2. EVOLUTION'S SHORE by Ian McDonald (Bantam Spectra, ISBN 0-553-37435-4, 1995, 355pp, US\$12.95) (a book review by Evelyn C.

Leeper):

Once again Ian McDonald has written a science fiction novel of the future (and, no, that's not redundant) which reminds us that the future is not going to be all high-tech and shiny, nor is it going to be all Euro-American. EVOLUTION'S SHORE (known as CHAGA in Britain) is set in Kenya in the early part of the 21st century.

McDonald's protagonist is Gaby McAslan, a newswoman from Northern Ireland, who manages to land a job reporting on the situation in Kenya. And just what is that situation? Well, it seems that "parcels" from outer space have landed at various places around the world along the equator and a strange life form or forms has emerged--and is spreading. And this appears to be connected with strange goings-on around Saturn as well.

McDonald does a good job in depicting the strangeness of the alien life form, but he does an equally good--and perhaps more important--job of depicting the strangeness of his future Kenya society. This is not the "back-to-traditional-values Kirinyaga" that Mike Resnick writes about, but a society in touch with and affected by the rest of the world, yet also maintaining its own path and its own ways. This is not to say there is anything wrong with Resnick's construct as a plot device. But he is using the artificial "Kirinyaga" as the basic premise of his story, while McDonald is using 21st century Kenya as the background of his extra-terrestrial science fiction premise. As such, his Kenya must be more believable as a real extrapolation of today's Kenya, and I believe it succeeds in this. In fact, the irony is that (for me at least) McDonald's background is more interesting than his core premise.

Like many readers I suppose I started reading science fiction because it portrayed a world different than the one I knew. Maybe it was that the world was in the far future, when people had paranormal powers, or maybe it was on a distant planet with a fight for survival against dangerous animals and harsh conditions. As I grew older, I discovered that there were places just as strange and just as interesting here on Earth (as Lawrence Watt-Evans noted so well in "Why I Left Harry's All-Night Hamburgers"). And I started to look for authors who had realized this--who figured out that they could set a story in a society other than their own. Various "cyberpunk authors" do it in various degrees. George Alec Effinger does it in his "Marid" trilogy. Maureen McHugh does it in CHINA

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MOUNTAIN ZHANG. Gwyneth Jones does it in WHITE QUEEN. And Ian McDonald does it, here and in many of his earlier short stories.

Given all this, I think having a Euro protagonist is the right choice. One might ask if this isn't just a copy of Hollywood always having an Anglo-Saxon protagonist even in a movie set in Peru or China, but I don't think it is. When you watch a movie you see not what the main character sees, but what the director and cinematographer films. But when you read a book not written by an omniscient narrator, you see things through the main character's

eyes, and from the main character's viewpoint. So having that viewpoint the same as the majority of the readers makes sense (as anyone who's ever tried to read a book written for people with a different cultural background will agree).

My only objection might be that the space mission pieces don't seem to match the rest of the story. (Then again, how much do today's shuttle missions "match up" with life in Kenya today?) There may be a few too many science fictional references, especially towards the end, but this seems to have been intentional overload, as the "postface" is a line from Samuel Delany's TRITON: "In science fiction, everything should be mentioned at least twice ... with the possible exception of science fiction." But these are minor quibbles in an otherwise excellent and fascinating novel. This one is making my Hugo nomination ballot.

[In Britain, this novel is called CHAGA. One may only speculate on why the publisher thought it necessary to change the name for an American audience. Or why it appears to be missing from the publisher's list of upcoming books on their Web page.] [-ecl]

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3. RAPTOR RED by Robert T. Bakker (Bantam, ISBN 0-553-10124-2, 1995, 246pp, US\$21.95) (a book review by Mark R. Leeper):

I suppose it was a matter of time before someone wrote a book like RAPTOR RED. It is a perennial natural science topic to take some animal of interest and write a story of the animal's life for one year. I believe there is a book called THE YEAR OF THE RABBIT, though I don't know the author. Victor Scheffer wrote a similar book called THE YEAR OF THE WHALE (copyright 1969). Then there is Hank Searls's SOUNDING (1982), a novel that took the reader into the mind of a sperm whale. Searls may have exaggerated a bit on cetacean intelligence (my favorite line was having the whales remember World War II as the time when the oceans were noisy), but he did give a feel for the point of view of a whale. Of course James Oliver Curwood's THE BEAR (originally THE GRIZZLY KING) was adapted successfully into a film. It was a matter of time before somebody like Robert Bakker, author of THE DINOSAUR HERESIES and

one of the two or three most popular American experts on dinosaurs, wrote a description of life in the time of dinosaurs (in this case the early Cretaceous) in a novel-length story. Eric Temple Bell (who wrote science fiction under the name John Taine) wrote a 1934 novel, BEFORE THE DAWN, which was very much along the same lines. He has scientists viewing the prehistoric past with a sort of time scanner, but the main characters are dinosaurs. Bakker has taken his view of the early Cretaceous and describes the life, mind, and emotions he envisions a Utahraptor would have. A Utahraptor is a raptor the size of those in the film JURASSIC PARK. Bakker was an advisor on that film and apparently told the special effects people that they should go ahead and portray raptors of the size they were in the film. That was larger than any raptors that had been found at the time. He said to go ahead and portray them that large, because it was likely that there might have been raptors that big that just had not yet been discovered. Coincidentally, by the time the film was released or shortly thereafter fossils of Utahraptor were discovered that were the right size.

It is difficult to write a really adult story realistically from an animal's point of view. It almost always comes out at about teenage level at most. RAPTOR RED does have violence and sex. The former is considerably more graphic than the latter, but I think neither is any worse than what plays on cable. And on cable it is humans who are doing it. So this book is probably suitable for a ten-year-old, and because it is salted with Bakker's theories about dinosaurs and presumably is a fairly accurate representation of the period, it is not too juvenile to be read by an adult.

The structure is a little too much like THE BEAR in that the title dinosaur suffers a loss at the beginning that leaves her unattached. The cub in THE BEAR lost his mother, and here the title character's mate is careless in making a kill and has his intended prey fall on him. The book is the account of how Raptor Red travels with her sister and looks for a mate. Along the way she has to fight off creatures like the giant sauropod called a whip-tail, allosaurus-like acros, and deinonychus. Thankfully, there are few of the dinosaurs that we had plastic models of as kids. That would be a sort of name-dropping, I suppose. She also has to face a flood, but no volcanos. We see how she hunts, what she looks for in a mate, and a great deal of the family life behavior that Bakker theorizes.

Probably the book would have been more rewarding if it had been clearer which theories Bakker was challenging. I think a dinosaur expert might see more controversial ideas in the book than the uninitiated would catch. Each chapter starts with a sketch of some animal who will be appearing and (I discovered too late in my reading) there is also a drawing toward the end of the book depicting all the dinosaurs drawn to scale.

While I have read more rewarding books, this one serves its function. It might make a good holiday gift for some teenager who likes dinosaurs. Of course \$21.95 is just a little on the hefty side for a less than hefty novel. [-mrl]

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4. THE GOD-FEARER by Dan Jacobson (Charles Scribner's Sons, ISBN 0-684-19660-3, 1992, 159pp, US\$18) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

This is an alternate history, though not in the usual mold. And I am reviewing it as such, not as the (basically) mainstream literary novel that Jacobson was writing.

Kobus the Bookbinder lives in the town of Niedering in the land of Ashkenaz, in a Europe with a culture comparable to our Middle Ages (a nice broad swath, that). But it's not our Europe, as the name Ashkenaz should tell you. In this Europe, the God-Fearers, descendents of the ancient Yehudim, rule, and the Christer are blamed for all the misfortunes that befall the world. ("Christer" is both singular and plural, by the way.)

Now that Kobus's wife Rahella has died, his primary human contact is his housekeeper Elisabet. But Kobus is starting to have visions: two Christer children who keep appearing to him. Who they are and what their appearance means is what this book is about.

The alternate history aspect is emphasized in many places, talking about how "the Muselmi tried to put an army into the land of Pannonia," "Buddh in the land of Sinn," and so on. Jacobson has done his homework: the Egyptians are "Mitzrim," a Hebraicized derivation of Egypt's name for itself. And, true to alternate history tradition, Jacobson has his protagonist thinking about how his (different) world came about--in this case, by the God-Fearers winning over the Romaim instead of, say, staging a rebellion in the Holy Land.

But it is in the very emphasis on the alternate history that

Jacobson fails to convince. Kobus also thinks about what things might be like if drinking blood, devouring children, worshipping asses, scheming to seize power, and killing God were aimed, not at the Christer, but at the God-Fearers. God-Fearer children think it very funny to run up behind a Christer man, pull down his pants, and laugh at his uncircumcized penis. The Christer claim to be the elect, the chosen ones. The Christer are accused of witchcraft, poisoning wells, etc. And so on.

Now, in fairness, Jacobson is not trying to write an alternate history novel. He's trying to write a literary novel with

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emphasizes on each individual's responsibility to protect society from the evils within it. He is doing this by the sort of "walk a mile in my moccasins" approach that many trainers seem to like. In Jaconson's case, he turns around the situation in our world to one in which the Christians are subjected to precisely the same persecutions that the Jews were subjected to in our world. Now maybe it's my familiarity with alternate histories that makes me find this unimaginative and unconvincing, but I didn't think this aspect worked either. However, perhaps outside the science fiction field this technique will work better.

In summary, while this book has been lauded by mainstream critics, it has little to offer the alternate history fan. [-ecl]

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5. PERMUTATION CITY by Greg Egan (Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-218-5, 1995, 310pp, L4.99) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

When you start this, you may be tempted to compare it to Charles Platt's SILICON MAN. But wait, because what you think the book is about is not what the book is about at all.

PERMUTATION CITY starts out with the idea of being able to download one's personality into a computer (the "Autoverse"). (And a friend of mine who works on projects dealing with virtual reality sorts of things says it's the best representation he's seen in science



fiction of what it would be like.) But it goes beyond that, into further levels of remove from "reality"--which ironically may actually be their own reality. It reminded me of the philosopher who dreamt he was a butterfly, but then awoke, only to try to decide if he was a philosopher who had dreamed he was a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming he was a philosopher. There's also a variation of an idea that my husband Mark had suggested independently: an alternate history which hasn't \*diverged\* from ours into a different present, but \*converged\* into ours from a different past. The whole book reminds me of that set of mirrors from CITIZEN KANE, reflecting back and forth, stretching to infinity--and when you think you're looking at reality, it turns out to be just another mirror.

In the middle of all these ideas, it would be easy for the characters and characterization to be given some short-shift, and in fact that is one problem I had (not to mention the fact that the "same" character can be different characters, depending on which level of remove he's at). This in turn made following some of the convolutions difficult, as I wasn't always sure of who the characters were. Still, there are enough ideas in the book to compensate for this, particularly if ideas are what you are looking for.

[This is also available in a United States edition, HarperPrism, US\$4.99, ISBN 0-06-105481-X.] [-ecl]

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6. FAMOUS MONSTERS by Kim Newman (Pocket Books, ISBN 0-671-85300-7, 1995, 448pp, L4.99) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

This collection of fifteen horror stories isn't available in the United States yet, but I assume it will be soon, because it's so much \*about\* the United States, and in particular, about Hollywood. Whether he's writing about Lovecraft Great Old Ones surfacing off the southern California coast, or what might have happened to history if Fatty Arbuckle hadn't made it to that party with Virginia Rappe, or what became of Charles Foster Kane's Xanadu,

Newman is focused on Hollywood. Even the few non-Hollywood stories are about Hollywood in a way, with one about Superman and one about another, more offbeat, superhero.

Not all the stories are compelling. In particular, while "Where the Bodies Are Buried" had some interest, "Where the Bodies Are Buried II: Sequel Hook" seemed to fulfill the promise, or rather the curse, of sequels. And "The Pale Spirit People" may have had some promise, but somehow all I could picture it when reading it was that it seemed perfect for being made into a boring movie with the second-stringers from "Saturday Night Live." Now that's real horror.

Still, the majority of stories here are fresh and involving, and I would recommend this. (I do hope that some American publisher will pick this volume up, especially since I think only "Ubermensch" has appeared over here, but I fear it unlikely. Newman is too British for Arkham House, and too little known for Bantam. I suppose the one hope is that Tor picks it up for either its horror or its Orb line.) [-ecl]

Mark Leeper  
MT 3F-434 908-957-5619  
m.r.leeper@att.com

Every major horror of history was committed in the name of an altruistic motive. Has any act of selfishness ever equalled the carnage perpetrated by disciples of altruism?

--Ayn Rand