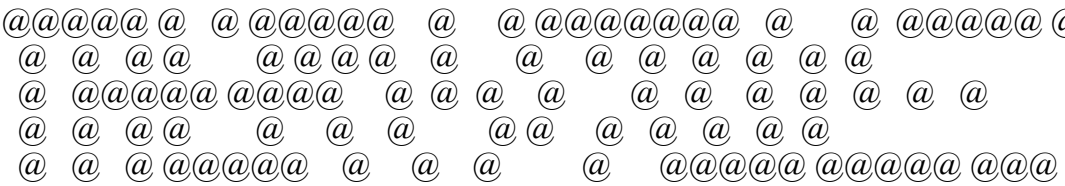

Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
Club Notice - 01/19/96 -- Vol. 14, No. 29

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

Unless otherwise stated, all meetings are in the Middletown cafeteria Wednesdays at noon.

DATE	TOPIC
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
HO Chair: John Jetzt MT 2E-530 908-957-5087 j.j.jetzt@att.com
HO Librarian: Nick Sauer HO 4F-427 908-949-7076 n.j.sauer@att.com
MT Librarian: Mark Leeper MT 3F-434 908-957-5619 m.r.leeper@att.com
Distinguished Heinlein Apologist:
Rob Mitchell MT 2D-536 908-957-6330 r.l.mitchell@att.com
Factotum: Evelyn Leeper MT 1F-337 908-957-2070 e.c.leeper@att.com

1. Lance Larsen, our longtime Holmdel co-librarian (previously Lincroft librarian) is leaving AT&T for greener pastures (or emptier voids). We all wish him good luck! [-ecl]

==========

2. I eased my time machine to a stop. It had worked on both directions. I had gone back to January 10 and returned to January 18. I had to be very careful not to step on a butterfly or do anything stupid like that. But wait. I had gone back in time and returned without hitting one time paradox.

But wait. Here in front of me was the new copy of the MT VOID. When I left the blurb for the next meeting had been by Charlie Harris and had read one way. Now the blurb was by me and read entirely different. Aha, I still had a draft that I printed up in

my pocket. I pulled it out. I read it. It said...

Our next discussion book is THE MAN WHO FOLDED HIMSELF by David Gerrold, of which Charlie Harris says:

When I began reading adult science fiction (back in the Golden Age of sf), Robert A. Heinlein's classic time-travel novelette "By His Bootstraps" had a tremendous impact--indeed I was inspired to write a rhymed verse variation on his theme for my fanzine, INFINITY. The fundamental time travel paradox--time travelers encountering themselves in a different time--continues to fascinate, as witness the megabytes of discussion of "Twelve Monkeys" in the Usenet newsgroups.

What made Heinlein's story so compelling was that his protagonist encountered not just one time-displaced version of himself, but half a dozen. And, being new to the genre, I was suitably astonished when the narrator finally realized that his nemesis, old Diktor, was also himself. Later, in "All You Zombies--", Heinlein took the notion a considerable, seemingly oxymoronic step further, into an overpopulated solipsism. If my understanding is correct, all of "Zombie"'s characters, male and female, may be time-variants of the narrator.

David Gerrold's THE MAN WHO FOLDED HIMSELF takes 135 more pages to reach the same point, in spades. Clute & Nicholls, in THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF SCIENCE FICTION, describe THWFH as "a notable...story which conscientiously attempts to compile a narrative portmanteau of all possible time paradoxes." This is not quite correct: Gerrold's narrator, 19-year-old Dan Eakins, does not become his own grandpa. Nor does he murder him. But he does, innumerable times, make use of the Timebelt Temporal Transport Device bequeathed to him by his mysterious Uncle Jim--no mystery to me this time! The timebelt is no simple forward/back device; it

comes with extensive online documentation, sporting a two-page table of contents (which Gerrold reprints) that includes four separate subsections labeled "Cautions."

The first future self Dan meets is from a day ahead. Of course they head straight for the racetrack and win $50,000. Oh wow, a day later they can go back and parlay that into a fortune! Nope: a third Dan shows up brandishing a local paper with the headline "IDENTICAL TWINS TAKE TRACK FOR $1,500,000! Track Officials Promise Investigation." So the Dans settle for their more modest winnings. But time-cloning means more than just getting rich. As Dan's day-older and wiser self explains, "You'll never have to be alone again. You'll always have me. I'll always have you.... I can share the things I like with somebody I know who likes them too." Thus Gerrold sets the stage for the solipsism and narcissism that increasingly predominate.

In Gerrold's world, as the timebelt manual explains, paradoxes are impossible. Dan can jump back in time and persuade himself not to do what he did, resulting in a different future. The "original" future hasn't been destroyed, though: this new future is on a different newly-created timeline. "Every time you make a change in the timestream, no matter how slight, you are creating another timestream. As far as you are concerned, it is the only timestream, because you can't get back to the first one." That is, you can't get back to the first one beyond the point where they diverged. There's no problem going back to an earlier point.

So Dan keeps hopping around in time, and the past keeps filling up with tangled Dans--enough to keep a perpetual poker game going, with Dans playing all the hands. The only limitation is imposed by language: beyond a couple of centuries ahead or past, it is too different for easy understanding and participation. Because changing the past changes the future (on the new timeline), Dan starts deliberately bouncing back and forth, changing past events to create a future more and more to his liking. In the process, the other annoying, irrelevant or unknown inhabitants of the planet are excised from his latest timeline.

On the other hand, he meets many different versions of himself, even some who are female. And, finding these clones so congenial, it is inevitable that he'll have sexual relations with many, even some who are male. Indeed, he finds that he rather prefers the same-gender relationships, not because of a homosexual preference per se, but simply because they are more in keeping with his narcissism.

Gerrold's relentless explorations of his theme lack much action, but are rich in philosophical and psychological speculation, wry humor, and occasionally (as critic Donald Lawler says in Magill's SURVEY OF SCIENCE FICTION LITERATURE) "poetry and symbolism..., beauty and tenderness." [-csh]

But now there on my workstation screen was a blurb signed by me. It said...

Our next discussion will take place in the Middletown cafeteria an January 24 at noon. I will be holding down a table so just look for me. If you are not sure what I look like, I will be the best-looking person in the cafeteria. If you can"t wait to see what I look like you can see a poor graven image at http://www-gbcs.mt.att.com/~leeper. We will be discussing Jerrold David Friedman (penname David Gerrold) and his book, THE MAN WHO FOLDED HIMSELF. This book combines a Heinlein-style time travel plot with Heinlein-style descriptions of sex. Our main character is a young man who inherits a time travel belt and soon enough he is screwing up time lines, creating time paradoxes, turning himeslf into male and female versions of himself and having a high old time having

sex with himselves of both sexes. This is not the most sophisticated novel, but it has its share of fun. Now for more time-related hijinks you can read my article two down on alternate timelines. [-mrl]

I smiled. Mine was better. I read it again savoring each well-chosen syllable. I didn't remember writing it, but it certainly was good. If I can write this well, I think I'm going to like this world.

==========

3. Last week I was talking about how in stories there are multiple possible futures but only one past. It strikes me that is strange. For me anyway it seems likely that if there are alternate futures, there should also be alternate pasts. The branching should take place going in either direction. Most reactions in science are time-symmetric. With the exception of entropy most reactions are reversible in time. For example if you combine hydrogen and oxygen you get water and a release of energy. Put energy back into the system and you can separate the hydrogen and oxygen. The only two phenomena that seem really to discriminate between the past and the future are entropy and memory. And Hawking has at least at one time thought that they were just two aspects of the same time-directional phenomena. He thought that if you reverse entropy you start to remember the future but forget the past. At one time he thought that this is destined to happen at the instant the universe stops expanding and starts collapsing. It is destined at that moment that entropy and memory would reverse direction. This strikes me as foolishness, but not because it is counter-intuitive. (I do not put a lot of faith in my intuition.) But it cannot be because if you jump up on a trampoline at the instant you are at your highest the system consisting of you and the Earth has stopped expanding and is already starting to contract. But when you are falling you do not start remembering the future. If the reversal does not happen in this small system, why should it happen in the larger system we call the universe.

But the concept that all branchpoints are a single earler point on the continuum giving rise to multiple later points. That structure, in graph theory, is called a tree. If you are going to extend the space-time continuum to be a tree, why not go the whole way and make it a lattice? In fact, if we are to believe Steven Hawking's model of the universe all the alternate history timelines probably have a single point of origin in the Big Bang and they all converge together in the Big Collapse. So we have a lattice with an infimum and supremum. (But don't worry about that if you are not sure what I mean by that.) What this is saying is that there is a lattice all the alternate futures will come together in a single future and all alternate pasts come from a single, if

catastrophic point in the past.

Now what would the time continuum having a lattice structure mean? It would mean that as diverse as the alternate futures we can imagine are the alternate pasts. Currently we think of the whole set of possible alternate futures as a big and rather motley set. We think of there being only one past, because that is what we remember, but there would have to be an infinite set of pasts all of which lead to this one present and then the timelines diverge again going separate ways into the future. But all of these timelines come together in an infinite number of alternate presents of which this is just one. In fact, just like there are an infinite number of timelines going from now to the big collapse, there would be an infinite number of timelines going from the Big Bang to the present. You get something that looks like two tangent paper circles. Time moves along the axis of symmetry. Time starts at a single Big Bang point, goes a lot of different ways and comes back together at the present or the point of tangency of the circles, then it bows out in different directions agains in different alternate futures and they come together again at the futuremost point of the continuum where the whole universe converges into a point again. This model encompasses all possible pasts and futures of this instant in time. Now take an infinite number of copies of this model for an infinite number of alternate presents. Glue them all together at the Big Bang points and the Big Collision points, and you have a model of the space-time continuum, with special reference to this present and all possible alternate presents. But other than the fact that I am writing this right now, there is nothing special about this particular point in time. You could create a similar model with reference to a point one billion years ago and one of the circles would be smaller and one larger. It sounds like the model when all the sheets are glued together would look somewhat different from the model I described, but in fact it would be exactly the same. That's because even this simple little paper model is hard to visualize in three dimensions.

Think about that for a little while and I will have more to say on this subject next week. [-mrl]

==========

4. The February 1996 issue of INTERNET WORLD contains an interview with Vernor Vinge, author of "True Names" and other cyberpunky stuff. [-ecl]

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

It is better to debate a question without settling it
than to settle a question without debating it.
-- Joseph Joubert

THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT ALMOST BLANK