

PROMETHEUS

Novelist of achievement

By Phillip Salin

I've often been surprised at how easy it is for admirable artists and works of art to go unnoticed by most of the people who would really enjoy them. What a waste on both sides: authors, directors, composers are deprived of their proper audience and appropriate recognition; the audience is deprived of potential enlightenment and enjoyment.

This problem is particularly acute for worthy "old" works of art. One might expect critics to help maintain awareness of admirable works and artists, but the majority of critical analysis is only Monday morning quarterbacking, scoring points on an artist for what he didn't but might have done in his most recent performance. Such criticism overlooks the simpler, more basic functions of publicizing and market-making, of helping to bring together a work and its proper audience.

That is my purpose here: to introduce you to an author, to pique your interest in buried, under-praised, or forgotten writings. In this brief survey, I'll highlight a handful of Nevil Shute's novels, as well as his autobiography, *Slide Rule*.

Individualist Visions

Born in 1899, Nevil Shute wrote twenty-five books between 1923 and 1960, the year of his death. Most of his stories involve aviation, which is not surprising, because writing books was Shute's second career. His first was in the infant airplane and airship business of the 1920's and 1930's. He worked for a series of companies as junior assistant designer, chief calculator, deputy chief engineer, and managing director (i.e., president). When he quit the airplane business he was head of Airspeed, Ltd, with over 1000 employees.

Shute is so simple and straightforward in his style, so decent and modest in his characterizations, that you might think he's not saying much. And then, bit by bit, you realize how perceptive he is. How very decent and good-hearted.

Shute's people are believable, and, for the most part admirable. His situations, even the most melodramatic, are also believable. For this reason, they reflect on real life in ways that many works of fiction do not. Although several of his plots do contain a fantastic element (e.g., involving strange dreams or inexplicable hunches), these are generally plot devices rather than the core of the book. There is also a curious (and refreshing)

absence of villains in most of his stories. The tension generally comes from attempting to accomplish a difficult task, rather than from any artificial need to overcome malevolent human adversaries. Shute's plots emerge naturally from the attempts of his main characters to try to get a job done right.

On the Beach (1957) is Shute's most readily available book, but is quite atypical of him. If this is the only Shute story with which you are familiar, you cannot avoid getting a very mistaken impression of his work, and possibly of his purposes in writing the story itself. Shute was not a passive man, but *On the Beach* portrays a world that has allowed itself to fall into a fatal situation from which there is no escape; life on Earth is doomed by the unintended consequences of a nuclear war. Shute's dry, painful understatement about this tragedy could lead to an impression of fatalism, but familiarity with his other works makes clear that Shute's objective was to inspire horror in order to motivate preventive action while it is still possible.

On the Beach succeeds admirably at inspiring horror and

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PROMETHEUS

The newsletter of the Libertarian Futurist Society

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Editorial: Whither *Prometheus*?

Is print dead? Is it time to cease publication of *Prometheus*, its role no longer valid in the age of the internet? These are questions I ask myself as I prepare each issue, and that I now state in public, as I lean towards the affirmative more and more. This issue possibly may be one of the last print publications I produce. Although the annual costs are not staggering, they present a large portion of the LFS's annual budget. Is there any worthwhile return on this investment? Original content is minimal, though certainly *Prometheus* provides a unique outlet in terms of libertarian publications. But cannot the internet do the same and more? Would not moving the newsletter to an online only edition make better sense in our online world? More questions here than answers.

Financially there would be minimal costs involved in a web presence. The savings appear substantial, and untold new readers would discover reviews about interesting books. Yet how would readers and members treat the new format? One of the benefits of membership is a subscription to *Prometheus*, and were it to move online, what extra benefits are there to membership in the LFS? If everything is online for free, do people have any incentive to join the LFS? Is voting for the Prometheus Award and/or Hall of Fame enough? Realistically I would have to say no, as the cost of the Advisory membership is such that not everyone would pay just to send in a ballot once a year. Also, would the newsletter be lost amid the clutter of the web and mail inbox, forgotten unlike a print newsletter that is physical and can be picked up and read at leisure? We are not the only organization/newsletter to ponder this issue. However, the LFS is unusual in that we are one of the few (or perhaps only) awards organization that actually publishes a newsletter.

In the 1990s the future was wired. Everyone needed a website, an online *presence*. Then the dot.com boom broke shortly after Y2K and 9/11, and while casualties litter the ground, the internet surged forward. Today we see terms such as Web 2.0 and social media thrown around with abandon. Static web pages have become relics of a bygone age. The current trends show Twitter, facebook, smart phones, and other rapid technology exist as ways to connect people to people, not people to destination sites.

The LFS has a website, although it currently is a very static site. Successful web pages these days are those that draw eyeballs, but more importantly interaction from visitors. Rather than try to scramble around for original content for the newsletter amid mostly reprints, I propose a greater focus on building up the LFS web site into a richer, more interactive location. As editor of *Prometheus* I find my position complex, as I am in effect advocating myself out of a position. I think it is high time to crowdsource the solution and spend our resources in building a better web experience, with multiple writers and editors. Feedback would be welcome—*Prometheus* will print your letter if you wish, or just send me a note to discuss the issue. Or better yet, good fresh content to publish here first.

— Anders Monsen

Doctorow and Stross to Write Authorized Sequel to *Atlas Shrugged*

By L. Ron Creepweans

Today the estate of Ayn Rand announced that they had authorized science fiction writers Charles Stross and Cory Doctorow to write an official sequel to Rand's bestselling novel *Atlas Shrugged*.

"Given that the original novel features an amazing new metal alloy, a secret valley protected by force field, and an unlimited new energy source, we felt that a science fiction perspective was key to carrying forward Ayn Rand's ideas," said Rand estate spokesman Perry Leikoff. "And what better science fiction writers to choose than two collaborators who were also past winners of the Prometheus Award given out by the Libertarian Futurist Society?"

Stross, author of the Prometheus Award-winning novel *Glasshouse*, said that he and Doctorow (author of the Prometheus Award-winning novel *Little Brother*) were hesitant at first. "But then we realized that both of us shared one important trait with Ayn Rand: all three of us really, really like money. That made it much easier for Cory and I to cash the seven figure check."

The sequel, *Atlas Rebound*, features the teenage children of the founders of Galt's Gulch rebelling against their elders and traveling out into a world devastated by John Galt's strike, where they develop their own political philosophy with which to rebuild. That philosophy, called Rejectionism, features a centralized bureau to rebuild and control the new economy,

socialized medicine, compulsory labor unions, universal mass transportation and a ban on individual automobiles, collectivized farms, a tightly planned industrial economy, extensive art subsidies, subsidized power, government control of the means of production, public housing, universal public education, a ban on personal ownership of gold and silver (as well as all tobacco products), government-issued fiat money, the elimination of all patents and copyrights, and a cradle-to-grave social welfare system.

"Plus strong encryption!" added Doctorow.

After 1,200 pages (80 of which consist of Supreme Leader Karla Galt-Taggart's triumphant address), a new Utopia is born. The final scene of the novel features the grateful citizens of the new world order building a giant statue of Atlas with the globe restored to his shoulders, upon the base of which is chiseled "From Each According to His Ability/To Each According To His Needs."

In other Rand-related news, editor David Hartwell (who lives in nearby Pleasantville) reported a weird humming emanating from the grave Rand shares with her husband Frank O'Connor in Kensico Cemetery in Valhalla, New York. Said Hartwell: "I think she's become a Dean Drive."

This news story appeared at Locus Online <locusmag.com> on April 1st, 2010, and is reprinted with permission of the author.

Everybody is Stupid Except for Me And Other Astute Observations

By Peter Bagge

Fantagraphics Books, 2009

Reviewed by Anders Monsen

Peter Bagge's cartoon stories make regular appearances in *Reason* magazine. In 2009 he collected a decade's worth of these strips into one volume. His humor is biting, mordant, full of on-the-spot attacks on silly attitudes and posturing government apologists. Chapters range topics such as war, sex, arts, business, boondoggles, politics, our country, and more.

The art at times is crude and brash, vivid with colors and imagery. Mouths gape and eyes are bloodshot or bugged out. Arms are rubbery and absent elbows, but Bagge manages to convey in every single panel a multitude of ideas and visual gags. Many of these cartoons are actual reporting in graphic format. Bagge places himself into his cartoons, drawing in the first person so to speak, at many of the events he reports on, from visiting a Christian youth talent contest, to riding Amtrak and going through its well-documented agony of delays.

Bagge proves that reporting on serious subjects can be both tragic and comic. His panels are crammed with words that explain the issues he's covering, setting the scene for this drawings. Comic book readers who stumble on this book will find a dose of libertarian politics, while libertarians will gain interesting perspectives through Bagge's weird lenses.

RIP: James P. Hogan

Author and two-time Prometheus Award winner James P. Hogan died July 12 2010 at his home in Ireland. Cause of death remained unknown as *Prometheus* prepared to go to print. A longer obituary will appear in the next issue of *Prometheus*.

2010 Prometheus Award winners

On July 21 2010, the Libertarian Futurist Society announced the winners of the 2010 Prometheus Awards. *The Unincorporated Man*, by Dani and Eytan Kollin (TOR Books) won for Best Novel. The Hall of Fame award went to "No Truce with Kings," by Poul Anderson (1964).

Classifieds

The (Libertarian) Connection, open-forum since 1968. Subscribers may insert four pages/issue free, unedited. **Factsheet Five** said, "Lively interchange of point, counterpoint and comments". Eight/year, \$10. Strauss, 10 Hill #22-LP, Newark NJ 07102.

“Palimpsest” (Wireless)

By Charles Stross

Ace Books, 2009

Reviewed by William H. Stoddard

Forty-two hundred million years or so from now, two galaxies will be colliding. . . .

In this Hugo-Award nominated story, Charles Stross takes up one of the classic science fictional forms: the story of human destiny on a cosmic time scale. H. G. Wells brought the theme into science fiction in *The Time Machine*, with the Time Traveler watching the dying sun rise slowly over a beach in the inconceivably remote future earth of 32,000,000 A.D.; Olaf Stapledon worked on vaster time scales, eventually recounting the entire history of the cosmos over a span of half a trillion years in *Star Maker*. It’s a mark of how our vision of the cosmos has changed, in less than a century, that Stross’s latest scenes are set roughly a trillion years from now.

How do you tell a connected story on this time scale, inconceivably longer than any human lifespan we can even imagine? Stross resorts to the same expedient as Wells: time travel. In fact, he explores the implications of time travel quite thoroughly, from the economics of scarcity (only one time gate can be open at a given instant, apparently anywhere in the cosmos, so opportunities for time travel get used up) to the social organization of time travelers. His viewpoint character, Pierce, is a recruit of a secret organization that travels backward and forward in time, changing history “to prevent wild efflorescences of resource-depleting overindustrialization, to suppress competing abhuman intelligences, and to prevent the pointless resource drain of attempts to colonize other star systems,” with the ultimate aim of prolonging human existence as far as possible—even reshaping the sun to prevent its depletion in a mere few billion years, and protecting Earth’s orbit from the Milky Way’s collision with Andromeda.

But any organization so powerful must have its own hidden agendas, and that’s a big part of what this story is about. One of Stross’s recurring themes (see for example *Glasshouse*, his Prometheus Award-winning novel of 2006) is the impact of memory erasure. Stross’s secret organization, the Stasis, has the ultimate in memory erasure: the ability to change history so that an agent’s memories no longer refer to anything outside themselves. His plot turns on an irony: On one hand, the human civilizations throughout Earth’s prolonged existence routinely invent pantopticon surveillance technology, indeed so routinely that the Stasis’s *definition* of a civilized society is one where every human act is recorded (though apparently the inner workings of brains remain inaccessible). On the other, the final records of humanity, in the great library at the end of the Earth’s existence, cover *all* the alternate pasts, with no simple way to find any particular past. This is the basis of the metaphor of his title: a palimpsest is a parchment that has been written on once and then scraped clean for reuse, leaving traces of the original text from which sufficiently advanced technology can reconstruct its former content. The very mass of information provide a hiding place for conspiracies both within and against the Stasis.

And at this point Stross’s story becomes curiously reminiscent of one of the classics of science fiction: Isaac Asimov’s *The End of Eternity*, a startling novel in which Asimov criticized the very rational bureaucracies that most of his fiction idealized. Like the Stasis, Eternity worked to prolong human survival, and to prevent the pursuit of dangerous extremes such as interstellar colonization, through manipulation of human history. Like the Stasis, Eternity recruited from every era, and faced its recruits with the knowledge that their own birth worlds would eventually be erased by some historical readjustment. And like the Stasis, Eternity attracted personalities with certain pathological traits—or inflicted those traits upon them. Both novels ultimately turn on their viewpoint characters realize that the organization that has become their home, their family, and indeed their nation is not the solution humanity has been seeking, but the problem.

To be specific, the problem is power. The Stasis is *aware* of the temptations of power: Stross writes, “True world governments were rare, cumbersome dinosaurs notorious for their absolute top-down corruption and catastrophic-failure modes; the stasis tended to discourage them.” Vernor Vinge could not have said it more clearly! But its own power traps it into its own failure modes, its own narrowness of vision and denial of human potentiality.

And the solution? That would be telling. But the solution’s *scale* is impressive; indeed, it’s as comparable to Stapledon as the book’s timespan. And it’s presented as a truly impressive, indeed a breathtaking, final reveal. Stross gave me both the pleasure of a classic science-fictional eschatology and the satisfaction of its having a hard science fictional basis. Stross mentions that he was tempted to turn “Palimpsest” into a novel; I would be equally tempted to read it if he did. Not least because of the absolute appropriateness of the story’s ending to its carefully developed theme. “Palimpsest” is one of the most *science fictional* stories I have read in years.

Destroyer of Worlds

By Larry Niven and Edward M. Lerner

Tor, 2008

Reviewed by William H. Stoddard

The third volume in Larry Niven and Edward M. Lerner’s renewed exploration of Known Space shares the virtues of its two precursors, *Fleet of Worlds* and *Juggler of Worlds*: fidelity to the style and tone of the original stories, a more richly detailed treatment of the setting, and a fuller exploration of Niven’s central ideas. In contrast to *Juggler of Worlds*, which largely retold the original stories from a different point of view, this book tells a new story, but one that grows out of previously described events: The wave of supernovae propagating through the Milky Way, and the Protector refugees migrating just ahead of it. The main viewpoint character is once again Sigmund Ausfeller, formerly a professional paranoid in the service of the United Nations, and now a key figure in the government

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—*Destroyer of Worlds* review, continued from previous page

of New Terra, a planet inhabited by human former slaves of the Puppeteers who have gained near independence, with Ausfaller's help.

Niven has always excelled at writing alien characters; he's one of science fiction's masters of John Campbell's formula, "A being that thinks as well as a human being, but not like a human being." Here Niven and Lerner give us alien characters with greater depth of motivation. We get insights into the mentalities of Puppeteers, Pak Protectors (technically "human," but they don't think like human beings), and the starfish-like Gw'oth, natives of the oceans of an ice-covered moon. Their distinctive qualities are brought out all the more strongly as their interests clash, forcing some of them into uneasy alliances.

The end of the book sees the clash partially resolved, the immediate peril averted...but it clearly leaves room for a sequel. The Pak are not beyond any possibility of coming back for a rematch; the Gw'oth have gained access to new technologies, and might find their interests opposed to those of the Puppeteers; and the alliance between the Puppeteers and New Terra could come under strain. I'm sure that Niven and Lerner mean to come back to this version of Known Space, and I expect to find the return interesting.

The overall theme of the book, and the series, isn't exactly libertarian, though libertarians will find parts of it sympathetic. But there are some ideas that are very striking. On the one hand, there are the Pak, a hyperintelligent race who can calculate the rationally predictable payoffs of their actions, and have no choice but to pursue it...even if that means betraying an ally; they are the ultimate low-trust society. Axelrod's concept of the iterated Prisoner's Dilemma as a situation where honest dealing is rationally self-interested doesn't apply to them; they always calculate the maximum immediate payoff and go for that. The portrayal of Pak society thus in a way is an exploration of different ways of conceiving of self-interest...and of the limitations of one way.

On the other hand, there are the Gw'oth, a race whose members can link their nervous systems directly together, forming a single living supercomputer. At a key point, a Gw'oth character discusses the social position of such group minds, or Gw'otesht: in low-tech societies, a group entity was hampered, being less able to react quickly and defend itself against threat, and so Gw'oth societies all have taboos against the practice. But those who violate the taboos are able to create new technology, making them a source of wealth and political power, and so rulers who protect them gain victories over other rulers. In a curious way, Niven and Lerner have come up with an allegory of capitalism...an economic system that is based on a more effective mode of cooperation, that creates new technology and new wealth, that makes governments more powerful, but that is often resented by the general population.

I don't think that Niven and Lerner necessarily consciously intended either of these interpretations. But the fact that they can be found shows the richness of the world they're developing. It's a setting that's worth exploring.

Escape From Terra, Volume 1

By Sandy Sandfort, Scott Bieser, and LEE OAKS!
Big Head Press, 2010, \$12.95, 189 pages

Reviewed by Anders Monsen

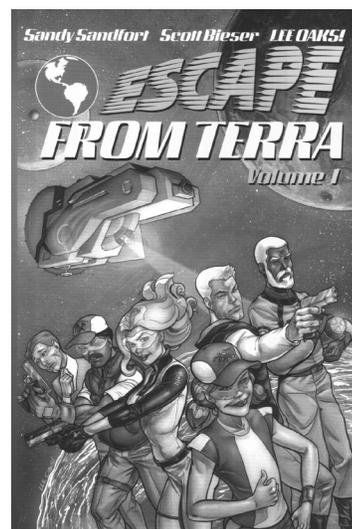
Big Head Press is gradually amassing a resumé of quality online graphic novels collected into print editions. Their latest offering is the very libertarian collection of tales from a trio of writers and illustrators, *Escape from Terra*, scripted by Sandy Sandfort and Scott Bieser, with art by Lee Oaks.

Set around 100 years in the future, *Escape From Terra* showcases stories about anarchist colonists on the asteroid Ceres who deal with the statist Terra's "United World Revenue Service." This is *Moon is the Harsh Mistress* as if the revolution succeeded.

The slim volume densely packs in a series of five vignettes, or arcs as they are classified on the Big Head Press web site (where the stories continue beyond what appears in Volume 1, so presumably there will be a Volume 2 some day). Although the book does not list the titles, I tracked these down in an early email announcing the series a few years ago. The first one, entitled "Marching Orders" introduces us to some of the main characters. Tax collector Guy Caillard is assigned the task of collecting outstanding revenue from Ceres. Once a mining destination, Ceres has become a thriving place of commerce and wealth, and Terra declares part of that wealth as rightfully theirs. Along with his gorgeous assistant Fiorella Stellina, Guy attempts to make sense of the Ceres structure of government, which is not quite what it seems. Perhaps the shortest of the arcs this serves mainly as an introduction to the rest of the tale. We meet the very Heinleinian teenager Babette, her comical relatives Bert and Ernie, and King Reginald the First, the supposed ruler of Ceres.

"World Ceres" concerns an episode where Guy and Fiorella are trapped along with one of their hosts in a surface corridor on a mining asteroid. Here we learn that Guy has a heroic streak, and is not just a stuffed-shirt bureaucrat incapable of surviving outside the office. We also witness our first "escape" from the Terran government, though not a surprising one, as someone decides to leave the service of the Terran government and re-locate to the less law-bound (though not without rules) Ceres.

"War of the Worlds" brings the crisis of Terra to the fore, as warships are dispatched to Ceres to subdue the populace and arrest those in charge. When Reggie King declares everything



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motivating readers to prevent a catastrophe. But it fails to offer any specific analysis of what ought to be done. I think this was wise. By avoiding simplistic solutions, Shute avoids the impression that the problem is amenable to such solutions. Much of the book's power derives from its harsh refusal to offer an easy way out. This, indeed, is a common theme in his work; the reality of hard problems, and our responsibility for noticing and addressing them as well as we can.

With similar purpose, in a novel written shortly before World War II, Shute focused attention on important issues of civil and personal defense. *What Happened to the Corbetts* (1939, published in the U.S. as *Ordeal*), was meant to inspire unproved preparations against bombing attacks that Shute, quite rightly, considered imminent.

A Town Like Alice (1950) is a good introduction to Shute's works. Part of the action takes place in Malaya, during World War II; the remainder in England and Australia. The complex plot is skillfully handled, with many compelling scenes. The story concerns a legacy whose beneficiary is Jean Paget, Shute's most enduring heroine.

I won't say more about the narrative, since it contains a number of surprises, except to emphasize the importance of commercial themes in what, at first glance, is primarily a romance-adventure story. One such theme is the importance of avoiding prejudice in accurately evaluating another person's business judgment. Another is the virtue of company towns. I'd be surprised to find another work of fiction from the early 1950s with a more positive view of capitalism and entrepreneurship than *A Town Like Alice*.

No Highway (1948) is a cliffhanger about integrity, eccentricity, personal responsibility, judgment and management. It exemplifies what is most attractive about Shute's work: he clearly sees the impact each individual has on the lives of his or her family, friends, and co-workers. He clearly illuminates the tremendous responsibility each of us has, not just in the "major" choices, but in seemingly "insignificant" ones as well: the decision whether or not to provide minor, timely assistance to a stranger; the decision about whether to act before one is sure of the facts; the decision to re-examine a cherished presupposition, even when one doesn't have to.

The narrator, Dr. Dennis Scott, is manager of an aviation research establishment. Slowly, just as in real life, facts begin to present themselves to Scott's attention suggesting that perhaps there may be a materials flaw in a new commercial airliner. The plot involves tracing the steps by which one of several

possibilities becomes a probability, and then, only at the end, a demonstrable fact. The central conflicts of the story stem from the necessity for each character to take responsible action before the uncertainty has been resolved.

Shute skillfully intertwines two very different kinds of uncertainty: uncertainty about technology and about people. The reader comes to realize that we often have to take action based not on our own judgments, but on the judgments of others. The crux is, how should we decide whose judgments to rely upon, and how far?

The story centers on a modest, dedicated, irritating, highly eccentric man, Theodore Honey. As the story unfolds, each of the other characters has to decide how to think about Honey and how to treat him. Their decisions, as well as Honey's responses to those decisions, determine the outcome.

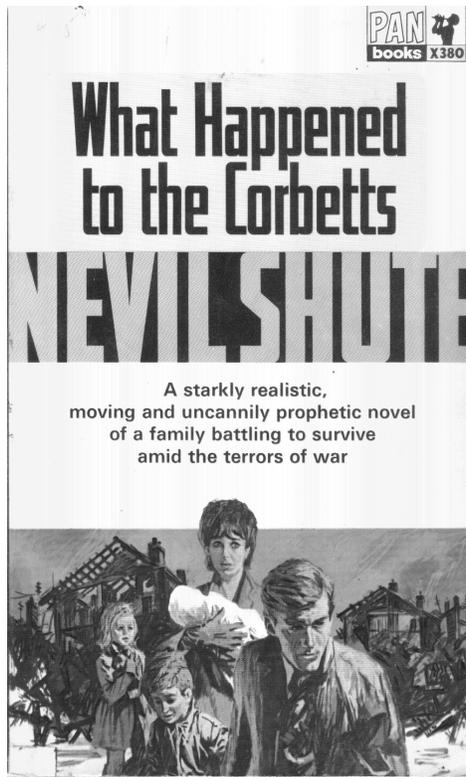
For many years the actress had been out of touch with the hard realities of life. She had not been short of money for thirty years and she would never be again. All her working life had been spent in the facile world of honky-tonk, of synthetic emotion and of phoney glamour.

Now she was getting a glimpse into a new world, a world of hard, stark facts, a world in which things had to be exactly right or people would be killed . . . She was beginning to perceive that little insignificant men like Mr. Honey were the brains behind that world . . .

Shute's main characters are not supermen or superwomen. They are strong human beings, and Shute concentrates his efforts on showing what makes them strong: integrity, hard work and training, and an occasional helping

hand, particularly one guided by a similar sensibility. There is no arrogance or solipsism in his writing; as a result, we see human beings engaged in co-operative enterprise, each person good at some things and not so good at others. It's a refreshing contrast from the normal run of super-heroes and anti-heroes. Here we have recognizable, believable heroes and heroines, who differ from us in degree of competency and perceptiveness, but not in kind. I think this is the main source of Shute's enduring (albeit relatively unsung) popularity.

Round the Bend (1951) has two main themes: the hard work and attention to detail required to build up a business (in this case, a cargo airline), and the need for traditional religions to adapt to the requirements of modern life. The story takes place in the Middle East during the late 1940s, when the oil boom was just starting. Much of the book describes the birth of a new oriental religion that emphasizes the virtue of



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excellence in one's work. In the light of recent history, it is sad to reflect on how different Middle Eastern politics might be if something like Shute's path had been followed instead of the Ayatollah's.

He said quietly, "you're saying, in effect, that we must work on the assumption that Shak Lin's divine."

"God damn it," I said angrily. "I tell you he's not. I know him, and he's just a damn good engineer who's going round the bend a bit. That's all there is to him."

"A damn good engineer who's going round the bend a bit," he said thoughtfully. "It wouldn't have been a bad description of the Prophet Mahomet, only he was a damn good merchant."

The singularity of Shute is readily apparent: who else would combine a positive vision of business enterprise and an original view of religion in the same work?

Although Shute was not a libertarian, he was a vocal opponent of government meddling in business, confiscatory income and inheritance taxes, and other aspects of socialism. This fitted right in with what one obituary writer referred to as his "almost pathological distrust of politicians and civil servants." In 1950, unwilling to put up any longer with the British Labour government's disastrous policies, he voted with his feet and emigrated to Australia. Both *The Far Country* (1952) and *In the Wet* (1953) contain biting criticisms of conditions in England under socialism.

The latter book explores the political implications of then-current trends in the British Commonwealth, extrapolated 30 years into the future. Shute explicitly criticizes traditional democracy for its tendency to give too much political power to people who have done nothing to earn the respect of their peers. Shute's proposed solution is unorthodox: as in our world, every individual gets one "basic" vote, but as many as six additional votes can be earned—by education, military service or foreign travel, raising children and staying married, earning significant income, ministering a church, or—the highest honor of all—gaining special grant from the Queen.

We got a totally different sort of politician when we got the multiple vote. Before that, when it was one man one vote, the politicians were all tub-thumping nonentities and union bosses. Sensible people didn't stand for parliament, and if they stood they didn't get in.

This scheme strikes me as neither workable nor desirable. It is insufficiently radical, and too arbitrary—how many years of education? at what schools? does a minister of the Universal Life Church qualify for an extra vote? Nevertheless, *In the Wet* remains interesting because of the importance of Shute's underlying concern that there is something wrong with the idea that all men's opinions are worthy of respect and should be weighted equally in politics. That Shute was willing to say this in print in 1953 showed both courage and an uncommon independence from intellectual fashion.*

* Readers interested in the "multiple vote" idea may also wish to read Mark Twain's brief satiric essay "The Curious Republic of Gondour" (1875), reprinted in Mark Twain: *Life as I Find It*, ed. Charles Neider (Garden City: Doubleday, 1961).

While *A Town Like Alice* shows the birth of a company town, *Ruined City* (1938, U.S. title: *Kindling*), shows the near-death of one. As with most of Shute's stories, the plot builds on personal experiences. Indeed, I recommend reading this book after his autobiography, *Slide Rule*, which discusses in detail his opinions about management's conflicting responsibilities to shareholders and employees. Just before writing *Ruined City*, Shute was in much the same position as his protagonist, responsible for raising and making money, and preserving the jobs of over 1,000 employees during very tough times.

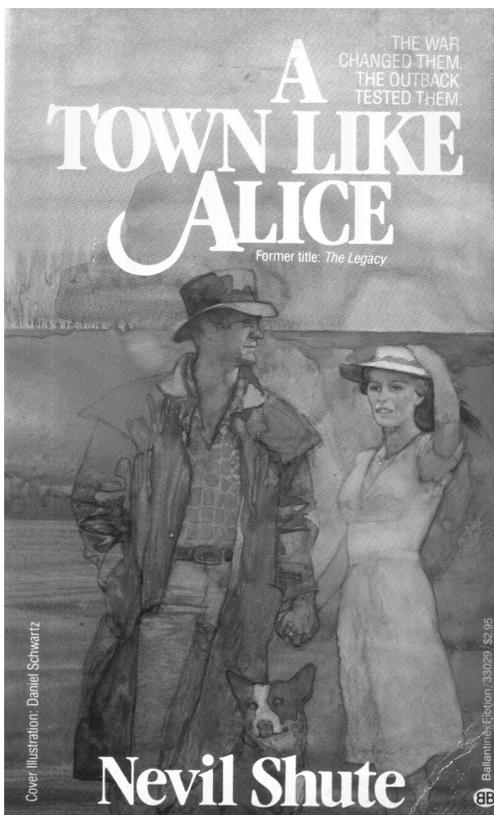
Ruined City is a "there but for the grace of God go I" story, in which the main character concocts an elaborate scheme to resurrect a moribund town and create jobs in the midst of the

Great Depression. Shute seems to be pushing his readers, asking them "And how far would you go to get out of this mess?"

Every machine that's put into a factory displaces labour. That's a very old story, of course. The man who's put to work the machine isn't any better off than he was before; the three men that are thrown out of a job are very much worse off. But the cure isn't Socialism—or if it is, I'm too much of a capitalist myself to see it. The cure is for somebody to buckle to and make a job for the three men.

My favorite part of *Ruined City* are the chapters in which the protagonist has to obtain consent of a foreign government to back his scheme. Shute provides us with a vivid, step-by-step account of bribing Balkan officials during the 1930s. Entirely a piece of fiction, no doubt.

—Continued on page 8



—*Novelist of achievement*, continued from page 7

Trustee From The Toolroom (1960) was Shute's last novel. It tells of a quiet man who is suddenly confronted with an obligation that requires him to travel halfway around the world and back on minimal funds. The plot has many amusing twists exemplifying the book's opening motto: "An engineer is a man who can do for five bob what any bloody fool can do for a quid."

If *On the Beach* is Shute at his grimmest, *Trustee from the Toolroom* is Shute at his most optimistic. Unlike his other books, in which success comes only by overcoming extreme difficulties and dangers, this one shows a man steadily pursuing a goal by a series of small, thoughtful steps. The protagonist is entirely successful at achieving his goal: retrieving a lost treasure, and returning it to its right owner. In the process, he discovers both modest fame and sufficient fortune to become a wealthy man. He even acquires a child. When the story begins, he appears a very isolated man; but by its end he turns out to have a rich and varied network of friends and admirers who are much like himself, decent and accomplished individuals.

If this story has any villain, other than ocean storms, it is governments. Shute takes obvious pleasure in showing us the careful steps by which the hero, despite modest means, manages to overcome every government-created roadblock he encounters. Many of Shute's books contain similar passages showing the protagonist ignoring or subverting laws of all kinds, but Shute never discusses how one is to decide which laws, if any, should be obeyed. His ethic seems to be that whenever laws conflict with personal or family interests of decent people, laws should be ignored, short of creating more trouble than this is worth.

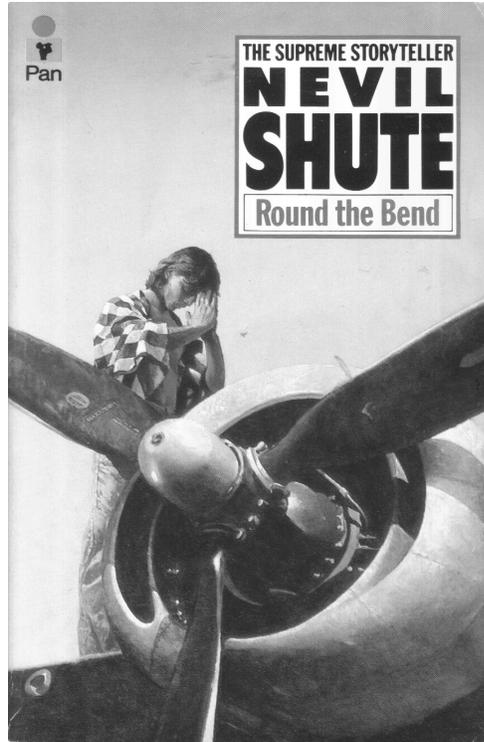
Shute's other novels are also interesting. *The Chequer Board* (1947) attacks racial prejudice. *Pastoral* (1944) vividly portrays a wartime romance. *An Old Captivity* (1940) intertwines description of a hazardous flight to Greenland with strange dreams about the Norse in America. *Most Secret* (1945) draws on Shute's experiences managing the development of innovative weapons during World War II. *Landfall* (1940) and *Requiem for a Wren* (1955, U.S. title *The Breaking Wave*) represent two completely different treatments of the same plot germ: the psychological effects of errors committed in time of war.

Shute's early books *Stephen Morris* (1923), *Marazan* (1926), *So Disdained* (1928) and *Lonely Road* (1931) contain colorful descriptions of the early days of aviation, as does *The Rainbow and the Rose* (1959). *Rainbow and the Rose* and *Lonely Road* also include memorable uses of stream-of-consciousness narrative.

Man Of Achievement

My special favorite of Shute's books isn't fiction, though it reads as if it were: *Slide Rule—the Autobiography of an Engineer*. Published in 1954, *Slide Rule* focuses on the period in Shute's life when he was a doer, building aeronautical machines and aeronautical companies. It is full of experiences and observations, but the jewel of this book is the detailed, knowledgeable and pointed first person narrative of the direct competition between a government designed airship, the R101, and a privately-designed airship, the R100.

In the late 1920's, when the Zeppelin was still expected to out-compete the airplane for long distance air travel, airships were a very big deal with military and propaganda significance. The R100 was the 747 of its day and Shute had much of the hands-on responsibility for its development.



The controversy of capitalism versus State enterprise has been argued, tested, and fought out in many ways in many countries, but surely the airship venture in England stands as the most curious determination of this matter. The Cabinet Committee heard all the evidence, and had difficulty in making up their minds. Finally, in effect, they said, "The Air Ministry at Cardington shall build an airship of a certain size, load-carrying capacity, and speed, and Vickers, Ltd. shall build another one to the same contract specification. By this ingenious device we really shall find out which is the better principle, capitalism or State enterprise." I

joined the capitalist team.

Thus begins an amazing, outrageous, true story. Shute tells it as one who is outraged still, 25 years after the event. He does not mince words:

A man's own experiences determine his opinions, of necessity. I was thirty-one years old at the time of the R101 disaster, and my first close contact with senior civil servants and politicians at work was in the field of airships, where I watched them produce disaster. That experience still colours much of my thinking. I am very willing to recognize the good in many men of these two classes, but a politician or a civil servant is still to me an arrogant fool till he is proved otherwise.

In a passage with implications for defense policy today, he

—Continued next page

—*Novelist of achievement*, continued from previous page

concludes:

The one thing that has been proved abundantly in aviation is that government officials are totally ineffective in engineering development. If the security of new weapons demands that only government officials shall be charged with the duty of developing them, then the weapons will be bad weapons, and this goes for atom bombs, guided missiles, radar, and everything else.

Shute shows how government mismanagement caused the R101 program to fail at every step, and by every measure—financial, technical, political. The end came on R101's maiden voyage, October 31, 1930, when she crashed and burned near Beauvais, France. Of the 54 persons on board, only six survived; all the officers, all the government officials, and all the passengers perished. Following this crash, all airship development in England was terminated. R100, the entirely successful "capitalist airship," which Shute's firm had built more quickly, on a tighter budget, and to the required specifications, was rolled over with a steamroller and scrapped—even though it had already flown to Canada and back, without difficulty.

Suddenly out of work, Shute decided to try his hand at starting an airplane manufacturing company. The second half of *Slide Rule* is the story of the birth, growth, and eventual disappearance-by-merger of Airspeed, Ltd. It is a story that can provide valuable lessons and moral support to anyone with visions of starting a risky, capital intensive business.

Much has been written... about the provision of risk capital for Industry, but few of the authors who pronounce so learnedly upon this subject have ever had the job of looking for the stuff. Men who start businesses upon a shoe string and battle through to success are frequently reluctant to recall and publicize their early disappointments and rebuffs...

I had to think and talk quite hard... I had to convince my chairman... that a policy of caution, of doing what everybody else was doing, could never bring us through to an established position in the industry. If we did only what the large, conservative firms of the industry were capable of doing we should inevitably lose to them... Our only hope was to lead the way...

Shute goes on to tell the story of how he and his colleagues built Airspeed from scratch into a profitable airplane manufacturer. Before it was merged into de Havilland in 1940, Airspeed had designed and developed the twin-engined Oxford, one of the main British training airplanes of World War II; over

8,000 Oxfords were built.

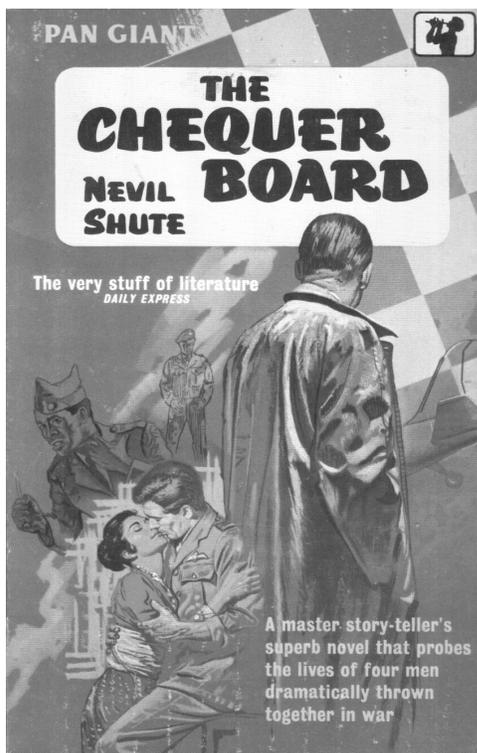
Shute strongly preferred commercial aviation to military aviation. He makes perceptive criticisms of military procurement procedures and the perverse incentives they produce:

From that time onwards, I think I began to lose interest in the company that I had brought into being. Civil work was coming to an end and all new design projects were of a military nature... Ahead of the managing director of Airspeed, Ltd. stretched an unknown number of years to be spent in restraining men from spending too much time in the lavatories in order that the aeroplanes might cost the taxpayer less, with the reflection that every hour so saved reduced the profit ultimately payable to the company. In time of war the sense of national effort will galvanize a system of that sort, and does so; in time of peace it tends to make a managing director bloody-minded. I think it did with me.

Few books on 20th century English authors mention Shute's writings. Julian Smith's biography, *Nevil Shute* (Twayne, 1976) appears to be the only serious analysis to date. Shute seems to have no natural base of reviewers, critics or popularizers, being neither a "literary" author nor a genre writer of thriller, romances, or speculative fiction. Yet his books contain all these elements.

Unlike most works of fiction, they also contain a sense of realism about matters of business and technology. Too many authors reveal complete ignorance of what people who work as engineers or managers actually do for a living: try to get something useful done within real constraints of time, money, uncertainty, and personalities.

I think of Shute as the author of novels of achievement. In each book, the protagonist works to achieve an admirable goal in an admirable fashion, with intelligence, sensitivity, energy, and integrity. As Shute shows, such novels can be entertaining, instructive, and celebratory of man's capacity for purposeful, moral action. The world would be a better place if there were more works like these, and more writers like Nevil Shute.



Philip Kenneth Salin (1950-1991) was an American economist and futurist, best known for his contributions to theories about the development of cyberspace and as a proponent of private (non-governmental) space exploration and development. This essay first appeared in Liberty magazine in May, 1989, and is reprinted by permission of Salin's widow.

Anti-Capitalist Film Makes Cameron a Billionaire

By Victor Koman

I finally—reluctantly—gave Jim Cameron, Regal Entertainment, and Imax my \$16.50 to see *Avatar* in Imax 3D the last week before it got booted out by Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* so that I could knowledgeably explain why I knew I wouldn't like the film before I saw it.

Let me state that I am a big fan of Cameron's films. I love the Terminator series and think *Aliens* is the best of the four in that series. Whenever *True Lies* is on, I have to stop and watch it. And, yes, I cried at *Titanic*. But then again I cry at Muppet movies, so take it for what it's worth. The man's a brilliant master of visual storytelling. And that is the big reason why I am so upset with *Avatar*. I knew that I would dislike the film as soon as I learned bits of storyline as the hype began last year. Aliens are the beleaguered good guys enduring invasion. Check. Earth people (specifically, American Earth people) are the venal, rapacious invaders. Check. One man defies his people to save the aborigines. Check. Scientists always seek Truth and never twist their research for grant money or to please the government. Check. And businessmen will always opt to exterminate potential trading partners, have no respect for life or property, and are bereft of morality. Check.

Other reviewers have already made the more-than-obvious parallels with *Dances With Wolves*, Disney's *Pocahontas*, *Ferngully*, and a bunch of others. And I'm probably writing this late enough that most of my coming points have already been made by others, but I think the problem with *Avatar* is endemic in American culture, and highly damaging.

George Lucas understood the importance of removal from reality in writing fantastic fiction. *Star Wars* originally took place "in the year 3000", but moved to "a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away" not merely to make it sound more like the opening of a fairy tale, but to remove it from any connection with 20th Century Earth. In that way, the elements of the story become a template that can apply to any viewer's outlook. What was the Empire? To one, it might be an analogy for the British Empire versus the Rebel Alliance of the 13 colonies. To another, it might be evil Corporate America vs. heroic union organizers. Roman Empire vs. Christianity. In other words, you can't pin Lucas down to a particular current political viewpoint. He's merely for liberty and against tyranny—it's up to the viewer to choose the analogues.

Cameron's mistake (and I use the word advisedly, since *Avatar* is one of the highest-grossing films of all time) is an artistic one: making a fantasy film too specific. *Star Wars* and *Lord of the Rings* will be timeless because they are not bound to any specific historical matrix. James Cameron has chosen to plant *Avatar* squarely in a specifically 21st-Century American matrix. In other words, the ex-Marine mercenaries we see

are obviously American ex-Marines; the corporate weasel is obviously an American corporate weasel; the native-loving scientist is portrayed by Sigourney Weaver, the same actress who played ape-loving Dian Fossey. This allows viewers only one template: the film is only an analogy to American corporate rapacity, American military brutality, and 21st-century environmental insensitivity.

In *Lord of the Rings*, one could look at the destruction of Isengard's forest to build Sauron's war machine as a critique of Nazi, Soviet, or American war economies (or insert your own government) having a deleterious effect on the environment. The choice was up to the viewer. It did not alienate anyone watching it (except maybe for foresters and arms dealers).

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Avatar alienates, making it less universal or lasting in its appeal (said, again, with a grain of salt, since it's made a billion bucks plus my \$16.50).

Cameron protests that his film is not anti-military. Why, he purposely made his hero a Marine to show how the finest attributes of honor and defense of the weak enabled him to defy orders and slaughter

his own people. In this, though, Cameron engages in several liberal conceits.

Liberal conceit #1: The highest form of patriotism is treason. This is the theme, too, of *Dances With Wolves*. The liberal creed seems to be "My country, right or wrong. When right, to be kept right; when wrong, join the other side and kill as many of your countrymen as you can." For all the horror we are supposed to feel at the callous way the Americans kill Na'vi without any awareness of their individual sovereignty (and certainly no discussion of their property rights), Cameron's "Good Marine" Sully (and Costner's "Good Cavalryman" Dunbar) had no compunctions about slaying his former comrades en masse. Are we supposed to cheer that massacre? I'm reminded of the brilliant deleted scene in *Goldmember* where the wife of the beheaded henchman receives The Call and has to tell her son that his father has died at the hands of super-spy Austin Powers. "No one ever thinks about the henchman's family!" she wails. Similarly, we are not supposed to feel anything but satisfaction at the mass slaughter of all those other Marines. (OK, ex-Marine mercenaries, but Sully himself says there are no ex-Marines, so he's killing fellow Marines, Q.E.D.) (Semper fi indeed.)

Liberal conceit #2: Native populations live in wise, eternal harmony with the land; White Americans relentlessly destroy nature for short-term profit. Right. Would someone like to explain why—shortly after the arrival of humans in North America—all the megafauna vanished? Chinese dudes cross land bridge, look at mastodons, mammoths, giant sloths, and

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saber-tooth cats, and say “Get in my belly!” (pace, Fat Bastard). You could argue that they learned from their errors, I guess, but why aren’t Americans given the same indulgence? It took 10,000 years for Indians to learn to live with the land. Europeans have only been here 500 years or so (900 years for Vikings). What Cameron portrays as a Na’vi prayer acknowledging the Circle of Life (when killing an animal for food or self-defense) could just as easily be interpreted as the Na’vi version of liberal hypocrisy: acting all apologetic and spiritual (and believing it, of course, with all your heart), but still getting what one wants by killing. Hey, I didn’t hear any prayers to Eyah (meant to sound similar to Gaea or YHVH?) when the Na’vi were dispatching fighter pilots by the score with armor-piercing arrows. If the Americans prayed to Eyah while bulldozing the Tree of Souls, would that have made it better?

Liberal conceit #3: Only a white male newly minted liberal convert can get these disorganized, unfocused, superstitious ethnics to recognize the threat they face and only a white male neo-liberal possesses the wisdom and savvy to guide them into victorious battle (isn’t that how we lost the Vietnam War—a bunch of liberals telling the military how to fight?). This is the same conceit displayed by Kevin Costner in *Dances With Wolves* and (forgive me, Sarah Jessica) Matthew Broderick in *Glory* (the story had to have a white guy as the lead character to make it more “accessible”) (Hollywood code for “we want more than 12% of the population to see it”). This is the same messianic complex that leads liberals to think that they are the only ones wise enough and smart enough and pure enough to prevent destruction of the entire planet by car exhaust, the only ones who can end the business cycle by dragging us into socialism/fascism, the only ones who can tell us what to eat/drink/drive/smoke/read/think, and the only ones who can mobilize the masses to push for social change (which is why they don’t think the Tea Party people are really a grass-roots people’s movement and must be an evil corporate plot).

At least in *Return of the Jedi* it was the Ewoks’ own idea to run off and attack the stormtroopers, and they did it with their own skills, tactics, and weapons. They didn’t need Luke telling them what to do.

Was the decision to bash American business, slander the

American military, and ignore the American conservationist tradition intentional on Cameron’s part, or is such self-loathing so endemic that it didn’t even occur to him that he was attacking the very corporate structure that made him a mega-millionaire, the military that has kept him safe both from communists who delight in slaying the wealthy and the intelligentsia after they have served their purpose and from Islamic jihadists who delight in killing everyone, and the American inclusiveness that made Hawaii a state, preserving vast swaths of its natural beauty for location filming on *Avatar*?

I said sympathy for your enemies was dangerous. It’s everywhere, even in children’s films. When I saw the trailer for *How to Train Your Dragon*, in which the young hero discovers that dragons aren’t the monsters his elders made them out to be (because naïve youngsters full of Hope and Change always know better than their elders, who actually may have experienced a few dragon attacks), I thought Yes... that’s just what the dragons want you to believe... Islamic terrorists love Americans who think that their jihad on the

West is merely a reaction to American imperialism—they are the current version of the “useful idiots” Lenin used so well to drag Russia into a tyranny worse than that of any tsarist.

I didn’t dislike the film per se. Artistically, it was superb. Pandora looks like a fun world (if you can survive the Death-world-like fauna). The plot is tried-and-true (some might say clichéd and worn-out). And Zoë Saldana’s left breast stole every scene it was in. But the anti-American, anti-business, anti-military, anti-reason sub-text turned me off completely. It was superfluous to the basic storyline; the villains could have been anyone. They did not have to be from Earth at all. (I recall the super-hit *Independence Day* made the rapacious invaders non-humans and the heroes the US military.) They did not have to be capitalists at all. Didn’t fascists and communists invade the lands of native people and rape and pillage them? And wasn’t it, oh, I dunno, American military men and women who fought and died to liberate those lands? Who’s leaving Haiti after weeks of sweltering work keeping quake victims from dying, only to sail down to Chile to conduct more rescue and relief work? Would that maybe be the Marines? Hmm. Odd thing for them to do. From watching *Avatar*, I’d swear they’re supposed to go in there and murder everyone.

And I don’t like seeing movies disingenuously engineered to give me that utterly false impression.

At least in *Return of the Jedi* it was the Ewoks’ own idea to run off and attack the stormtroopers, and they did it with their own skills, tactics, and weapons. They didn’t need Luke telling them what to do.

Moving?

Please send any changes in your mailing address to:

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Victor Koman is a three-time winner of the Prometheus Award for best novel—The Jehovah Contract (1988), Solomon’s Knife (1990) and Kings of the High Frontier (1997). His other novels include Captain Anger #1: The Microbotic Menace, and Death’s Dimensions. He blogs at <http://www.komansense.com/blogger/blog.html>, from where this entry first appeared, and is reprinted with permission.

—*Escape From Terra review, continued from page 5*

a sham the Terrans refuse to believe him. They kill a family of Cerans as a demonstration. When events go south for the Terrans, those responsible for the murders are executed in what can only be described as a disturbing scene. I am not sure if the authors thought through some of the ramifications of such a form of justice and method of execution, but it seemed very out of place. One could argue this was no different from “toss them out an airlock” statement from the Heinlein novel to which I alluded above, but no person who shoots another person can continue to exist as the same person, especially a teenager.

“The Icemen Cometh” deviates from the serious themes, and introduces some new players. Bert and Ernie are hired to transport a large chunk of ice to a remote asteroid, and learn their mysterious client has some huge ambitions. Thrown into the mix is a brutal Terran assassin who fails to plan for every eventuality. Their host turns out to be the wealthiest man in the universe, Tobikuma Kobayashi, a reclusive inventor who open sources his inventions to keep them out of reach of the Terran government. He seeks to one-up his hero, Norman Borlaug, and find a way to feed billions, while still making a buck or two, no doubt.

“Mystery of the Martian Melodies: The Trouble with Sybils” digresses from the main tale, as the primary setting takes place on Mars. Still in the very slow process of terraforming, Mars

remains brutally cold and hostile to humans outside pressure suits. Reggie King is hired to debunk some strange paranormal phenomena, as grad students are hearing strange voices in a remote SETI research station. When a researcher marches naked into the Martian landscape after hearing voices telling him to come out to play, the engineers in charge look for possible reasons. We learn as much about Reggie’s psyche as the supposed ghosts of Mars, and see a possible future history of the planet through the cracks of the story.

The volume of takes from the *Escape from Terra* universe packs entertainment and ideas. Some of the pages almost pack in *too* much, and this book is probably not one to read in a single sitting. Some of the pages also are packed in a little on the small side; though the web comics are bigger and easier to read, clicking through the “pages” is not as familiar as flipping through paper, at least in my eyes.

Sandfort, Bieser, and Oaks have an interesting future history on their hands. Told in the fashion of old-time action adventure comic strips, this is definitely *not* a novel. Some of the arcs hint at future events in other arcs, and the growing cast of characters sometimes distracts. While Guy appears to be the main protagonist, his story is but one of many in this large ensemble cast, very reminiscent of the TV series *Babylon 5*. Depending on where the story leads, it should have a strong readership. There are few books which detail positive liberty rather than statist dystopia, and *Escape From Terra* manages to do a great deal of both.



The Newsletter of the Libertarian Futurist Society
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