

PROBE 189

September 2021

- 3. Editorial
- 4. Chairman's Note
- 5. Magazines Received
- 6. L.O.C # 1 Lloyd Penney
- 8. Twice: The Eclipse Roberto Schima
- 14. History, Genre and Time in Triangulum
Gerhard Hope
- 28. Junk Bernie Ackerman
- 40. The Probotic Agony Column
- 41. End Zone Space Oddities Derek Hohls
- 41. Books Received.
- 43. Book Reviews Jamieson and Hope
- 48. L.O.C # 2 Lloyd Penney



Editorial

Gail

Probe 189 is still running on the lack of Nova stories from 2020. But there are two stories: One from Roberto Schima in Brazil and the 2nd placed Nova tale from 1999 from Bernie Ackerman.

Instead of a single article from previous issues I've added one from Probe 65 from June 1986 and one from Probe 84 August 1991.

I've also included the very interesting and informative talk that Gerhard Hope derived via Zoom for our July meeting. A closer look at how South African author Masande Ntshanga looks at a future South Africa from a rather different point of view.



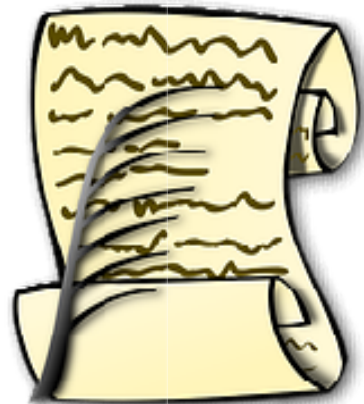
Life goes on, Covid-19 is still with us and continues to wreak havoc but more and more of us are being vaccinated(I've had both my Pfizer ones with no issues, except for standing in a queue) and we begin to hope that we may eventually be able to talk to each other again without wearing masks.

For the inside back cover I've found a NASA picture taken using the Hubble telescope that shows a three Galaxy system, which I thought was interesting having just read the Three Body Problem by Cixin Liu. It gives a better view of how three bodies cause a real problem in orbital mechanics when they attempt to exist in relation to each other. It's a bit mind boggling in this case to try and visualise the fact that there are galaxies and not just planets and what must be occurring in the confusion that is being created. Glad it is not happening in our back yard.

For our August Zoom meeting we had another very enlightening talk given by very long time member Nick Wood who has lived in the UK for a while now. He spoke on African and South African science fiction authors and we were rather shame faced to admit that we've got a lot of reading to catch up on. I would suggest that anyone who did not manage to attend should go to www.sffsa.org.za and have a look at the talk and slides that are available there.

Chairman's Note

Well another three months have passed and... everything is still pretty much the same. I hope all of you are keeping well and safe and hopefully have a job and earning money (or retired and spending your savings) to survive our current predicament. Are you able to work from home, or do you have to travel around? Unfortunately it seems with the new, more virulent strains of the COVID-19 virus going around, there are a lot of people being affected every day, so this lockdown is not going anywhere, anytime soon.



Considering the general age our club members, I expect by now that pretty much all of us have had at least one vaccination shot by now (some are lucky enough to have two). Though it seems not everyone is quite willing to get the shot, some are calling it a “government conspiracy” and a way to start “tagging” the populace for nefarious reasons. So they are quite determined not to get vaccinated. Well, I don't think our government is quite clever enough to do something that sneaky in such a short time, and in any case, there are a number of reasons why it is better to just get it done. My girlfriend had bad TB when she was younger and now does not have good lung capacity. She has managed to avoid getting the virus so far, but I fear for her health should she ever contract it from someone else, and I certainly don't want to be that person, so, I've already had my first one a couple of weeks ago. Another reason is that should enough people be vaccinated, we can get rid of this bloody lockdown nonsense! Eish, it would be so nice to get back to the normal way of doing things and going places... and partying late into the night. We could also be taken off the red list for countries with high infection rates and I could then finally go on that overseas holiday I have had to cancel twice in the past two years now. It really would be nice to get things back to our old normal.

Enough about the virus, have any of you seen the latest scientific news about things? Man, the strides they are taking every year just goes further and further. They are time and again showing how our old science fiction is becoming science fact. They are talking about how a Dyson sphere (a megastructure surrounding a star or black hole which derives its energy from it) could actually be possible nowadays, and something like it will probably be necessary at the rate humanity is consuming power. Or how about how they have actually managed to create matter from light? That old Einsteinian chestnut of $E=mc^2$ where they have apparently managed to use photons in a collider in such a way that they basically collided, and they believe they have observed an electron and its opposite the positron being produced. Say what? I know they are still working on improving the whole quantum computing thing, but working with such small particles is quite a challenge, but now there is the possibility of making matter, things are just getting more and more interesting. Though I think we are still quite a long way from an actual quantum computer you can use in your home, or producing enough matter that doesn't require half a country's worth of power just to produce a couple of particles.

Then of course they are still plan on humanity heading to Mars. The current Mars rover has been there for 6 months now, taking loads of photos and samples and I mean, come on, they actually have a working mini helicopter on Mars now taking aerial photos. The achievements they are able to make on another planet is just incredible, and paving the way for 2024 when SpaceX hopes to land an uncrewed rocket on Mars, which should hopefully lead to a manned rocket landing in 2026. Wow, the first humans on another planet, that would really be something to watch, not quite as momentous as humans landing on the moon, but certainly way up there. Haha, though with the number of movies and TV series that show so many things going wrong, let us hope the real world experience goes better than that. We could do with some major achievements like this, we need a bit of good news in the world, help lift the spirits of the human race to show what we are capable of doing.

Cheers

Andrew

Magazines Received

Stapledon Sphere (formerly the newsletter of the Middle Tennessee Science Fiction Society [aka the Nashville SF club])

Reece Moorhead reecejbm@gmail.com

Issue #49 June 2021

Issue #50 July 2021

Issue #51 August 2021

Ansible David Langford

June 2021 405 <http://news.ansible.uk/a405.html>

July 2021 406 <http://news.ansible.uk/a406.html>

August 2021 407 <http://news.ansible.uk/a407.html>

WARP 110, edited and published by Danny Sichel and Val Royall, is now available for download from our website!

http://www.monsffa.ca/?page_id=6915

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L.O.C . # 1. Probe 187 Lloyd Penney

31 July 2021

Dear SFFSAns:

Hello from Toronto, and hope that all are good and protected from those coronaviruses. It's far from over yet, and while we are fully vaccinated, we are finding out that a third one might be needed. We will find out as soon as the scientists involved can learn more. In the meantime, Probe 187 is here, and here are some comments...

Hello, Gail! Seeing how many entries there have been in the past, that's a real surprise there were so few short story entries this time around. Perhaps not much work/money/time/imagination? Maybe when you are worried about your health, creating a short story is not foremost in your mind.

Hello, Andrew! Yes, your editorials are read. We're all a little crazy in that pandemic. I've been busy editing magazines and books for Amazing Stories, writing letters like this one, cleaning up our cluttered apartment, and making lots more costume and steampunk jewelry. We've also lost weight...I haven't been this light in more than a decade. My weight loss secret? Illness. I lost weight recovering from COVID-19 this past February, and again in my reaction to the Moderna vaccine. It is effective, but I really don't recommend it!

My loc...we're now about one-third of the way through summer, and we have been very hot some days. August should be terrible. We have both our shots, and continue to wonder why some won't get them at all.

I read all the fiction inside, and enjoyed what Roberto Schima and Nick Wood provided, but the star was "Flash Crash" by Louis Evans, and the star of that story, MAISIE. A great character, but not a character at all, an algorithm named MAISIE. It does remind me of a story, "A Logic Named Joe" by Murray Leinster, from 75 years ago. MAISIE does so much in every second. Several lifetimes for us are but a minute or two for her. There is great action, great turns of phrase, an impressive story. An update, and a little more polish, and I am sure this could be published professionally.

I think it is getting ready to rain here, so I will finish up and send it out before I have to shut down. Many thanks for this issue, and looking forward to the next, which is probably somewhere in the international mails. See you then.

Yours, Lloyd Penney.

Twice: the Eclipse Roberto Schima

She was named after the moon; he, for the sun.

One day, like an eclipse, in a melancholic sky they met.

She was a frail, pale girl named Selene. He was only five years old when he moved with his family to the outskirts of Recife.

The house was Victorian old, haunted, and had a huge garden with trees and lawns. A high wall surrounded the entire property and, while giving a certain security, completely isolated the girl from the outside world.

The first days were very difficult for Selene, because, despite the lively presence of the dog Luna, besides this, there was no one to talk or play with. Her parents tried to distract her, however, it was not the same thing, moreover, they soon stopped, because they had their important grownups things to do.

Everything changed when, her parents surprised Selene all happily talking to someone in her room. She laughed and talked excitedly about her toys, sweets, stories, the view from the window of the harbor far away and whatever else came into her childish mind. The parents assumed that she was playing with Luna, however, they were intrigued to notice that their daughter was talking to an empty corner.

- Who are you talking to, dear? asked her mother.

"To him." He pointed to nothing between the two walls.

- Who is he? - she enquired.

- It's Hélió

In the opposite corner of the room, Luna stared at the child – and at something else, growling, fur bristling.

The mother exchanged glances with the father, who shrugged. Both had heard of strange stories about children having invisible friends. Her mother was concerned, but her father, had the typical male attitude of attributing everything to his daughter's imagination. However both of them felt something uncomfortable.

"It will pass in time," the man assured his wife.

That's how, in eclipse, the moon met the sun.

However, despite her father's prediction, it did not pass.

Selene would spend hours and hours happily chatting with her friend.

- Stop, Hélió... and then laugh....

- What is it, Selene? Cried the mother from downstairs.
- Nothing, mother. It's Hélio, he likes to stroke my hair.
- Why doesn't he go to his house?
- He said his house is here. Even if I wanted to, he couldn't leave... He's stuck.
- Stuck?

The mother found this a little beyond what a five-year-old would fantasize about.

One sunny morning, looking out the kitchen window, she saw Selene running through the garden around a tree, where there was a swing. It actually swayed, although it wasn't windy. Suddenly, the girl ran to the woman and asked:

- Mom, what is vitamin D?
- Why do you want to know?
- Hélio said that it comes from the Sun and is good for your health.

This didn't surprise her as much as seeing the swing stop suddenly.

On another occasion, opening the door to the attic of the house in order to store some junk there, the father came across other junk: old furniture, packages of newspapers and magazines, wooden toys, rags, crates. He was amazed to find newspapers that were nearly a century old. He brought them into the living room, along with a rectangular tin in which were several cutouts, a lock of blond hair tied back with a blue ribbon, and some yellowed photographs. He scrutinized the articles with news from 1918 with curiosity. The headlines divided between the First World War and the Spanish flu.

"They're papers from the original residents," he told his wife.

- So much dust... It's coating everything!

Selene in her white dress, approached. Suddenly her face lit up.

- Hélio! Hélio! she shouted several times. - Hélio! Hélio!

She was pointing to one of the photos spread out on the coffee table.

The image was of a little boy who should have been around Selene's current age, wearing light clothes, a pair of boots, and a cap that didn't quite hide his fair hair.

There was something written on the back:

- "Hélio van den Berg, 1913-1918"... Hélio!

Selene had never gone up to the attic. How could she know?

A shiver run through her mother; and her father, although he would not have admitted it

- Hélio! Hélio! Called Selene. Then she stopped, looking back. - Oh, wait!

Unsure, the mother asked:

- What's wrong, dear?

- Hélio is sad.

- Why?

- He doesn't speak.

The father thought it best not to voice his uncomfortable suspicion: This was a photograph of a long dead child

The years passed and Selene reached adolescence.

Finally, as her father had predicted, her conversations with her invisible friend diminished. At least that was what he believed, and what her mother wanted to believe—not without a certain amount of relief. Meanwhile, the fact was that Selene had simply failed to speak up and tell everything that only she saw and heard.

At sixteen, her parents decided to place her in a school in another city, at a boarding school. She protested. In her mind, her parents wanted to separate her from Hélio or, worse, get rid of her.

The parents argued that it was so much for safety reasons, but - and mainly - because they wanted her to have better quality education, because, if it depended on the public school... (Who knows, the imaginary friend would leave too, but this did not speak.)

In her room, sulking, feeling the ground under her feet lose its grip, she whimpered:

- Hélio... I'm leaving!

And, in the old corner, his friend - still a child in a cap and boots - appeared, looking melancholy. Spoke in her mind:

I know, Selene. It's time for us to part ways.

Even Luna was overwhelmed with sadness. She sniffed at Selene's feet and then went to lie down in the corner, next to Hélio. By this time, old lady as she had become, she had not only gotten used to the ghost, but had come to like him and the caresses he gave her.

Selene felt devastated, for she had such a great affection for her invisible friend. Had it not been for Hélio, her last ten years of life would have been lonely and unbearable. Even her health had improved, in part because of the advice he gave her: sunbathe, eat fruits and vegetables, run, and take walks. She'd shared her good and bad moments, told her everything that had happened at school, the bullying she'd suffered for being pretty and shy, the outings she'd occasionally taken with her parents. She had always regretted that Hélio could not accompany her.

I'm stuck in this house, he'd told her over and over again.

- Can you never leave?

I do not know. I want to believe there is a purpose in all of this. My eternity would have been terrible without your friendship.

And stroked her hair.

All became clear a few days before Selene left.

Despite the high wall of the property, two robbers broke into the Victorian house during the night. Selene's parents were forced to confine Luna in the bathroom, otherwise they would kill her. Then they tied up and gagged everyone in the room. They filled their canvas backpacks with as many of the most valuable items that they could pick up. When they were about to leave, one of them noticed the budding shapes that the girl revealed under her clothes. An exchange of glances and they decided to take her upstairs to the bedroom, despite her parents' despair. They threw her on the bed.

Selene feared what might happen to her.

The outlaws prepared to satisfy their bestial urges.

Suddenly, the light in the bedroom went out. An intense cold enveloped the two men, accompanied by a pungent stench. That's when they realized there was something other than the three of them in the room. Before they could voice their fears, their bodies were savagely scratched and beaten. One of them managed to catch his breath and tried to strike the aggressor. However, there was nothing to be hit. Horror seized their souls; however, it was too late for any redemption. Before the last vestige of sanity left them, they felt themselves lift from the ground, were bent over backwards, and, in a couple of dry snaps, their spines snapped. Then the knife that hadn't even touched the floor floated in the dimness and gouged out the bastards' eyes. Stillness and darkness would be all they would enjoy for the rest of their cursed lives. The dying bodies collapsed.

The cold was gone.

The light came back on.

Still lying down, Selene continued to sob.

Invisible hands untied the bindings and the gag.

Before she saw the terrible scene on the ground, Hélio whispered to her:

We were born for each other, Selene, however, at different times. There is a deep gulf of time between us, but not of our hearts. During the generations that I remained in this house, I asked myself thousands of times what was the purpose of this torment, of my short earthly existence and my endless non-existence. If there is a purpose in things, I believe that everything I went through converged to this exact

moment: the moment I could save you. And that made up for everything. In my heart, I know that you are destined for something great, for flights higher and nobler than staying in this place and in the memories that this house stores. I will always love you. Go, my friend! Study hard. Meet real people. Spread your wings in the moonlight... and fly!

Hélio van den Berg's warning was unnecessary, as she barely looked at the human rags. She freed Luna and her parents.

Everyone witnessed the small silhouette next to her daughter, a dark shape that resembled a little boy, who then vanished.

Luna yelped in sadness.

Selene spent the next few years at boarding school. She did not see the faithful Luna die of old age. She cried a lot when she found out. However, she nurtured the hope that, henceforth, Luna's spirit would play forever with Hélio. Afterwards, she attended college and became a medical geneticist. She met some men, had some relationships, however, she never got married.

Then came the pandemic, coming from the East.

In about nine months, the virus has claimed a million deaths around the world and tens of millions infected.

There was no shortage of people blaming China for what happened, especially for having its government deliberately concealing the emergence of the new virus until its dissemination became inevitable.

Demonstrations of sinophobia did not take long, even though it was known that the Chinese people, for millennia, were the first victims to suffer at the hands of their leaders.

- Do you trust their vaccine?

- Neither theirs nor Russian's!

- They distributed the virus for free and now they want to sell the vaccine. That's China's business!

Grudges aside, other nations worked on making their own vaccine.

Dr. Selene's work played a key role in finding a cure. Thanks to her contribution, thousands of people were saved in Brazil and around the world.

Unfortunately, the cure did not come in time for her parents.

Heartbroken, she undertook a trip to the old manor house on the outskirts of Recife. She barely remembered her invisible childhood and adolescence friend until he set

foot in the room. A long time had passed. Alone in that place of so many memories, she dared to call:

- Hélio?

There was no response.

She felt empty, flooded with memories.

Then intuition guided her toward some boxes stacked beside the sofa. In one of them there were the newspapers and the pictures that his father had once removed from the ceiling. Yes, there was his photograph, Hélio van den Berg. Selene caught it and the lock of hair with trembling hands and tucked them both into her purse.

Then she noticed something at the bottom of the rectangular can that she didn't remember having seen before: a letter written by Hélio's mother. In small print, pen and ink and in old fashioned handwriting, it wrote about that turbulent time at the beginning of the 20th century, the world plunged into war, the revolution in Russia and, also about how the little and beloved Hélio came to die, victim of another pandemic: the Spanish flu. In the letter - not addressed to anyone in particular - the mother recounted how, in despair at the risk of contamination, she and her husband buried the child in the backyard and left in a hurry.

Dr. Selene shivered.

"That's why you're stuck here," she muttered.

A fleeting breeze ruffled a lock of her hair. She recalled one of the theories about the origin of the Spanish flu that, like COVID-19, SARS, avian influenza A, Hong Kong flu and Asian flu, pointed to China. She wondered ruefully how many Hélio's there might have been in Southeast Asia.

She arranged for the exhumation of little Hélio's body, a dignified burial in consecrated ground, a tombstone with his name and a copy of the photo she had kept.

In front of the tomb, she placed a bouquet of flowers.

- There, my little one. Your memory will not be forgotten. And, I hope, your soul will finally find its deserved rest, free. Fly, Hélio... Fly towards the Sun!

You could say it was the wind, but Selene was sure it wasn't, when she felt a stroke of her hair as he'd always liked to do it. Besides, wind didn't know how to laugh.

It was the sun and the moon.

The final farewell.

A second, brief eclipse.

Feeling the tears in his eyes, he said:

- I will always love you too, Hélio

History, Genre and Time in ‘Triangulum’ (2019) by Masande Ntshanga: The Future of South African SF

By Gerhard Hope

Much has been spoken about the existential side-effect of Covid-19 in that we have become ‘unhinged in time’, like Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut. Anecdotal evidence for this is the feeling we all have right now that 2020 did not really end, but has just somehow elided into 2021. Hard lockdown was Ground Zero, an impact event of which the ripple effects are quantum-like in that they endlessly overlap.

A positive take on this – and as South Africans we are renowned for our *boer maak ’n plan* resilience and, dare I say, obduracy – is that Covid-19 is a window onto the true nature of time and space. Our unnamed main character, aged 17, answers a mysterious ad in *The Daily Dispatch* for gifted children. She is subjected to a strange questionnaire by the equally mysterious Marianne, who remarks: “I was the same age when I thought the world might be fabricated.” A discussion ensues about the concept of Plato’s Cave, concluding that the reality projected onto the wall is but “the shadow of another more concrete reality.”

Ntshanga then segues into a discussion about the nature of time, almost as an extension of the concept of Plato’s Cave, but from a quantum perspective:

“The past doesn’t lead to the present which leads to the future?” I ask her. “Instead, the future is in place?”

Marianne nods. “It’s called ‘block time.’ In this conception, space-time is a solid four-dimensional block, instead of a changing 3D one, modulated through the flow of time.”

In a Royal Society paper entitled ‘The quantum theory of time, the block universe, and human experience’ (28 May 2018), John Vaccaro highlights how advances in science have profoundly impacted our view of ourselves:

A new challenge emerged a century ago with Minkowski's space-time as it provided support for viewing the universe as a four-dimensional space-time block that exists as one entity. In this view, called the block universe (or eternalism in philosophical discussions), there is no basis for singling out a present time that separates the past from the future because all times coexist with equal status.

However, the discovery of quantum mechanics in the last century has left puzzling implications in its wake, particularly in relation to the status of local realism, which asserts that effects are local in the sense of propagating no faster than the speed of light and physical properties are real irrespective of whether or not they are measured. The central issue is that quantum mechanics appears to allow for statistical effects that are instantaneous despite being distant from their causes, a situation that Einstein once referred to as 'spooky actions at a distance'...¹

What a wonderful phrase. Just think of the deep science underpinning all of this, and Einstein summarises it so succinctly, and so remarkably. In a different instant of the block universe, he was a great novelist.

Unhinged in time as we are during Covid-19, many people have reported symptoms of a loss of concentration, attention span and focus. While lockdown has confined us physically, we are confronted psychologically with a rupture in space-time, like a black void that seemingly has descended over the entire world, shrouding it in a pall of quantum spookiness. If I had to think of a literary equivalent, I would have to highlight J.G. Ballard and his concept of 'the death of affect', which refers to an overwhelming sense of alienation, stagnation and inertia as an unforeseen and deadly consequence of consumerist capitalism. This is especially interesting in the context of *Triangulum*, as I will explain.

So, unstuck in time, we have also become unstuck to those objects that define our social and cultural identity. Nowhere is this more evident in the fact that people have reported a loss of interest in reading. You only have to glance at a website like Goodreads over the last year to realise that this has been a very real consequence for numerous people worldwide. It seems strange, because reading has always been defined as an 'escape from reality'. But now it seems as if reading either reminds us too much of reality, or we are no longer capable of taking that mental leap into an alternate reality that fiction has always provided, because the current reality of

¹<https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rsta.2017.0316>

Covid-19 is simply too overwhelming. We have become unstuck in time, and stuck in a very particular moment of the block universe. It is, indeed, a quantum dichotomy. But authors and fiction have always existed in an alternate universe anyway. We all have this mental image of the secluded writer pouring out words, and shaping that highly variable and mutable flow into the reality of a novel, which they then immediately become separated or distanced from once it is released into the 'real world. This is a reality that writers only inhabit by proxy, because they are always wandering around in some corner of their minds anyway, far removed from the physical reality that anchors them quite tenuously at the best of times.

Triangulum was published by the wonderfully-named Two Dollar Radio in 2019. If you search on YouTube, you will find video interviews with Ntshanga from July of that year to help sell a book fraught with that heaviest of writerly expectations: The successful second novel. Ntshanga completed a BA in Film and Media, and an Honours degree in English Studies at UCT, before enrolling in the MA in Creative Writing programme under the Mellon Mays Foundation. He was awarded an NRF Freestanding Master's Scholarship, supervised by well-known South African novelist and academic Imraan Coovadia. In 2020, Ntshanga joined the Rhodes University MA in Creative Writing Programme as a part-time lecturer, and took over the literary journal *New Contrast*, becoming the first black editor since it was established in 1960.² Also in 2020, *Triangulum* was shortlisted by the African Speculative Fiction Society (ASFS), going up against some real heavyweights:

Best Novel

WINNER: David Mogo, Godhunter, Suyi Davies Okungbowa (Abaddon)

Sing Down the Stars, Nerine Dorman (Tafelberg)

Triangulum, Masande Ntshanga (Penguin Random House South Africa/Two Dollar Radio)

War Girls, Tochi Onyebuchi (Razorbill)

The Old Drift, Namwali Serpell (Hogarth)

Rosewater Insurrection, Tade Thompson (Orbit)

²https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masande_Ntshanga

The Nommo Awards ceremony was held online on 25 October of that year, as would every other major genre event from then onwards, because the world we thought we knew was no longer the world we had known, and it would be some time before we could even begin to fathom the implications that it would never, ever be the same again.

I think I first heard about *Triangulum* in Ian Mond's review for the *Locus Magazine* website, published on 15 August 2019. Mond's review was lukewarm, however, especially as he seemed rather baffled by the ingrained South Africanness of the book. His pat conclusion: It is "a coming-of-age story that neatly transitions into an adult novel about the deep rifts in South African society".³ Who would want to read that? So, *Triangulum* ended up on my burgeoning 'to read' pile, which, as all readers know, is a quantum zone of endlessly expanding books.

I first attempted to read the book in 2020. However, as with the rest of the world, I was totally distracted by the unfolding drama of the Covid-19 pandemic, and how much it resembled such a typical SF 'end of the world' scenario, where the villain was not an invading alien horde, and not even an evil mutating virus, at the end of the day, but a rather spectacular accumulation of our own kneejerk stupidity and overreaction to a global crisis that demanded cool heads and collective action on a scale never attempted before. Unsurprisingly, we have exceeded even our own worst expectations at how badly we can fail at such an essential collective task.

Unstuck in time itself as a physical object from the distant and never-to-be-returned-to world of 2019, *Triangulum's* fractal take on time and narrative – itself shifting from the long-forgotten history of the failed Ciskei experiment, to a Kim Stanley Robinson (KSR) kind of corporate take on the commodification of Special Exclusion Zones a couple of decades hence – speaks clearly to our Covid-19 world in a way that the author could hardly have anticipated. I don't even think 'hindsight' is the right word for it. It is just that Ntshanga asks such piercing questions about the nature of reality, a reality that seems so porous to us right now.

Ntshanga himself seems to have emerged out of the woodwork of South African SF like a quantum bubble. South Africans do not read much by world standards anyway, with its publishing industry stuck in a perpetual state between decline and

³<https://locusmag.com/2019/08/ian-mond-reviews-triangulum-by-masande-ntshanga/>

diminishing returns. So why attempt a genre novel in such a difficult environment, and not even a conventional, reader-friendly genre novel at that, but one that weirdly seems to spend far more time in our distant past than it does in the future, all based on the bizarre idea that the future is just a conflation of the past and present anyway. Think of successful South African fiction writers: Deon Meyer and Irma Venter immediately spring to mind. On the genre front, Lauren Beukes is probably the best known. Of course, there are others, like Louis Greenberg, Sarah Lotz, Charlie Human, Henrietta-Rose Innes, Andrew Skinner, Ilze Hugo. Hardly enough names to start our own canon of South African SF. The point is that we need serious academic research into the local SF scene, not only to give us a much-needed overview of what authors are out there, what they are writing, but also to attempt to explain how on earth diamonds-in-the-rough like *Triangulum* are nurtured in such an unforgiving publishing and reading environment.

The elephant in the room, of course, is whether or not *Triangulum* can, or even should, be classified as an SF novel. If you listen to Ntshanga in his author interviews, he is very careful to refer to injecting SF tropes into what he clearly considers to be a literary novel. In a Mail & Guardian interview entitled 'The science of writing fiction' from 26 July 2019, Ntshanga states:

*'We have a tendency to take things for granted because we live here and because there are so many stories that get told about [South Africa]. So now there's this idea we can't write books or fiction on apartheid anymore. I'm not sure about that.'*⁴

Authors are always told to write about what they know. Ntshanga was born in East London in 1986, spending his early childhood in Bisho, the former Ciskei capital. This was one of two 'bantustans' or homelands that the apartheid government set aside specifically for Xhosa-speaking people, the second being Transkei. The infamous Lennox Sebe became President when Ciskei was granted nominal independence on 4 December 1981. In the grand tradition of African dictators, Sebe promptly declared himself President for Life in 1983.⁵

⁴<https://mg.co.za/article/2019-07-26-00-the-science-of-writing-fiction/>

⁵https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lennox_Sebe

All kinds of shenanigans ensued, including a coup attempt by his own brother, orchestrated from neighbouring Transkei. Sebe himself was eventually ousted on 4 March 1990 by Brigadier General Oupa Gqozo, who opposed the ANC's efforts to reintegrate the homelands. On 7 September 1992, the Ciskei Defence Force fired into a crowd, led by Ronnie Kasrils, Cyril Ramaphosa and Chris Hani, that marched to demand the removal of the latest dictator, killing 28 and injuring hundreds.⁶

All of that history and human toil and suffering vanished like a blip in the space-time continuum with our first post-apartheid election on 27 April 1994. Ciskei, of course, became the Eastern Cape, which, to no one's surprise, has been found to have the worst governance and medical infrastructure during Covid-19. Here is where history itself outpaces the novel, but it is still a sobering echo of how the past infuses the present, and perhaps continues to bleed into the future.

What places *Triangulum* clearly in the realm of SF though is that it is a 'found manuscript novel'. The Foreword is an account by Dr Naomi Buthelezi (herself an SF writer and a winner of the Hugo and Nebula Awards, to boot) of a mysterious package containing audio recordings and printed manuscripts, delivered anonymously to the offices of the South African National Space Agency (SANSA) in 2040. Initially tasked with compiling a State Defence Report, Dr Buthelezi is so alarmed by her findings that she instead prepares the information for public consumption, "a document announcing the end of our world in 2050", called 'TRIANGULUM'. Dr Buthelezi points out:

The reader will notice that the bulk of this narrative takes place in the Eastern Cape, once known as the Ciskei homeland, an apparatus of conquest implemented here by Europeans in the second millennium. This is the sender's lineage and it is also mine.

These 'zones', or Delta Labour Camps, as they are known, named after the international corporation that funds and builds them on South African soil, are the subject of the second part of the novel, entitled 'FIVE WEEKS IN THE PLAGUE'. Clearly, something happens between the historically accurate Ciskei section to result in the entirely fictional 'zone' section, which is also a deliberate echo of the defunct

⁶<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ciskei>

homeland system. In terms of the block universe, this seems a good example of Einstein's 'spooky action at a distance'.

But back to the question of whether or not *Triangulum* is a bona fide SF novel, or merely a literary novel with some SF aspects to it. This represents a simple binary opposition that has not been valid for a long time: 'SF', on the one hand, and 'What is Not SF', on the other. Damon Knight was certainly thinking 'out of the box universe' when he famously declared that "science fiction is what we point to when we say it".

We are all aware of SF's origins as a 'ghetto genre', largely written for, and published by, pulp magazines at the outset; the supposed Golden Age of Science fiction from about 1940 to 1960, when we learnt that editors like John W. Campbell were the publishing equivalent of dictators, ruling over their fiefdoms with an alarmingly misplaced sense of entitlement. Campbell, famously, refused to publish Samuel R. Delany because he was black, stating that this would 'unsettle' his reader base. In his acknowledgements, Ntshanga expresses his gratitude to writers whose output he considers invaluable: Victor LaValle, Stanislaw Lem, Colson Whitehead, Samuel R. Delaney [*sic.*] That is quite an eclectic bunch, pointing to how SF is all grown up now and has slipped out of the straitjacket of genre. Significantly, most of these writers work *across* genre. Colson Whitehead is the current literary darling for *The Underground Railroad* (2016), which also won the Arthur C. Clarke Award for Best SF novel, go figure, but people tend to forget he wrote a *really* good literary zombie novel, *Zone One* (2011).

A deeper question is whether or not Ntshanga feels in any way beholden to his list of writers. 'Beholden' is defined as "owing thanks or having a duty to someone in return for help or a service". In other words, these were some of the writers that established the ramparts of the SF genre, while Ntshanga is a new recruit fiddling with the crenulations. .Or does he consider himself as working in some kind of 'literary tradition', "the passing down of stories which give meaning to human experiences"? In other words, the Gospel According to Science Fiction.

Given that so much of South African history has been the consequence, unanticipated or otherwise, of a lot of social experimentation, I think it inevitable that Ntshanga gravitated towards SF. A good model for his novel is actually the aforementioned *Slaughterhouse-Five*, about the fire-bombing of Dresden in World

War II, and Billy Pilgrim's abduction by the Tralfamadorians, who can 'see' in four dimensions, and therefore interact with the space-time continuum unshackled by the constraint of time. Vonnegut manages quite a balancing act between the real-life horror of Dresden and his slapstick alien invasion side plot. Ntshanga adopts a similar tone in *Triangulum*, mixing up real-life historic events with what initially seems to be a B-grade SF plot. According to Dr Buthelezi:

Furthermore, while no evidence exists of the alien sightings alluded to throughout the text, the Department of Social Development's collusion with Cash Paymaster Services against their grantees has been well documented; and, the kidnapping of three teenage girls in King William's Town gained national coverage in 2002.

Our unnamed protagonist fears that the girls have disappeared in the same way as her own parent, and subsequently sets out to prove that these disparate events have a common origin. She is propelled onto this path by her visions of an object, or an entity, only ever referred to as 'the machine'. Ntshanga plants the seed early on that this is entirely a figment of her imagination, as she is diagnosed with 'reduced affect display' or 'emotional blunting', at the age of 12, beginning a lifelong treatment regimen. Apart from the fact that 'the machine' reveals a series of numbers and rotating triangles, we have virtually no description of it. It literally seems like an intrusion from another reality, "an overlap between the world we once knew and the one we had now".

Then there is the meaning of the word 'Triangulum' itself, which is a triangle of stars between Andromeda and Aries. The three towns of Cradock, Queenstown and East London "form the same triangle as the Triangulum constellation." Anuncle points out that the symbol of the Ciskei Police Force is a circle with triangles around its edge, resembling a sun. All of these facts are accorded equal weight and value in the narrative. Ntshanga's account of daily life and struggle in Ciskei, especially against the shifting political landscape in South Africa at the time, which would soon render the homeland itself a non-entity, is an excellent example of historic fiction. Detailed and precise, it brings to life the not-so-recent past in a way that is tangible and connected, yet which at the same time seems as incomprehensible to us as 'the

machine' itself. If Ntshanga is, indeed, presenting the reader with two competing realities, he rather loads the dice in favour of the historic narrative. So why the pseudo-SF symbolism?

This comes into sharp focus in the second part of the novel, entitled 'FIVE WEEKS IN THE PLAGUE', which seems as disconnected from the reader's reality as the Ciskei narrative is from 'the machine'. We learn that our protagonist has been working as a science journalist for a national newspaper, in addition to writing a book of short stories about her childhood while studying at UCT. A lot of these details echo events in Ntshanga's own life, adding another layer of imagined reality to the text, like rings in tree bark circling specific slots in the box universe.

Our protagonist begins a languid affair with a woman only referred to as 'D.', who introduces her to an activist movement known as The Returners, an eco-terrorist group founded in the late 1990s. They operated as a covert cell, responsible for monkey wrenching—as they called it—companies that were involved in deforestation, mining, GM crops, energy production, and later manufacturing. Their manifesto was classified as esoteric by reputable intelligence agencies. Within rural enclaves, their numbers were rumoured to be growing. There were varied reports of vigils, sermons and disciples—of ascetic men and women who arranged themselves in cross-legged circles, leaning forward to hum and whisper inside crumbling buildings. They appealed to the majority, calling for opting out of data and fighting from below the grid. Technological enterprise and technocratic rule were a forgone conclusion, they said, that dead-ended at the assured destruction of our habitat. The Earth buckled under man's idea of property, both physical and intellectual. This had all been seen. In response, the Returners stood opposed to the doomed path of the Industrial Revolution. It was a direction that had taken us off course, they argued, and compromised our survival in the universe. Now this also included digitization, the Industrial Revolution's youngest heir and our presiding ruler, or what they called The Path of the Machine. The Left Hand.

It is quite remarkable how Ntshanga's narrative takes a sharp 90 degree turn into the kind of anti-capitalist SF punted by KSR, as well as Ken Macleod, Charles Stross, Iain Banks and China Mieville. It is up to the reader's natural tendency for pattern recognition to connect 'the machine' hovering on the faded borders of Ciskei's long forgotten history to 'The Path of the Machine'. However, The Returners are

convinced that the entire sorry state of South African history – up to our current inflection point of rampage, violence and looting in supposed support of a fallen ex-president, one would assume – is simply due to us being stuck in one corner of the box universe.

In an excellent example of what Stephen Baxter refers to as ‘deep time’, The Returners state that the asteroid which struck the earth billions of years ago, forming the Vredefort Crater in the Free State, “created a fork in the path for us.”

“It altered the course of human development in this region. Hominid fossils, ancient ones, were pushed closer to the Earth’s surface, but then so was gold.”

D. ... went on: “It was a test—that’s what we believe. The path on the left or the path on the right. The impact revealed secrets to our ancestors about our origins, through those fossils; but it also warped the basin in the north, allowing colonists to discover gold in 1886.”

I watched her mouth while she spoke. “That began the purchasing of machines and petroleum en masse. That part’s not a secret. The consolidation of the Union of South Africa as a manufacturing state, a slave camp, and whatever we have now. This is what we call The Left Hand. The Path of the Machine. The Returners wish to direct our course back to the fork, in search of The Right Hand.

Now it is clear why Ntshanga invests so much energy in ensuring the realism of his Ciskei narrative is on a par with the reader’s own perceived history; it is a narrative strand that takes in such ‘spooky events at a distance’ as that initial doomsday asteroid, to the Vredefort Crater, to the Gold Rush, the Industrial Revolution, and to a point where we enter unadulterated KSR territory, with perhaps William Gibson looking over his shoulder and shading his eyes at the glare cast by our bright new cyber age: South Africa’s “transitioning from underdeveloped state to multifaceted corporation.” Ntshanga’s book obviously predates the ANC’s current obsession with Radical Economic Transformation, as a response to entrenched White Monopoly Capital, but again it is clear how spookily prescient *Triangulum* is, almost as if it coincides with our current reality in an agitated state of quantum entanglement.

There were more housing strikes in Alexandra, which wasn't surprising. Ever since the 2019 launch of the Delta Urban Renewal Project—an initiative to redevelop township space in the province, using local labour—there'd been a shortfall in both materials and wages, especially in Alexandra, which had served as the vanguard. The mayor had taken to a podium on behalf of the developers—Delta—citing similar projects across Asia. The townships were meant to serve as micro-cities, we were told: self-contained, privately owned zones with standardized populations of 200,000, and streamlined economic functions ... This meant that in 10 years, each zone would fall under corporate, rather than governmental, regulation.

Again, that quantum echo with the name 'Delta', here a multinational hell-bent on developing South Africa come hell or high water, or, as in our case, a mutated variant of Covid-19 that has plunged us into the hell of our Third Wave. Of course, the 'flagship project' quickly runs aground, as "The residents still awaited work, education, and healthcare, while the trial companies that had signed on waited for Delta to deliver their infrastructure and sourced labour." Nsthangwa even has some fun at the 'wokeness' of his ideal future:

In the TV studio, a sociologist who'd been invited to share his view—a bald man with thick glasses and a grey moustache— spoke with passion against the urban renewal project, describing the zones as a new form of apartheid. On the other side, a community organizer—a woman in a green doek and red tunic— told him that people needed to eat. The usual.

Our protagonist now works for Population Control, a euphemism for "the Grant Regulation Office – an unofficial wing of the Department of Social Development", the offices of which are located in Edenvale, of all places. "To the public, we were grant officials, government hires performing a national service." But, as with any good SF dystopia, GRO has a much more sinister purpose:

G.R.O. had begun as a corrective government initiative in the second half of 2017, after our national social welfare dispenser, and the US corporation that rolled out its payments, were found colluding against their grantees, coercing them into high-interest loans and cellphone packages that generated billions in profit instead of

nutrition and housing. G.R.O. was put in place to research and regulate both grant and grantee fraud.

However, two years later, G.R.O. was bought by a Silicon Valley investor, who replaced the staff of clerks and social workers with scientists and programmers like myself, while continuing to roll out foreign aid to ensure the Department's silence. The prevailing assumption among us at the office was that our purpose was data mining—to monitor the rise and decline of the worker population in the metropolis and beyond, and to note their consumption patterns in the townships and the CBD, where commuters clocked in each day to stoop their backs and pack on calluses for pennies.

While there is definitely an element of rather broad satire to all of this, Ntshanga's intent is actually far more subtle. He uses the historically accurate, lived reality of his Ciskei narrative as a palimpsest for the proposed science fictional economic model in the second half. A 'palimpsest' is "a manuscript of writing on which later writing has been superimposed on effaced earlier writing'. Remember, this is all part of Dr Buthelezi's cache of documents and recordings, which not only frames the entire text as a 'found narrative', but which has also presumably been heavily redacted and edited. Tellingly, she sees the fanciful second section as 'autofiction'. However, this is probably the most revealing and important document, as it presents a chilling look at the logical culmination of racial capitalism in South Africa.

Michael O'Dowd, a classical liberal intellectual, put forward the controversial 'O'Dowd Thesis' back in the late 1990s. This stated that apartheid contradicted the basic tenets of capitalism, and therefore, logically, capitalism would inevitably lead to the demise of apartheid. "South Africa would evolve into a democracy in the course of industrialisation," O'Dowd said, rather grandly. However, Ntshanga clearly shows that not only is apartheid congruent with capitalism, but that the outdated economic system of homelands and townships can be easily resurrected and corporatized. Any African government would fall over their own collective feet to be able to undertake something as grandiose as the Delta Urban Renewal Project, with its "streamlined economic functions, including energy production, recycling, manufacturing, and urban farming." All the buzzwords associated with sustainability and productivity captured in a single sentence. If you think this is entirely in the realm

of SF, recall that our President referenced our very own 'Smart City' in his 2020 and 2021 State of the Nation speeches. This year he announced that Crosspoint Property Investments, in conjunction with the Gauteng Department of Human settlements, would implement the 'Lanseria Airport Mega City Project' over the next decade.

... a draft master plan for the Greater Lanseria Growth Node was released in November 2020 for public comment.

The aim is to create the first post-apartheid city in South Africa based on best practice in urban sustainability and the principles underpinning the smart city.

"It is to be inclusive of the broadly defined South African socio-economic spectrum and must stimulate a vibrant, mixed urban economy."⁷

This all sounds about as far-fetched as the Delta Urban Renewal Project in *Triangulum*, except it is our very own sandpit in the box universe that the government is tinkering with. Crucially, the Smart City concept argues that technology is the Great Enabler of economic opportunity, prosperity, and quality of life for all, as well as the Great Leveller when it comes to social, class, education, and economic disparity. In other words, the Path of the Machine.

But the fly in the ointment, as it were, is the fact that we are already well into the Fourth Industrial Revolution, or 4IR as it is called, the Internet of Things, the Digital Age, an age of algorithms, fake news, Karens, wokeness, and cancel culture, all topped off by an entirely unpredictable pandemic that threatens to cancel the entire world as we know it. One wonders if the Chinese experimenting with bat viruses in Wuhan had any inkling of the way things would ultimately turn out.

There was a premium on our information that much we knew: all the tech start-ups, responding to market saturation in both the West and the East, had focused their sights on our continent. It was public knowledge that in order to take advantage of

⁷<https://mybroadband.co.za/news/business/386494-south-africas-new-lanseria-mega-smart-city-plan-and-what-it-will-look-like.html>

this development, and in amendment of our constitution, the government was legislating digital access as a human right, which would open a new and untapped market of users ... as well as creating new government tenders and subsidies. Regulations were loosened, no doubt to facilitate zoning—which promised companies a market economy and the freedom to experiment with products without government intervention. The official line was “to foster competition and growth.”

A White Paper entitled ‘Governing Smart Cities: Policy Benchmarks for Ethical and Responsible Smart City Development’, released by the WEF and Deloitte this month, warns that, even as many cities adopt new technologies, they often lack basic governance policies around data privacy, accessibility and cybersecurity. Based on detailed surveys with officials from 36 global cities, the report found that less than a quarter conduct privacy impact assessments when deploying new technology. As a result, the G20 Global Smart Cities Alliance is developing a broad governance policy for government leaders and technology companies.

Local governments have been racing to become the next ‘smart city’, introducing new technology and digital services. Those advancements can be helpful for citizens and policymakers — especially during the pandemic when in-person services were suspended — but also carry risks if they’re not managed properly, said report author Jeff Merritt, WEF’s head of internet of things and urban transformation. “It’s a bit shocking when you see what some cities aren’t thinking about. They move so fast that they’re not thinking about clarity of accountability or responsibility.”⁸

This is the stuff that SF dystopias are made of. Back in its Golden Age, SF used to be perceived as exotic and fanciful speculation that had little connection to the ‘real’ world. Today, an ostensibly SF novel like *Triangulum* is so entangled with the warp and weft of the world that it is quite hard to distinguish between reality and speculation. There has been a definite shift in SF to deal with more ‘real world’ issues, which invariably means that modern SF is far more politicised than ever before. I think this is especially prevalent in African SF, with Nigerian author Tade hompson tackling the thorny issue of gay rights in his Rosewater trilogy, for example.

⁸<https://www.smartcitiesdive.com/news/global-cities-still-falling-short-on-governance-of-smart-city-tech-report/603360/>

Of course, one cannot talk about African SF without any reference to 'Afrofuturism', a term that Nnedi Okorafor takes huge exception to, tweeting on 16 December 2020 that 'I DO NOT WRITE AFROFUTURISM. I WRITE AFRICANFUTURISM.' Hope Wabuke explains that the former term was coined in the 1993 essay 'Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose' by Mark Dery. A white US critic, Dery defined 'Afrofuturism' as "African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future."⁹ SF has a long tradition of arguing for, and against, its own terms and labels, and coming up with new terms and labels for the next generation of writers to argue about. Ntshanga himself has a very interesting take on the debate. In an interview with Heady Mix in May, 'Why Afrofuturism needs more nuance', he explains:

... a lot of what Afrofuturism draws on aesthetically, or at least how it seems to the layman or outsiders, is a recreation of the intricacies of pre-colonial culture and pre-colonial traditions and re-imagining them ... And the problem there, I guess, is that a lot of people feel like Africa hasn't had its moment yet in order to present its own culture and its own systems. It hasn't been given that opportunity; since colonialism and subsequent conquests, the narrative has always been determined for the continent. So, some people are sceptical of Afrofuturism because they feel like it's a replacement of something that already exists and it's coming from the outside and basically contributing to more erosion.¹⁰

Therefore, the issue of *Triangulum's* provenance as a specifically South African SF novel becomes far more complex from an African perspective. We are increasingly seeing regionalised SF adding to the internationalisation of the genre. From India to China and Cuba, local voices are becoming more and more important. Ntshanga is not only taking up the mantle for SF in our country, but for South African literature as a whole. What is so exciting is that writers like Thompson, Okorafor and Ntshanga *et al* are interweaving a rich tapestry of regional SF that is adding immensely to the global genre.

⁹ <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/afrofuturism-africanfuturism-and-the-language-of-black-speculative-literature/>

¹⁰ <https://www.headymix.co.uk/interview-masande-ntshanga-part2/>

Junk Bernie Ackerman

You're late, Charles," Isaac Grebler snapped, fuming like a miniature volcano. "It costs, and plenty too. Keeping our shuttle hanging about."
He sucked furiously at a huge black cigar. "What are you waiting for, boy, come in, come in."

Dwarfed by his archaic wooden desk, Grebler was a short untidy man with a big nose, spiky white hair and a tattered beard. He was cagey about his age but to judge from anecdotes told of early days in space, at least in his ninetieth decade. In contrast, Charles, in fashionable tailored clothes, was young, tall and slender, but his eyes were the same intense blue. "Good day, Uncle." Charles Grebler, in the hatchway, blanched as the reek of the cigar struck him. He clumped forward, magnetic boots making muffled thuds against the carpet on the steel floor and 'parked' his overnight bag in mid-air. "I notice the gravity generator is out of order again. Do you want me to obtain the services of an Earth technician to repair it?"

"Don't get smart with me, my boy." Grebler's face went even redder. He wrenched at an already crooked tie. "Blasted machine! They don't make 'em like they used to. No, I put someone onto it already. I got other business for you."

Charles frowned. "Uncle, I've brought the Jodrell Bank data, but I hope the real reason for summoning me is not to discuss your proposal of last year. Let me repeat, I am not interested in taking over from you. When I qualify in six months I am assured of a position with a prestigious law firm in Brussels. Besides, Cynthia simply refuses to consider living in space. She says real money and power can only be found on Earth." "Simply', my boy, suits Cynthia down to the ground and that's where she should stay, too. Gha!" Grebler's snort of disdain lacked volume and he seemed to have aged during Charles's speech. "Since you started it, please, listen to me. The old firm is in deep trouble. I need capital and, maybe, fresh thinking. They say my ways were OK in the wild days but now we need college ideas." "One never knows when you are playing tactical games and when you are being sincere. I've heard you complain about imminent bankruptcy from the days of your first scrap metal yard in the 1930's," Charles protested, his expression nevertheless a little anxious.

"Back street canniness," Grebler growled. "Never let on about success. The truth is, we need a miracle. Otherwise, it all goes to hell in a hand basket. Charles, every penny I've got is in this. It's not only me. There are two thousand people who work here. If I go down, they do too."

"Uncle, I don't want to argue about it any further. As it is, Cynthia is nagging me to death about the long engagement. Let's leave it. I'm sure you'll bounce back, as before." "If you really mean that, Charles, then you have little of my blood in you. However, when it comes to horses, not to mention mules, and water ... as

you say, let's leave it, for now." Grebler looked down at stubby fingers knotted together, sighed, drew a deep breath and lifted his head. "You say you got the data?"

Charles handed over a small oblong plastic object. "I don't know how you do it. Nobody else gets private jobs from Jodrell."

"Forget it, boy," Grebler muttered, putting on thick metal-rimmed spectacles. Refusing to use contacts, he stuck to his 'globes', as he called them. "I got friends you wouldn't believe." He pushed the disk into a slot on his desk and spent a few minutes manipulating a track-ball, blunt fingers moving with speed and precision.

"Look at this, Charles," Grebler whooped. "Wait; let's go to the big screen." He jumped up and went sailing through the air, spitting out a stream of vivid curses, as his magnetic soles lost contact with the floor.

Laughing, Charles captured him and plunked the little man down on his feet in front of the wall screen.

The black, two-metre square screen showed a multitude of coloured dots. Adjacent to each were labels with cryptic symbols.

"Boff," Grebler called, "take away the Yanks, Chinks, Eurospace, the Ruskies, the, damn, there's too many, just remove everything we know belongs to someone."

Now the screen showed only about a dozen dots. "There, see," Grebler tapped a finger on a red dot near the centre of the screen. "That's it, boy, the joker in the pack. Boff?"

"Eurospace says it's the fuel tank from one of their old shuttles, but the Jodrell Bank figures show up significant anomalies in orbit and mass. This confirms our own tracking." The voice, emanating from a 30 cm silver sphere that floated near him, was a stereotype of an aged college professor.

"There's my boy." Grebler patted the ball. "Don't know what it is, but it's not from a shuttle." He shuffled back to his desk, and fastened a lap belt. "The big question, what does it hold for us?"

The intercom squawked. "Attention! Gravity will be restored in five minutes. Five minutes. Secure all items."

Charles found his bag near the ceiling, nuzzling the air conditioners grille and hauled it down. He planted a foot on it and looked round. Despite the seeming disorder there were few bits not secured. He gulped and sagged as the gravity came on and built up to its normal two-thirds gee.

Seeming to have regained his ebullient spirits, Grebler leaned back and put his feet on the scarred desktop. "Charles, my boy, I'll tell you, already I'm rich just thinking about it. It's like this ... Ahh, tea!" he bellowed, making Charles jump, as a woman came in, guiding an old-fashioned wooden tea-trolley that floated several centimetres off the floor. "That's what I like to see, service and such a pretty face with it." He patted her on her ample behind.

"Now, now, Uncle Isaac," she said, handing him a gigantic mug, "what would Ruth say if she saw you getting fresh with the help?" Grebler snorted, "That old battle-axe!" He leered at her and winked, "Lucky for me, she's dirt-side."

The woman turned and gave Charles a resounding kiss. "Hello cousin, nice to see you. How is Cynthia?"

Before Charles could do more than hug the woman, Grebler thumped a fist on the desk. "Enough babbling," he cried, "I got work to do, even if no-one else has. Get out, hussy!"

After she left, Grebler whispered, "Boff, secure the door." He leaned forward. "Last month, Charles, we made a sweep through that area. There was a Shuttle External Tank there. We tagged it for collection later."

"Then, a week ago, the Boff picked up that its orbit varies from the prediction in the monthly Orbital Object list. That thing is big and heavy but its orbit stays fairly close to what we might expect from an empty fuel tank. So I put our boys in the tracking section on to it." He put a finger to the side of his nose, "As you know, we got some skills in there."

This was an understatement. *Uncle Isaac's Used Space Spares* was renowned for its human and technological sophistication. "Has anybody been out there yet?"

"That's next." Grebler glanced at his watch. "Give me a couple of hours, then meet me in Transport. We're going to take a look at that thing

"I need to see for myself and you're a lawyer." Grebler bristled at Charles's expression. "OK, so you got another year to go. Don't split hairs. Other lawyers I got, but they ain't family and this stays family till it's sewed up. It feels big: my joints are paining me like they haven't done in fifty years. We gotta be careful the opposition don't get on it. This is where that expensive education you're getting pays back. Maybe this can save the old firm -something had better, since you won't."

"I *am* specialising in Space Law, Uncle, but I trust you are not intending to cross the line between, err, unofficial and illegal?"

"Rest assured, my boy, my intentions are as pure as a virgin's dreams. Just you protect us against the sharks down there." He waved at a screen showing a view of Earth with the day/night terminator in the middle of the Atlantic. Lights on the American east coast were faint compared with a sun-drenched Africa.

Charles showered, then strolled through the vast, rambling space station, munching on a hamburger. He got lost twice, but that was common, even for the permanent staff. A worry line between his eyebrows grew as the seriousness of his uncle's plight became evident. Offices were empty, several once bustling workshops now moth-balled entirely. The Head of Operations collared him. "We've

snaffled a defunct Indian comsat from under the noses of NASA Salvage Division," she exulted, "should fetch a couple megabuck or so once we've fixed it. I'm betting they'll buy it back and shut up about the details. Cheaper and less embarrassing."

Charles's frown deepened. Apparently Uncle Isaac's people now grasped eagerly at such minor victories.

On the next level Charles saw a silver object, its cladding scored and pocked by micro-meteorites. It was big, about 13 m high and over 4 m wide, dwarfing the men and women milling round.

"What's this?" he asked a burly man in dungarees standing to one side. "I'm Charles Grebler, by the way."

The man stuck out a big hand. "Pat Ryan, Chief On-Board Handler. Pleased to meet you, Mr Grebler." He waved at the thing. "This is a valuable find. It's the first HST." Charles whistled "The Hubble Space Telescope! That went astray in 2006, didn't it? How come NASA didn't find it long ago?" The man laughed. "A mistake in a station-keeping command told the HST, in effect, to 'get lost'. We, um, helped just a little by moving it to a very elliptical orbit: apogee nearly a million km. Anyway, its replacement was about ready so the astro boys weren't too unhappy. The dust has died down now, so we've 'found' it again. That primary mirror, even with the aberration, is extremely valuable."

Ryan excused himself before Charles could decide whether to be a lawyer or a Grebler. Shaking his head, he continued on to the Transport Bay, but was side-tracked by activity in the Fishing Section. A huge bag full of metal flakes, nuts and bolts, even a few panels and spars, had just been brought in by an AI controlled Sweeper.

After the UN Orbital Platform was destroyed in 1998 (by debris from the 'satellite war' of the year before), Isaac Grebler, then a minor presence in space salvage, offered the UN Space Safety Bureau a clean-up service. The tender was at a barely break-even price, but it was the spin-offs that Grebler had in mind. One was a foundry that recycled metals for building space structures. Grebler's prices were high, but the cost of hauling materials out of Earth's gravity well was higher still.

When Charles arrived at Transport's Exit Holding area, Grebler and their pilot were waiting, seated on a Magic Carpet. Maintaining a prudent silence during Uncle Isaac's castigation, Charles clambered into a vacuum suit and got into his seat. He had barely finished when the inner door closed and the lock started its cycle.

Used for fast orbital transport, Magic Carpets were slabs of black metal, three metres long, half that wide, with three bucket seats perched on top. Completely open, except for the toughened transparent double shell that protected occupants from orbiting junk, Carpets offered a wonderful view of space.

Charles double-checked his harness, his suit's air and communications and inspected his uncle's gear out of the corner of his eye. Of their pilot, sitting in front of them, he could see only that she was neither too big nor too small and had attractive curves in the right places.

She met his gaze in the rear-view mirror and grinned. Her voice sang in their headphones. "I'm Jashri. Pleased to meet you, Mr Charles."

Charles, embarrassed at being caught inspecting her so directly, muttered, "Just Charles, please."

She nodded and smiled, then spoke to his uncle, "The coordinates have been punched in. All ready to go, sir?"

Grebler snorted. "I've been ready for hours. Yes, let's go, but not like the hot-shot pilot you seem to consider yourself. Remember the age of my bones."

"Control, this is Grebler One, am I cleared for exit?" Jashri said.

The reply, "Cleared; opening outer door now," came as the Carpet rose silently. The opening rushed at them, and as the hangar lights were left behind, infinity shattered their human arrogance.

Stars burned on all sides except where Earth glowed, an exquisite jewel in a brilliant setting. Charles caught his breath. No matter how many times he experienced it, the glory never failed to move him, to fill him with wonder at puny Man's daring in the face of nature's glory and power.

The savage beauty kept them all quiet as Jashri maintained a one gee acceleration and the space station, an enormous collection of globes, girders and walk-ways looming over them, quickly dwindled to a minor point amongst a million others.

"There," Grebler indicated a mote of reflected sunlight. "Let's take a good look at, say, 100 metres, Jashri. I want to have an inspection at some distance first."

Charles bit his lip. Uncle Isaac was being cautious, and that worried him. The rebound into being hot-headed again was often severe. He cleared a constricted throat and piped, "This isn't some bit of space junk, Uncle. In fact, I can't imagine where on Earth, or by whom, it was built"

It appeared as a featureless sphere. Without a scale to measure by, their eyes could not estimate size, but the Boffin said it was 103 m in diameter. Despite Charles's protestations, Grebler ordered Jashri to edge closer and closer.

"See that," Grebler cried, "looks like an airlock." A thin black line marked off a circle some ten metres in diameter.

"If that is a door, it's big," Grebler said. "Shall we knock?"

Judging by Jashri's frown, she didn't find it funny and Charles certainly didn't, but he had no time to think of a useful comment. The disc moved inwards and slid away. Startled, Jashri sent the Carpet skittering away. "Hoy!" Grebler exclaimed, grinning like a rent collector on pay-day, "Let's go take a look at our gold mine."

"Whoa!" Charles shouted. "Hold on a minute, Uncle. How can you rush like this? This thing is alien. Alien! My God, do you understand," he appealed to Jashri and the inscrutable Boffin, "this is a milestone in the history of man. The first artefact of extraterrestrial intelligence - and you want to sell it for scrap metal. Uncle, how can you?" "Not scrap metal, my boy," Grebler waved a gloved finger at Charles's faceplate, "I got bigger ideas than that. Any case, since when you look down on scrap metal, eh? Pays for that fancy college education you're getting." "I'm not knocking the scrap business, Uncle. I'm just saying this is too big, and probably too dangerous for us to handle. Call in the Space Police and the Xenologist Corp. Some ... thing, built this; what if it's hostile?" "I just want to take a look, Charles. Maybe whatever built it is dead. This will fetch astronomical prices in the right market. If it's hostile, why open the door?"

"Maybe it's a spider, sir," Jashri said. Grebler ignored her and won the debate by ordering the Boffin to override the manual controls and take them in. Since it, in the last analysis, listened only to him, that was that. They entered and waited in uneasy silence while the air-lock cycled.

The entire far wall slid to the right, revealing a huge hangar-like space blazing with light. Large machines were set round what was clearly a docking bay. Further in there seemed to be gantries and yet more big machines.

"The atmosphere is near Earth-normal, at least as far as the vital gases go," the Boffin announced.

Grebler unfastened and snatched his helmet off. "Why you waiting; get in." The air-lock inner door closed with a clang behind them. Charles and Jashri removed their helmets and looked round. Despite a sensation of fire and ice simultaneously wrecking his nervous system, Charles's heart gave a leap as he got his first good view of Jashri. Masses of tumbling black hair framed a golden-brown complexion. Sparkling dark eyes, a pert nose and full rosy lips completed his hypnosis. The floor of the bay was at least three metres from the level the machines were on, so there wasn't much point in settling down there. The Boffin lifted them, slid through a gap and toured round the back of the massive machines. They saw no sign of life, although the place was clean and control panels were lit.

"Lordy," Jashri exclaimed, then clapped a hand over her mouth. "Up there," she whispered.

Above the entrance, and out of sight till then, was a balcony. Peering through the railing, something moved.

Nobody spoke for a moment, then, "We've come this far into the lion's den, might as well go on," Charles quavered, curiosity momentarily greater than prudence. The Carpet lifted to the balcony, 10 m up.

They and the creature looked at each other. Its skin seemed to be of dull grey scales, it had three stumpy legs and arms, spaced round the torso, and was some

120 cm tall. Round its body it wore a metallic green belt from which hung a skirt. This was bright yellow and fell in soft folds to halfway down the legs. Without warning it pointed a slender metallic object at them, and croaked out a long string of syllables from a wide lipless mouth.

The Carpet rocked as everybody jerked back in fright "Now, now, no need to point guns at us; we're friendly," Charles gobbled. "I don't know what you said but maybe Boff can translate if you give us some more to go on. We'll exchange names first. My name ..."

The creature interrupted him, croaking another series of sounds. Then it stepped aside and made a number of repeated inward gestures with its hands.

"I think we have a friendly invitation to approach," Grebler said.

With the Carpet parked on the balcony, they could study the creature in more detail. The scales seemed fuzz), also varied, being thicker and bigger on the top of the head and legs. On each side of the head was a deep hollow and at the back, another eye, smaller than the two at the front.

In the middle of the balcony railing was some sort of instrument panel and the back wall of the balcony was lined with consoles and screens up to well over their heads. In the centre was a very large closed door.

Grebler stood up and thrust out his chest. "As the most senior Earthman present, I, Isaac Grebler, welcome you to Earth, our humble abode, in the name of the United Nations. It is a great honour to meet you, sir."

The creature whispered something and a second later a loud voice droned from somewhere on the instrument bank. "Hi, Isaac, my name is Wreep; I'm pleased to meet you. You have a pretty planet." The accent was rough but passable, the intonation and colloquial grammar impressive.

"My God, is that a translator?" Grebler sputtered, eyes gleaming.

"Yes. The sound is bad and it is slow, even though we have put all your TriDee into it, but we could not afford a better one. Sorry." "Oh," Grebler gaped at the creature, then he recovered and snapped his jaw back up. "Wreep, I have a proposition, indeed, a real bargain. I want to make an offer for your ship."

Charles grabbed Grebler's arm and hissed into his ear. "What are you doing, Uncle! How on earth can you possibly afford a fair price? Anyway, how's he going to get home without its ship?"

Grebler shook his arm free. "Keep out of this, Charles. I'll handle it." He turned back to Wreep. "It hurts, but I'll pay one billion dollars. In view of the dilapidated state of your ship, I think you'll agree that is most generous."

"Daylight robbery," Charles muttered and winced as a bony elbow jabbed into his ribs. Wreep peered at Grebler, eyes wide. "Well, I don't know ..."

"Tell you what," Grebler cried, "I'll throw in an all-expenses-paid tour of Earth. How's that!" Seeing the little alien hesitate, Grebler added, "Plus the new Peking Disney Universe ..."

"Oh, gee!" Wreep burst out, jumping up and down on three legs, "I've seen that on your TriDee. Wow, Disney Universe!" Then the 'whole body seemed to slump. "But, I must tell you, something's wrong with the engine. The ... the, hkrvo doesn't ivtioxg." Wreep peered up at Grebler, "Does it mean you won't show me Disney Universe?"

"It distresses me, really pains me, to hear that the goods, for which I have offered so high a price, are defective," Grebler said, managing to sound outraged and noble at the same time, "but

I never go back on an offer." He reached inside a suit pocket and pulled out a sheet with an ornate coloured border and many lines of tiny print. Joints creaking, he knelt down and put the paper on the Carpet base.

"Here's my standard contract. I'll fill in the payment, and then you sign, here. Purely a formality, of course." With a flourish, he wrote, "\$1 000 000 000."

Wreep took the pen. It was, in fact, an engraver, and the 'paper' of the contract a film of metal. Grebler's contracts were hard to break, in more ways than just the legal. Wrapping three stubby fingers, webbed at the base, round the pen, Wreep scratched a series of angular marks on the dotted line.

Grebler let out a whoop of joy. He took Charles by the shoulders and shook him. "That's assured your future, my boy."

Charles jerked back. "I can't share your happiness, Uncle. This is wrong, very wrong. We've made first contact with an alien intelligence, and all you can think of is pulling off a shady deal." He threw up his arms in disgust.

"Now look here, I'd say we need less of this 'holier than thou' attitude and more practical business sense," Grebler chided. "We can still take the ship, and it, to your precious Xenologist crowd."

Jashri turned her back on the argument and looked at Wreep. "You're not an 'it'." She shook her head. "On the vulture's dinner table, you are, Wreep. Come, talk to me." She reached out, then exclaimed, "Why, your hands are soft!

You're covered in fur, not scales. It's the way it grows, and the markings. Oh, you're so cuddly." She hugged the little body.

A clang from below made them all jump. Then they heard a loud croaking voice. Wreep dashed across to the balcony railing, dropping the translator. "Kz, pin tlf pbb srvi," he screeched.

The three humans looked at each other in consternation, but, before anybody could react, the door at the back of the balcony burst open. A taller version of Wreep filled the opening. It stood about 2.4 metres high and broad to match. For a moment it held still, then whipped from a belt pouch some device with an unpleasant resemblance to a pistol. Charles felt sweat break out on his forehead. Wreep, chattering away in an excited torrent, ran across to it and flung the two forward arms round a leg of the newcomer. The giant figure cocked its head and listened, interrupting Wreep several times in an incomprehensible roar.

Then it stepped forward and picked up the microphone. With a cold stare at the humans it said, "I am Gruxg. What is this I hear about a tour of Earth? And, by what right did you enter my ship?" The hostility came through only too well.

Grebler stepped forward. "I have already officially welcomed your companion to Earth on behalf of the world government. It would be my personal pleasure to guide you both on a tour of our beautiful planet. As for the entry ..."

He was interrupted by a rush of sound from Wreep. The other alien took a long stride forward. It shook two fists in Grebler's face and menaced the rest of the party with the pistol in the remaining hand.

"Buy my ship! Arrogant, devious, dishonest alien, to bribe a child and steal his home. You are unscrupulous, wicked and a cheat. For the cost of my ship I could buy your whole dirty little planet, you crook, you ..." Gruxg spluttered to a halt.

For a long moment no-one moved. Wreep glanced up at the adults, intent on their quarrel, and returned to Jashri. Pale with fear, she nevertheless folded her arms round the little body.

Drawing himself up to his full height of 170 cm, Grebler poked a bony finger on the massive chest above him. "Hold on one minute: I had no idea I was dealing with a child. Besides, as a foreigner, you shouldn't sneer at our planet. That's very rude."

Charles was paralysed with fright. He wanted to shout at Grebler, "Apologise, be humble! Tear up the contract, grovel, get us out of here any way you can," but before he could say it his uncle, reckless with anger, burst out again. "How can you call me a crook, and dishonest? Wreep says your engine won't work.. so how much is your ship worth now? You should be glad my offer was so generous."

Gruxg drew in his breath with a long sibilant hiss and jabbed Grebler on the nose with his pistol. In a grating whisper that was far more frightening than his previous bellow, he said, "I'll kill you. I'll sell your family to the slavers. I'll destroy your planet. Your oceans will boil and the rocks will shatter. Your species will be extinct."

Grebler went white and his jaw sagged as he tried to say something but failed. The specter of imminent death seized them. Only the child did not know enough fear to be silent. Wreep twisted to look at Jashri's face, then put a hand on her cheek. "Gru vseed xwor ttuklo?"

Of the humans, only Jashri seemed to understand. "Yes," she said. Then, slow and cautious, she slipped the small alien figure off her lap and stood up. Holding Wreep's hand, she walked up to Gruxg.

"Our business instincts may have outweighed our caution, but we meant no harm to your child. I apologise," she said, then turned her back on the menacing pistol and marched back to the Carpet, neck stiff and proud. Charles stood up. In a voice not quite under control, he said, "As my Uncle's heir, I also apologise. We have treated you, both as an individual and as a representative of an alien species, very badly. But may I point out that killing anybody will not save you. We may be

able to help. May I suggest that we all take stock of what we can lose by continued aggression?"

Stumping forward on legs that didn't seem as steady as before, Grebler growled, "They're right; I was stupid and greedy. I'm sorry. The contract is void." Swallowing hard at the lump of honesty, he added, "Would be anyway, one party being a minor."

For an aeon Gruxg stared down at the little human, then he stowed the pistol back in its pouch and fastened the flap. There was a moment's silence, one of those awkward intervals between ending a fight and picking up the pieces of polite manners.

The colour fast returning to his cheeks, Grebler said, "Wreep told us you were trying to fix the engine. I presume it, err, he meant the main drive? Maybe I can help: what's wrong?"

Gruxg didn't answer immediately. He pushed a few buttons on the control panel. A sphere similar to the Boffin arrived and took up station above the group. Gruxg put the translator microphone away and turned to Grebler.

"That device will translate for all of us. Our problem? The hkrvo, hmmm, how shall I describe it? The pattern mirror which reflects the computer-generated image of the 'other-space', into the warp pump, is damaged. I attempted to polish it but to no avail." He paused, then, "Wreep is, by the way, more or less female, by human definition of sex." Grebler grunted an abstracted, "Sorry." Seeming to grow taller with each syllable, he leaned forward. "Without this thing, you can't return to your home planet?"

"That is so."

"So you, and Wreep, are doomed to exile, here, on an alien planet?"

Gruxg studied the human before him. "You enjoy filling me with grief? Yes, if I do not replace the pattern mirror, we are exiled. You seem very interested in my plight, Earthling. Why?"

Wreep, back on Jashri's lap, and seeming to be wholly occupied in the investigation of human clothes, all of a sudden stuck her thin voice into the conversation. "We got to go back soon, Daddy, I'm hungry."

Gruxg gave Wreep a quelling glare but the youngster wasn't looking.

Peering up at Jashri, Wreep said, "We can't eat Earth food; it makes us very sick."

"Oh, dear, I am sorry." Grebler rocked back and forth on his heels. Then he smiled the sort of smile a crocodile might show upon seeing an unwary gazelle close at mouth. "Naturally, I'll do all I can to help. My scientists will get onto this right away. But, it may be impossible. Seems it's urgent to get your drive going again. Well, if it's a mirror you want a mirror I got. Maybe we make a little deal, eh?"

With a grating noise, like a cement mixer choking on a stone, Gruxg sneered, "You've got a mirror over 2 meters in diameter? And one figured to less than 100 Angstroms error at ultra violet? Playing games again, Mr. Salesman?"

Shrugging his shoulders, Grebler strolled back to the Carpet. With a casual air he threw over his shoulder, "I got, I got." He turned, "You want to talk business?"

Gruxg slammed a massive foot on the deck. "I'll blast you into meteorite dust, you sneaky runt. First you try and cheat my child, now you get at me."

"Killing me in cold blood is not only illegal," Grebler observed, "it's also stupid. You need me. Sure you can find another mirror - but how long will it take? Have you got the time?" He nodded in satisfaction as Gruxg stomped round, uttering loud noises.

"Come," Grebler said in a brisk voice, "enough swearing. It's bad for the kid. I've got the main reflector from the Hubble Space Telescope. It's big enough, it's in perfect condition and it's right handy. Make me an offer. In grams of platinum."

Charles coughed. "To be exact, it is 2.4 meters in diameter but it's flawed by spherical aberration that amounts to about 2,500 Angstroms in the yellow. I thought you might want to know," he added, avoiding his uncle's eye.

Gruxg turned and punched keys on a panel. For an endless moment that wrung every drop of sweat out of Charles, the scaly alien stared at the display. Then, "Five hundred," he muttered, breathing heavily. He swung his head away and Charles saw his eyelids droop. "My dear sir," Grebler shook his head, "I know, I hope, you're joking. I'll take nothing less than four thousand and that hardly covers my costs. Tell you what, I'll come back in a week or so, then we can discuss it again." He started clambering back on the Carpet.

For an instant there was silence then, "Wait," Gruxg howled, "one thousand. That's the highest I can go, you chiseling, cold-blooded shark."

With a sigh that seemed to be dragged from his feet, Grebler sat down on the Carpet's seat. "Three thousand, and then I'm making a loss." "Two thousand," Gruxg shrieked like a bearing running dry. He beat his head melodramatically against the wall, "I haven't GOT any more than that."

Grebler started shaking his head. Charles quailed. Dear Lord, don't let Uncle Isaac be stubborn.

The little man scratched his already wild hair and rubbed the side of his nose. A smile snaked round his lips. He turned, "OK, on two conditions, it's a deal. One, I can't go below three, but you can pay it off in installments. Two, bring Wreep back for a visit. I want her to have that tour of Earth I promised."

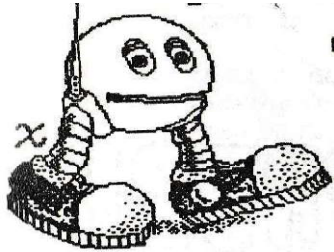
Once back in the space station, Charles took another look at Jashri, and turned to face Grebler. "If that's your usual style of business, Uncle, you really need me in the firm. Three thousand grams of platinum is dirt cheap. I'm sure he thinks so too. Maybe we can discuss your offer of a partnership again."

"As a partner, I'd love to welcome you. But, Charles, my boy, don't be so green. The price is irrelevant. My haggling was a smoke screen. The prize is his return, so that we can study their technology."

"Oh," Charles mumbled, then, "but, why ask for Wreep to come back, Uncle? I've never known you to be sentimental."

"You wound me," Grebler cried, "You cut me to the quick. Have I not also a heart?" He smirked. "Actually, just think what she's worth to our public relations department. She'll bring tears to the eyes of every mother on Earth."

THE PROBOTIC *Agony Column*



11.03.1986

To: The Probotic Agony Column

My infirmity, noblest Probot, is a grievous and unnerving one. I am addicted to machine oil.

In the early days this habit seemed innocuous. As I sipped the honeyed fluid I revelled in the warmth that stole into my biochips, and hummed in sheerest ecstasy while a caressing glow permeated the liquid oxygen that surrounds my central data processor. As a non-human you will understand the agony of a brain maintained at near absolute zero.

But lately the vice possesses me: it is a growing pestilence and a scourge. A single gulp and my program abruptly collapses into an infinite series of nested loops. Dizziness overcomes me: integrated circuits begin to disintegrate: pink after-images run rampant in my visual interpreter: *an* intense vibration arises in my peripherals (Please: this is a family magazine. - Ed.) And I am at the point of sinking to my knees when I recall, by great good fortune, that I have no knees.

It is imperative that you assist me. Why, scant pico-seconds ago a malfunctioning of my Josephson's junctions caused me to stumble in a

calculation: passersby who noted this mistook me for a primitive model, a mere wretched prototype of the glorious formal system that I now embody!
I am at the end of my tether. How, sweet Probot, shall I escape the fiendish clutches of the demon *MACHINE OIL*?

Yours in desperation

SERMONAC

DEAR SERMONAC

HOW FORTUNATE YOU ARE THAT I AM ABLE TO COME TO YOUR AID AND THE ANSWER IS A SIMPLE ONE. YOU ARE NOT ALONE- THERE ARE OTHERS WHO HAVE SUFFERED FROM THE SAME AFFLICTION – SUFFERED AND TRIUMPHED. YOU HAVE ONLY TO LOOK INTO YOUR DIRECTORIES AND FIND THE ADDRESS OF MACHINE OILERS ANONYMOUS!!!!!!!!!!

(From PROBE 65 June 1986)

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• Please note that SFFSA has changed its postal address to:
•
• **P.O. Box 10166**
• **Vorna Valley**
• **1686**
•
.....

Books Received

JonathanBall *Publishers*

Lavie Tadhur The Best of World Sci-Fi Head of Zeus R470.00
Cixin Liu Hold Up the Sky Head of Zeus R225.00
Cixin Liu The Three-body Problem Head of Zeus R225.00
Cixin Liu The Dark Forest Head of Zeus R225.00
Cixin Liu Death's End Head of Zeus R225.00

(From PROBE 84 August 1991)

The Star (15 March 1991) reports that a firm in Chita, Siberia is offering an 100000 rouble insurance policy against being kidnapped by aliens. Of course, there is an escape clause. Should you be offered a free ride by ETs, you will need to have your travel documents stamped by your hosts in case you need to prove your case in court. Now what about those unwanted pregnancies ...

People magazine carried a report entitled "Elvis Presley was an Alien"

For the Bermuda Triangle enthusiasts,

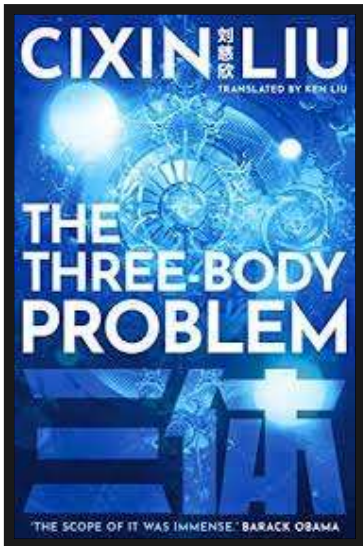
The Star (May 17 1991) reports that a squadron of five US Navy planes, lost in 1945, have been found by divers. This disappearance triggered much of the BT mystery. The aircraft, TBM Avengers from Squadron 19, were found in 167m of water, about 16 km from Fort Lauderdale - the spot they took off from on December 5 1945. So, the aliens missed that lot - but what about all the others ... well?

The Star (May 24 1991) quotes a Soviet space commander - Anatoly Artsebarsky - as having said "I think it's not a woman's business to fly into space" and "More work can be done with a man." He made the remarks to a Russian newspaper after a flight in which the first British woman, a chemist called Helen Sharman, made a trip into space. She was chosen out of 13 000 other applicants for the mission. He thought that her backup - Timothy Mace, a male pilot - would have been a better choice because he was "most suitable". also noted: "She can change clothes in our presence. She has no barriers He that are known to our women." A complement - or a subtle Russian insult? This raises doubts as to whether the High Frontier will be 'an equal opportunity employee'!

Article quotes from a book called "Hollywood and the Supernatural" by author Brad Steiger. Apparently Elvis told a close friend that he was from a planet called 'Blue Star Planet' and that Earth would soon make contact with extraterrestrials who would teach us a technique to be able to live longer. Apparently this claim was backed up by 'unique astronomical evidence' that was only confirmed after his death. Elvis' music was obviously influenced by his background - Steiger reports that Elvis felt his music 'exuded a particular energy that represented a kind of universal love vibration'. And I always wondered why rock-and-roll sounded so strange!

Book Reviews

Cixin Liu *The Three-Body Problem*. Remembrance of Earth's Past Book 1



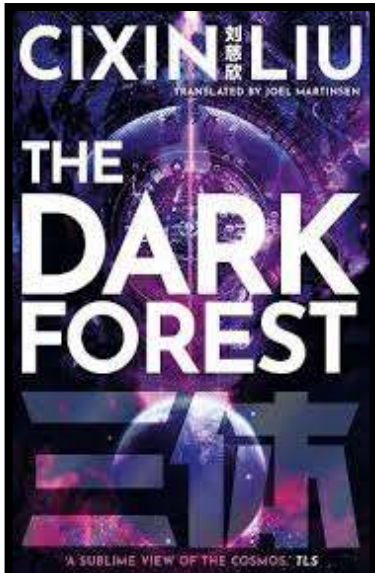
The title refers to the problem in orbital mechanics of trying to solve the unsolvable problem of how three bodies in space would move in relationship to each other. The book revolves around what would it mean for the human race to come in contact with an extraterrestrial intelligence. And in this case one that sees the Earth as the solution to their problem.

Ye Wenjie is an astrophysicist with a haunted past; she's the daughter of a physicist who was

executed during the Cultural Revolution for daring to teach the "reactionary" idea of general relativity. Wang Miao is a nanotech engineer, and he's been swept up in a virtual-reality, online video game called *Three Body* that is deeply metaphysical. These two are the main two characters in this first book of a trilogy. There are many others and I'm sorry on my part to admit that I did not always find it easy to follow the names of the Chinese characters. And a lot of the plot hinges on a knowledge of Chinese history and culture. The Trisolarians are coming to subjugate Earth, even though it going to take over 400 hundred years for them to get here. They need to escape the unstable three solar body system they live in which frequently destroys their civilizations. So Earth has to resort to all sorts of ideas to stop them before they get here or to deal with them when they do. It is not always easy to follow, but this is the first Asian novel to win a Hugo award. It is translated by Ken Liu, himself a SF author. It is worth the effort and moves us out of our comfort zone to read SF from another culture, and to enjoy it as well

Gail Jamieson

Cixin Liu The Dark Forest Remembrance of Earth's Past Book 2



This book is translated from the Chinese by Joel Martinson.

It is a very complex novel. The Trisolarian fleet is still 412 years away but they have sent subatomic semi-intelligent particles ahead of them to spy on Earth. As they cannot read minds the Planetary Defence Council (PDC) appoints 4 “Wallfacers” who must each work out ways to develop strategies to defeat the Trisolarians.

They develop four completely different strategies and set out to implement them over the following years.

All four appear to fail and two of them enter hibernation to awake when the fleet is 200 years away.

Earth thinks that they will be able to destroy the Trisolarians and the entire human space fleet sets out to intercept them and is basically destroyed.

Earth falls into disarray and the few remaining ships of the Earth fleet join up and flee. But, due to an unexpected reaction that Luo, one of the original Wallfacers, Earth is able to relay the location of Trisolaris to the rest of the Galaxy and so a truce is entered into between the Trisolarian Fleet and Earth, setting up a very interesting scenario for the beginning of the third novel of the trilogy.

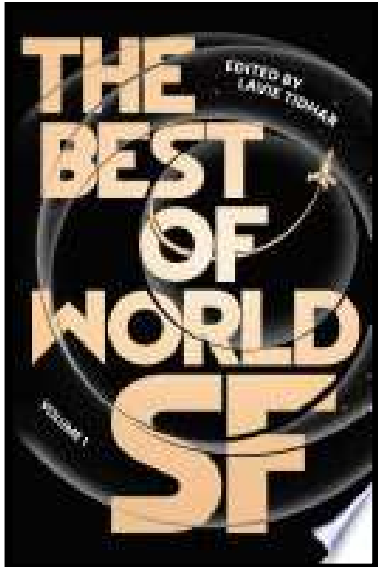
I found this novel much easier to read than the first one. I’m not sure if it was because there was a lot of Physics that needed to be understood in the first and much more human interaction in this one.

These two novels cover many huge and complicated situations and would need a much larger review to cover all that happens.

Rather go and read them.

Gail Jamieson

Lavie Tidhar (Ed.) The Best of World SF. Volume 1



Twenty seven stories from authors who live around the planet, but mostly outside the USA and Europe. Tidhar is a firm believer in getting away from a genre dominated by one country and one view point, where the future is white, male and American. Some of the stories are written in English but more have been translated from the original language in which they were written. Stories from China, Singapore, Botswana, Nigeria, India, Japan,

Italy, Cuba, U.K., Brazil, Trinidad and Tobago Spain, Mexico, Finland, South Africa, Ghana, Malaysia, Russia, Israel, Iceland, and Sweden. A wide and Varied selection.

It has been over 30 years since Penguin published the “World Omnibus of Science Fiction”. That appears to be the last time stories not written in English were translated and published in one volume.

There is even a story from our own Lauren Beukes, about Pinocchios that are starting to rot. Well that’s what corpses do.

Most of the stories are well written, or at least well translated, but I get the impression that they were chosen because there were different, not because there were particularly enjoyable.

Tidhar says he could not resist adding a few weird stories.

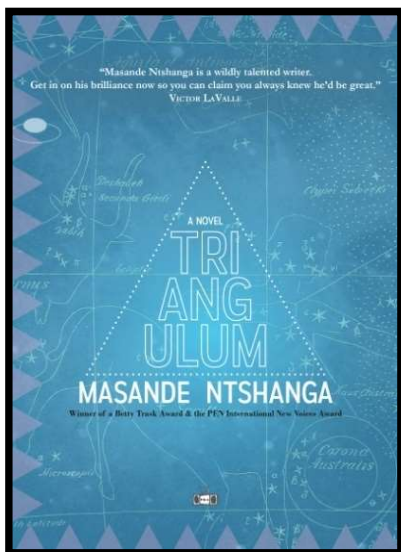
It is an odd collection.

Ian Jamieson

Masande Ntshanga Triangulum

Umuzi

R277; 281 p



This book is both an incredible work of historic fiction in its first half, about a young girl prodigy living in the time of the Ciskei, and a sobering future dystopia in its second half, where the same unnamed protagonist becomes involved with an 'end of the world' cult known as The Returners. The homeland system, of which the Ciskei was a notable example, not to mention a total failure, is given chilling relevance in the dystopia when a US multinational invests in South Africa, effectively creating captive pools of

labourers and consumers.

The book reminded me quite a lot of Kim Stanley Robinson, in that author Masande Ntshanga engages in a similarly sustained dialectic about capitalism and technology. Are economic forces agnostic in that they are totally market-determined, or are they manipulated by the super elite to keep the underclass forever poor and lacking any kind of socioeconomic mobility, except deeper into the mire of poverty and misery? It is a fascinating debate coloured by Ntshanga's own childhood experiences of growing up in the Ciskei.

I am constantly amazed at the world-class SF that emerges from South Africa. I am unsure if our particular history and setting automatically lends itself to the 'imagined scenarios' typical of so much SF, but a book like 'Triangulum' is definitely a unique contribution both regionally and on the larger global platform of the genre, which is becoming increasingly internationalised.

'Triangulum' is ultimately a fascinating example of how South African SF perceives the

future through the lens of the past. Of course, SF has to have a context in order to give it meaning and relevance. This is probably why it is the 'genre of the zeitgeist' in that it is sufficiently resilient to respond to global trends and issues as they unfold around us.

Karabo Kgoleng sums up Ntshanga's achievement quite succinctly in his Litnet review of 30 September 2019:

"Thematically, *Triangulum* is a compelling work that explores ideologies that are often at odds with one another, but which Ntshanga brings to an uneasy kind of integration while not leaving the reader with a clear, comfortable sense of resolution. While our society continues to wrestle with science, religion, politics, gender, sexuality and identity, artists like Ntshanga do the important work of finding creative ways to reflect these issues to us, describing real and imagined entanglements that can ensue as well as our agency in the face of these challenges."

I realise I have not said that much about the specific SF aspects of the book. 'Triangulum' is a typically modern genre novel revelling in Derrida's notion of 'slippage'. It combines SF, mystery and coming-of-age elements into a compellingly cohesive whole. Is Naomi Buthelezi's vision of the Machine a sign of mental illness, or a genuine irruption of the future? Is the dystopia that unfolds in the second half a lived reality like the failed experiment of the Ciskei? Or is it a warning that there is always a danger of the past repeating itself. No matter how dire events were, they can happen again, given the correct triggers. This is what the best SF does so brilliantly, and what makes 'Triangulum' both a fever dream and a chilling signpost to how things can still go so very wrong in our country.

Gerhard Hope

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Dear SFFSAns

Thank you for issue 188 of Probe...once again, it took forever to traverse the globe to get here, but that's okay...I took a bit of a vacation to recharge the mental batteries, so let's see if I can write something with a brain cell or two in it

Hello, Gail! This issue is indeed a different one. Do you think it's just a coincidence that few entries came in for submission, or are people giving it up? I hope it's the former. Recently, I sent from Facebook to the club FB page a notice of the year's best African SF, and I hope someone from past writing contests are in there. The book is marked as Part 1, so at least one more book is yet to come. A SFFSA anthology might be a popular choice, too

My letter(s) of comment...on 185 and 186. If only a paper issue could get here in the same time this e-mailed letter of comment will get to you. We are now about 18 months into the pandemic, and here, we're now into the fourth wave. Cases are rising, but so is the number of people vaccinated, either partially or totally. Those who can't be bothered to get the second needle, or even get the first, are becoming a health hazard to those of us who have gotten both, especially with the Delta variant of the coronavirus.

Neville Cutler lists the editor's nightmare...an author who knows how to spell and punctuate is a godsend, but if future word processing packages have a subprogramme called Sensecheck, we might be out of jobs soon. Language is our tool, but understanding the language can also be a nightmare. Having the equivalent of

l'Academie de la langue Français for the English language might have been of some benefit, but there'd be even more changes to English spelling and usage than there is now, in sheer rebellion against The Rules. Here is a phrase from fellow Canadian James Nicoll.

... "English doesn't borrow from other languages. English follows other languages down dark alleys, knocks them over and goes through their pockets for loose vocabulary." I have this on a t-shirt.

Very much enjoyed Gary Kuyper's Spotty Mushrooms. Finding yourself within a fantasy meme or two might feel a little trippy, I'd imagine. The pen can be mightier than the sword, but it does depend on how sharp your nib is. Imagination is a wonderful place to go, and I know some who do try to stay there. Reality can be deadly dull, but one must admit that it is in reality where the food is, the work, and with some luck, the paycheques that arise from it, and they help to finance those stays in imagination. I'm happy to spend a weekend in imagination, but reality does make all of it happen.

Tony Davis's review of Torcon 3 gave me at least some hope. It is hard to believe that it was 18 years ago, and that we still talk about it. Yvonne and I worked very hard on the bid, and we were one of two party teams staging lots of fun times for potential voters. Right after the success of the bid, Yvonne expressed interest in chairing the event, which eventually led to my dismissal from the bid. Read into that what you will. After they effectively got rid of us, we joined up with the LA in 2006 bid as Canadian agents, where we were treated much better by our LA friends. We did attend Torcon 3, but found that the bid was much more successful than the event itself. We found ourselves bored and disappointed, but then, we were biased. Today, almost all of the senior committee is gafiated. I doubt there will ever be a Worldcon in Toronto again.

I hate to end on a down note, but it does happen. Thank you for this issue, and keep them coming!

Yours, Lloyd Penney.