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Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
Club Notice - 08/20/93 -- Vol. 12, No. 8

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

Unless otherwise stated, all meetings are in Holmdel 4N-509
Wednesdays at noon.

_ D _ A _ T _ E _ T _ O _ P _ I _ C

- 08/25 CONSIDER PHLEBAS by Iain Banks
(Space Opera with a Knife Twist)
- 09/15 WORLD AT THE END OF TIME by Frederik Pohl
(Modern Stapledonian Fiction)
- 10/06 SARAH CANARY by Karen Joy Fowler (Nebula Nominee)
- 10/27 THE MOON IS A HARSH MISTRESS by Robert A. Heinlein (Classic SF)
- 11/17 BRIAR ROSE by Jane Yolen (Nebula Nominee)
- 12/08 STAND ON ZANZIBAR by John Brunner (Classic SF)
- 01/05 A MILLION OPEN DOORS by John Barnes (Nebula Nominee)
- 01/26 Bookswap

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.

HO Chair: John Jetzt HO 1E-525 908-834-1563 holly!jetzt
LZ Chair: Rob Mitchell HO 1C-523 908-834-1267 holly!jrnt
MT Chair: Mark Leeper MT 3D-441 908-957-5619 mtgzfs3!leeper
HO Librarian: Nick Sauer HO 4F-427 908-949-7076 homxc!11366ns
LZ Librarian: Lance Larsen LZ 3L-312 908-576-3346 quartet!lfl
MT Librarian: Mark Leeper MT 3D-441 908-957-5619 mtgzfs3!leeper
Factotum: Evelyn Leeper MT 1F-329 908-957-2070 mtgpfs1!ecl
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1. Of our next discussion book, _ C _ o _ n _ s _ i _ d _ e _ r _ P _ h _ l _ e _ b _ a _ s, Dale Skran says:

Iain Banks has written an interesting, albeit dark, vision of a

conflict between the "Culture" and the "Indirians." One of the things I liked was the fine detailing of the two antagonists and their varying assumptions that led to the war. This is not a standard space opera, and indeed may be creating a new sub-genre, "dark space opera." Banks is literate, and the backgrounds

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interesting, yet there is an appropriate amount of galaxy smashing action.

There is one rather gross sequence near the middle that reminded me of the middle part of N_e_v_e_r_n_e_s_s. In any case, don't expect an uplifting ending. Also, be warned that Banks really has only anti-heros. For a quick intro, read the appendix on how the war started and who won, the casualty lists, etc. This is the best part of the book.

I advocated this book since Iain Banks is a relatively new author, and I think an interesting one as well. After this book, I read

T_h_e_U_s_e_o_f_W_e_a_p_o_n_s and A_g_a_i_n_s_t_a_D_a_r_k_B_a_c_k_g_r_o_u_n_d, but C_o_n_s_i_d_e_r
P_h_l_e_b_a_s has by far the best background and largest scope. However, after having read three of his books, I don't see Banks on an improving track to the Hugo level--he seems stuck in the sub-genre he has created for himself. [-dls]

By the way, our Scottish members have expressed an interest in seeing a summary of the discussion, so we hope to publish one in the next issue. Maybe we can even get some comments from the folks you can't attend! [-ecl]

2. I have been talking about how places I go on vacation tend to end up in a mess, or at least making news. I don't think this is just because I visit there, though it's true that Evelyn looks for people to disagree with like a dog looks for fire hydrants. But for a lot of places I don't think you can trace the controversy to her directly. And I am not even counting places like Nairobi which had problems with protesters against President Daniel Arap Moi, Cairo with fundamentalist uprisings, or Leningrad with the fall of

Communism--though they did change the name of the city in the hopes that Evelyn could not find it again. Most of these places made news well after our visit. If you stand in any one place long enough, I am sure the place will eventually make some news. (If nothing else, it will make a "Believe-It-or-Not" that this weird person has been standing in this one place for years and years waiting for something to happen.)

But I mean sometimes trouble comes really quickly. A couple of years ago we got back from a trip my parents had been worried about, so we called them and said, "There was no reason for you to worry. They are still just talking in Yugoslavia." Next morning we turned on the news. Croatia had seceded from Yugoslavia; Slovenia would do so the following day. Our plane had gone from Dubrovnik (in Croatia) to Beograd (which for some reason you insist on calling Belgrade, in Serbia). I bet the next day's flight was no so happy, if there was one the next day.

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So we gleefully watched the news. ("Oh, boy, look, Evelyn: that's a tank rolling right by where we bought ice cream!") The fighting and shooting brought us happy travel memories. ("Hey, I remember what Sarajevo looked like before it was blown up like that. That was a month or so ago.")

Meanwhile there are riots in Bangkok, of all places--peaceful Bangkok--and the wounded protesters are brought into the lobby of the Royal Hotel. ("Hey, Evelyn, look at the lobby! Up at the top of those stairs was our room!") The newscaster said that protesters were taken out the back door to ambulances. ("That's a side door, jerk! Who's doing your reporting for you?")

Then Czechoslovakia broke up. Now it is interesting to have news coming from places we know, but it also is a bit disconcerting. So last year we decided we were going to go some place stable ... some place in the United States. Arizona and New Mexico. How much room is there for upheaval in Arizona and New Mexico? Now we are hearing about weird virus outbreaks on the Navaho reservation. The Tribal Council is meeting in Window Rock. ("Pretty town, Window Rock. That weird formation of rock towers over the town. The

Navajo were really nice people. Good sense of humor. And there were the friendly people at that trading post where the storm started as we arrived and knocked the power out. Do you think that was a bad omen?" Actually, maybe I should shut up. We are filling out visa applications for India and if the word of what we bring to a country gets back to them we will be about as popular as a rat in a bottle of milk.

3. THE THREAD THAT BINDS THE BONES by Nina Kiriki Hoffman (AvoNova, ISBN 0-380-77253-1, 1993, \$4.99) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

I rarely read fantasy, but I have liked Nina Kiriki Hoffman's short fiction in P_u_l_p_h_o_u_s_e, W_e_i_r_d_T_a_l_e_s, and elsewhere, so I picked up this book. The cover makes it look like a drawing room comedy with ghosts cavorting about. It isn't. It's a rather dark tale of enchantment and slavery and power and twisted emotions and mis-used talents.

Tom Renfield has always had special powers but tried to deny them. Laura Bolte comes from a family that revels in their powers, but she has rejected them until a return to her home triggers events that will force both her and Tom to use their powers to take sides in the coming fight.

T_h_e_T_h_r_e_a_d_T_h_a_t_B_i_n_d_s_t_h_e_B_o_n_e_s is reminiscent of those witchcraft movies that some studios such as Hammer Films used to make (T_h_e_D_e_v_i'l's_B_r_i_d_e comes to mind). It's not about witchcraft or devil

worship, but there is some of the same feel of strange powers and hidden secrets and dangers. The beginning also brought to mind T_h_e_T_w_i_l_i_g_h_t_Z_o_n_e, with its outwardly normal town that a bit at a time starts seeming strange. Hoffman has always seemed to specialize in the dark side of the human soul, and she puts this talent to good use here. Unless you have a complete aversion to fantasy, you may want to give T_h_e_T_h_r_e_a_d_T_h_a_t_B_i_n_d_s_t_h_e

_ B _ o _ n _ e _ s a try.

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4. HARD DRIVE by David Pogue (Diamond, ISBN 1-55773-884-X, 1993, \$4.99) (a book review by Mark R. Leeper):

I am willing to be corrected on this one, but I think that the techno-thriller was invented by Michael Crichton with _ T _ h _ e _ A _ n _ d _ r _ o _ m _ e _ d _ a _ S _ t _ r _ a _ i _ n. Certainly that was the first techno-thriller I had ever read. The idea was to tell a good story set in a technical environment and give understandable explanations of that environment as you go along so that the reader learns something interesting to take away from the reading at the same time that the reader is entertained. The same thing had been attempted in science fiction before but in all the cases I know of the accuracy of the science was dubious or the explanation not done very well.

_ T _ h _ e _ A _ n _ d _ r _ o _ m _ e _ d _ a _ S _ t _ r _ a _ i _ n was not afraid to use illustrating figures

that could have come from technical papers, but it explained them so that the reader felt they were something comprehensible, and they did lend an air of reality to the story. Since then many others have tried to write stories that taught you about some new technical field, most notably Tom Clancy. Of course one problem with these techno-thrillers is that you never know if the descriptions are being made simplistic. You never knew if the explanations would seem foolish if you only knew the field. David Pogue's _ H _ a _ r _ d _ D _ r _ i _ v _ e is about a field where I do have some knowledge: computer systems.

_ H _ a _ r _ d _ D _ r _ i _ v _ e is the sort of novel that immediately strikes you as surprising that nobody wrote sooner. It is about how a computer virus gets loose and the attempts to save the world from the virus. Of course, the Internet worm made national headlines in late 1988 and yet there have been no computer techno-thrillers to explain and exploit the presence of computer viruses. In fact, the only computer techno-thriller preceding _ H _ a _ r _ d _ D _ r _ i _ v _ e was Clifford Stoll's non-fiction _ T _ h _ e _ C _ u _ c _ k _ o _ o _ ' _ s _ E _ g _ g. The fact that Stoll's book was such a good story and was a true story in a field where there had been no notable thrillers published to date combined to give _ T _ h _ e _ C _ u _ c _ k _ o _ o _ ' _ s _ E _ g _ g the status of a "classic" within weeks of publication. So the field was ripe for _ H _ a _ r _ d _ D _ r _ i _ v _ e (or a novel like it) for quite a while.

Pogue presumably has the credentials to write such a novel. As the book says, he is a contributing editor of _ M _ a _ c _ W _ o _ r _ l _ d and a computer

consultant. The problem is that he is only mediocre as a storyteller. This is a first novel and is very light stuff indeed. A bright young computer scientist, Danny Cooper, comes to work at a start-up company, Artelligence. There the chief guru and most respected programmer is Gam Lampert. Gam is brilliant and mysterious, and he considers himself above company security rules. From there the plot is fairly predictable. In fact, things are so predictable that one might almost suspect the novel of being written by a computer if there were not mistakes that a computer would know better than to make. The first two lines of the novel are the title "Prologue" and the line "The Wall Street Journal, Friday, April 2, 1983." Come on, Pogue. I can figure in my head that that was a Saturday. Don't you have a calendar program on your computer?

So the thriller aspect of the story is slight. Unfortunately, the technical aspect is also. Pogue clearly wrote this assuming little technical expertise on the reader's part. One of the characters asks Danny what a computer virus is, and he and the reader get a simple explanation. Somehow Tom Clancy gets away without ever having a character ask, "What is sonar anyway?" I have had a friend tell me that some of the windows printed in the book as in-line illustrations have a crude layout. If so, that did not bother me. At some point the same virus goes from a MAC to a UNIX system; the same friend (well, let me credit him: Robert Schmunk) said this was unlikely. I am unconvinced that a virus could not be designed for cross-operating-system infection, particularly since presumably it would be valuable for a virus to be able to make the jump. In any case, if you are going to read both H_a_r_d_D_r_i_v_e and T_h_e_C_u_c_k_o'o's_E_g_g, read H_a_r_d_D_r_i_v_e first since its explanations are more basic and simple. But if you are going to read only one, you can skip Pogue's book.

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The fascination of shooting as a sport depends almost wholly on whether you are at the right or wrong end of the gun.

-- P. G. Wodehouse

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