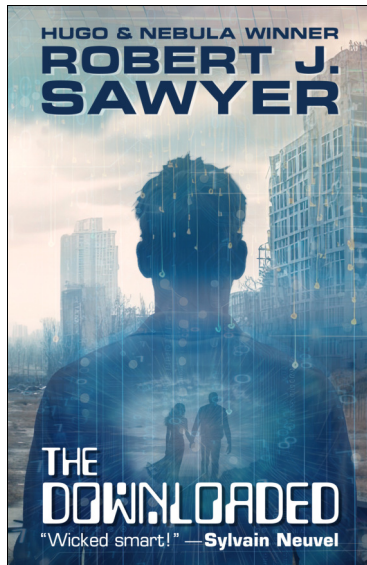




PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

MARCH 11, 2024



## ★ THE DOWNLOADED

Robert J. Sawyer

Shadowpaw, \$14.95 trade paper (190p)  
ISBN 978-1-989398-99-9

Hope wins out in this triumph of a postapocalyptic tale from Hugo and Nebula award winner Sawyer (*The Oppenheimer Alternative*). Capt. Letitia Garvey agreed to be cryogenically frozen for a 500-year space journey to a distant planet in hopes of colonizing a new home. Come the year 2548, Garvey awakens—only to discover that she and her crew of fellow astronauts never left Earth. Even worse, they and a group of convicts who recently awoke from their VR prison are the only survivors of an apocalyptic event. Earth is devastated and yet another calamity is on its way. Can these two disparate groups learn to work together to survive? Sawyer keeps the stakes climbing ever higher as he toggles between the perspectives of his disparate cast. A smattering of droll humor breaks up the gloom and plot twists aplenty keep the pages flying. Sci-fi fans will eat this up. *Agent: Matt Kennedy, Startling, Inc. (May)*

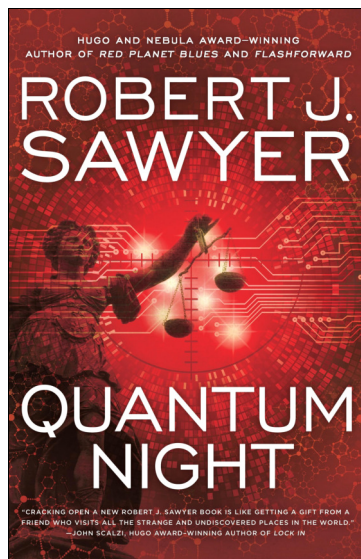
★ Starred reviews denote books of exceptional merit

***“Hope wins out in this triumph from Hugo and Nebula award winner Sawyer. Plot twists aplenty keep the pages flying. Sci-fi fans will eat this up.”***



**PUBLISHERS WEEKLY**

**FEBRUARY 9, 2016**



## ★ **QUANTUM NIGHT** **Robert J. Sawyer**

Hugo and Nebula Award-winning author Sawyer's latest work is a fast-moving, mind-stretching exploration of the nature of personality and consciousness; it balances esoteric speculation with action and character. James Marchuk, a psychology professor at the University of Manitoba, is dismayed to realize that he's missing half a year of memories from his college days. It turns out that he was the subject of an experiment that converted him from a passive nebbish to an active psychopath, until he eventually was shifted into a higher state of mind and acquired a conscience. Through painful discovery of his own vicious past, he confirms that conscience-driven humans are a minority, menaced by a large number of psychopaths who control zombie-like mobs. Now, looking at escalating military tension among Canada, the U.S., and Russia, Marchuk fears that psychopathic world leaders may be about to destroy humanity. Sawyer (*Red Planet Blues*) is very good at grounding the technical speculation in personal conflict, as Marchuk's utilitarian principles struggle with his emotional impulses and the political/media references keep the story uncomfortably close to present-day fears.

★ **Starred reviews denote books of exceptional merit**

***“Hugo and Nebula Award-winning author Sawyer’s latest work is a fast-moving, mind-stretching exploration of the nature of personality and consciousness.”***



PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

FEBRUARY 23, 2009



## ★ **WWW: Wake**

**Robert J. Sawyer.** Ace, \$24.95 (368p)

ISBN 978-0-441-01679-2

The wildly thought-provoking first installment of Sawyer’s WWW trilogy, serialized in *Analog* in 2008 and 2009, explores the origins and emergence of consciousness. Blind teen Caitlin Decter gets an experimental signal-processing implant that inexplicably opens up her vision to the wondrous infrastructure of the World Wide Web. Inside the Web is a newborn “webmind,” a globe-spanning self-contained consciousness that is just becoming aware of the outside world. Secondary plot threads about a highly intelligent hybrid primate and Chinese bloggers battling a repressive government extend the motif of expanding awareness. The thematic diversity—and profundity—makes this one of Sawyer’s strongest works to date. Numerous dangling plot threads are an unnecessary pointer to the forthcoming books; readers will keep coming back for the ideas. (*Apr.*)

★ Starred reviews denote books of exceptional merit

***“Wildly thought-provoking. The thematic diversity — and profundity — makes this one of Sawyer’s strongest works to date.”***

# Publishers Weekly

THE INTERNATIONAL NEWS MAGAZINE OF BOOK PUBLISHING AND BOOKSELLING *January 15, 2007*

---

## ☆ ROLLBACK

*Robert J. Sawyer*. Tor, \$24.95 (320p)  
ISBN 0-765-31108-9

Canadian author Sawyer (*Mindscan*) once again presents likable characters facing big ethical dilemmas in this smoothly readable near-future SF novel. Astronomer Sarah Halifax, who translated the first message from aliens and helped prepare humanity's response, is 87 when the second, encrypted message arrives 38 years later. To aid the decoding, a tycoon buys rejuvenation treatments for Sarah and Don, her husband of 60 years; however, only Don becomes young again. While coping with the physical indignities of old age, Sarah tries to figure out the puzzle of the second message. The bond between Don and Sarah continues, even while Don is joyfully and guiltily discovering the pleasures of living in a young body again. They want to do what's right for each other and the rest of humanity—for the aliens, too—if they can figure out what "right" could be. By its nature, a story about moral choices tends to get talky, but the talk is intelligent and performed by sympathetic and believable people. Sawyer, who has won Hugo and Nebula awards, may well win another major SF award with this superior effort.

☆ *Starred reviews denote books of exceptional merit.*

## Rollback

Robert J. Sawyer; \$29.95 cloth 978-0-765-31108-5, 320 pp., 5½ x 8¼, Tor Books/H.B. Fenn, April

In *Rollback*, bestselling Toronto science-fiction writer Robert J. Sawyer explores both the nature of time and the questions surrounding the scientific ability to fundamentally alter the human lifespan. In the process, he also delves deeply into the strange territory of the human heart.

It's 2048. Scientists have just received a new radio signal from Sigma Draconis. (A previous one arrived some 38 years earlier, it taking 19 years for such signals to travel the distance between Earth and the distant star system.) The world looks to Dr. Sarah Halifax, who decoded the aliens' first message and crafted humanity's response, to crack the new code and to continue her correspondence with this new life form.

Unfortunately, Sarah is 87 years old. Even if she does manage to crack the alien code, she will not survive to see the next stage of communication.

Science steps in in the form of a "rollback," an expensive combination of surgery and genetic tweaking that restores a person's physical age to their early twenties. The process would allow Sarah to continue her work for more than a hundred years. She agrees to it, with one condition: her husband Don must be offered the same rollback. Don's rollback is a success, but Sarah's procedure fails. As Don struggles to adjust to his renewed body, Sarah scrambles against time and her own mortality to decode the alien message.

While *Rollback* is inarguably a thought-provoking novel of ideas, it is also, at its core, a fundamentally human story: what is a lifetime? How do we measure a human life if it is potentially limitless in duration? As always in Sawyer's work, the human costs of scientific progress take the foreground. Don must grieve not only for the unavoidable loss of his beloved wife, but for aspects of his own life. The rollback forces him to live a bifurcated life, as a healthy young man with the experiences and psychic scars of more than 80 years of life.

The repercussions of the rollback surgery are genuinely surprising, but rooted firmly in the skillfully crafted and realistic thoughts and emotions of Don and Sarah. The alien-encounter plotline takes a backseat through much of the book. When the plotlines converge late in the book, it is a reminder of why Sawyer is one of our most highly regarded writers of speculative fiction, able to handle the demands of the heart and the cosmos with equal skill.

— Robert J. Wiersema, author of *Before I Wake* (Random House Canada).

## FICTION

## Second summer, second life

## ROLLBACK

By Robert J. Sawyer  
*Tor Books, 320 pages, \$29.95*

REVIEWED BY CORI DUSMANN

Although he has built a career largely on the periphery of mainstream Canadian literary culture (the sad lot of the majority of this country's genre writers), Toronto's Robert J. Sawyer is one of Canada's bestselling writers. Having won all three major science-fiction awards for best novel — the Hugo, the Nebula and the John W. Campbell Memorial Award — he is in the front rank of SF writers worldwide.

For his admirers, every new Sawyer book is highly anticipated. When dealing with an imagination as fertile as Sawyer's, readers never know what to expect. Case in point: His new novel *Rollback*, an exploration of love, relationships and human nature amid the sciences of rejuvenation

and extraterrestrial contact.

In 2009, Earth receives a radio message from a distant planet orbiting the star Sigma Draconis. Immediately, scientists and amateurs alike try to decode the message. Dr. Sarah Halifax, a professor at the University of Toronto and a SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) researcher, manages to break the mathematically based code.

The message has two parts: The first defines the symbolic language used, while the second, the actual message, is a request of sorts. The aliens have sent a survey to the people of Earth. Sarah works as part of a team to help compose a reply, and it is sent off on the first anniversary of the receipt of the original message.

Jump to 2048. Sarah and her husband Don are both 87, celebrating their 60th wedding anniversary, when a call comes in from a University of Toronto masters student. A

reply to the message sent in 2010 has finally arrived, but it is encrypted.

SETI's newest backer, wealthy industrialist Cody McGavin, approaches Sarah with a unique proposal. He wants her to work on the encrypted message, but cognizant of her age, offers her a rollback, a new rejuvenating procedure that will change her very cells, returning her to a physical age of about 25.

Sarah counters by demanding the same billion-dollar treatment for Don, and both undergo the procedure. Unfortunately, while Don's rollback is successful, Sarah's fails. Both must adjust to their new realities.

*Rollback* is much more Don's story than Sarah's, as he must deal directly with the emotional and hormonal changes that come with the vigour of youth while still maintaining his relationship with Sarah, their family and everyone he's known over his lifetime.

The realities of being young and fit (and attractive and sexually charged) while retaining the experiences and memories of an octogenarian must be faced.

Intertwined through the story of Don's second summer is Sarah's search for the key to decipher the new message, weighted with an awareness that, for her, time is fleeting. *Rollback* is a curious blend of philosophical, ethical and moral musings, with mathematical codes, futuristic science and current-day technologies and politics. Its strengths are most apparent in the human relationships and emotions of the characters. Moving between the first and fourth decades of the 21st century, Sawyer's vision is that of a world where technology and medicine have made significant advances, while life has changed in human nature or Canadian society, both in terms of politics (Canada remains an independent na-

tion which prides itself on free education and health care), and more intimate relations (while AIDS has been eradicated and there is more freedom in sexual relations, nuclear family units still appear to be the desired norm).

As Don comes to grips with the idea that he alone of his current friends and family will survive into the next century, that when he dies there will not be a single person at his funeral who remembers him as a child or during his "first life," *Rollback*'s underlying themes really shine.

While *Rollback* is, on the surface, a book about reaching out to those across the universe, it is at its heart an investigation of our very humanity, and how relationships are a fundamental key to defining who we are. When the alien-contact storyline takes centre stage, later in the book, these questions of self-definition, the lessons hard-won over both Sarah and

Don's lifetimes, reveal their true significance, and the book unifies in a surprising manner.

Sawyer's crisp and accessible writing style allows for this interweaving of the personal and the scientific. The characters feel real, and their emotions and responses genuine. Beyond the SF trappings, *Rollback* is a story about love and commitment, about humanity at its most basic.

As Sawyer writes in his blog (sfwriter.com/blog.htm): "I like to think of *Rollback* as a true scientific romance, in the modern sense of the word. It's a love story that, thanks to scientific developments that I'm sure we will see in the next few decades, tries to tell us something new about the human heart."

In this he succeeds, creating in *Rollback* a novel to be savoured by science-fiction and mainstream readers alike.

✉ Cori Dushman is an educator and writer living in Victoria, B.C.



# SFRA Review

July/August/September 2005 • Issue 272

Founded in 1970, The Science Fiction Research Association (SFRA) is the oldest professional organization for the study of science fiction and fantasy literature and film.

## FICTION REVIEW

### **Mindscan**

Philip Snyder

Robert J. Sawyer. *Mindscan*. New York: Tor, 2005. Hardcover, 383 pages. \$24.95 U.S.; \$34.95 CAN. ISBN 0-765-31107-0. [Reviewed in Advance Uncorrected Proof]

What might it mean to be human — and how might it feel to be human — when individual minds can be instantiated in separate bodies? Once a fairly popular SF trope, found typically in stories and novels about human cloning, the question has lately been asked with renewed energy by scientists and writers alike. In *Mindscan*, his new standalone novel, Robert Sawyer adds an exciting crowd pleaser to the growing library of SF novels that explore this intriguing idea. Richly informed by current interdisciplinary research in the burgeoning field of consciousness studies, and alive with provocative speculation of its own, *Mindscan* is a heady brew of hard SF, blended with enough comedy, romance, and adventure to appeal to a wider audience, as well.

The novel opens in 2018, when Canadian teenager Jake Sullivan witnesses the stroke that reduces his father to a persistent vegetative state, a stroke brought on by a congenital brain disease called Katerinsky's syndrome. The condition is hereditary, and Jake is at risk. Cut to the year 2045: Jake, now middle-aged, elects to cheat Katerinsky's via the newly developed Mindscan technique, having his consciousness copied into a near-indestructible android body, while his biological body (and original consciousness) takes up residence in High Eden, a kind of retirement paradise established on the far side of the moon by the Immortex corporation, creators of the Mindscan process. Premise in place, the novel then kicks into high gear: Jake (the "new Jake") falls in love with Karen Bessarian, an octogenarian who has undergone the same process; Jake (the "original" Jake), finding himself on the moon, has second thoughts about his new status. Karen's son, meanwhile, sues the "new" version of his mother in probate court upon the death of his "original" mother, and from there, things get complicated, suspenseful, and eventually violent

That, at least, is the Michael Crichton-ish chassis for this vehicle. But Sawyer, no mere manufacturer of thrillers, locates the serious fun of his novel in its bundle of scientific ideas. Whether discussing such neurological issues as the role of sleep in consolidating memory, or playing with concepts of quantum entanglement, or inventing nanogel brain surgeries, *Mindscan* is a Hard SF reader's delight. At the same time, Sawyer is nobody's starry-eyed idealist about the wonderful world of science. He can be quite sobering, for instance, about the potential horrors that could ensue if consciousness studies were to become an actively experimental science, and he is mordantly funny about the potential lack of appeal of cyborg sex: "I wanted it to be sexy," a character complains, "but it was just plastic and Teflon rubbing together, silicon chips and synthetic lubricants." Sawyer has worked with some of these ideas before — most notably in last year's "Shed Skin," the *Analog* story which was the starting point for this novel, and to some extent in his two earlier novels, *The Terminal Experiment* (1995) and *Factoring Humanity* (1998) — but *Mindscan* is both deeper and wider than these predecessors.

Especially wider. Pulling out all the pop fiction stops, Sawyer also serves up an excellent courtroom drama, a bittersweet comedy, tons of adventure — even a simple trip to the moon, in Sawyer's hands, is made to seem exciting again — and plenty of touches that are just plain fun. It's a kick, for instance, that Karen Bessarian is the famous author of the DinoWorld series (a nod to Sawyer's own *Quintaglio Ascension*), and it's an even bigger hoot when she is offered a \$100 million advance for her next novel. (O brave new world, that has such treats for writers in it!) All this, plus the thriller, plus the romance, are shoehorned with surprising ease into a book that is already stuffed with long discussions of the work of science superstar Roger Penrose, micro-lectures on opposing language theorists John Searles and Daniel Dennett, and extended asides on Julian Jaynes's seminal *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*.

For readers who can't get enough of the hard stuff, *Mindscan* includes an annotated bibliography of books on consciousness, and also puts in a plug for that valuable publication, *The Journal of Consciousness Studies*. Even more readers, though, will find themselves going back to their bookstores for more helpings of Robert Sawyer.

FICTION

# Our home and native outland

**Hominids**

By Robert J. Sawyer  
Tor, 441 pages, \$35.95

REVIEWED BY SHANE NEILSON

Science fiction is plot-driven prose, prone to hurtle starward at light-speed. There are always an intergalactic hero and heroine, and an evil genius/force/empire to contend with; a requisite interspecies cast o' plenty encourages subplot multiplicity. Strange phenomena occur under the laws of murky physics, which dictate: The bigger the word, the better the obfuscation. Like fantasy, its technologically challenged fraternal twin, SF is genre fiction, the medium of computer addicts, adolescent males and role-playing game enthusiasts.

Or so the popular convention goes. For the aesthete, SF is regarded as marginal, a forward-looking backwater of literature, a place where style is thrown into the warp engines and sacrificed to increase speed.

Robert Sawyer is unapologetic about his chosen mode, being on record that he is "a science-fiction writer — I make no bones about that." Such an overt challenge to the snob distracts from the hybrid creation that Sawyer has created in *Hominids*, his 10th novel, which supplies S-C-I-E-N-C-E in the requisite heavy doses, but which also crosses the purely technical

with applied story, creating a viable species capable of appealing both to the fan and to the literary-minded.

*Hominids* consists of three main narrative strands. A science-fiction "parallel universe" subplot involves a simple premise: What if there existed another Earth, populated by Neanderthals and not by Homo sapiens, and what if these two worlds intersected? *Hominids* is largely the tale of Ponter Bonditt, a Neanderthal physicist turned explorer in the aftermath of a failed lab experiment.

In a rape-crisis/psychological-trauma strand, a female professor deals with her own violation and develops feelings for our stranded Neanderthal.

Finally, a courtroom-drama strand has a man in the alternate universe falsely accused of complicity in Bonditt's disappearance. His adjudicated battles against a unique prosecution offset the Neanderthal media frenzy back on "our" Earth.

Sawyer reduces SF fabulism to a minimum by several means. First, he uses present-day Sudbury, Ont., as a setting. Second, current pop culture (Cosmo, *The X-Files* and the Darwin Awards are invoked in the first chapter alone) is ubiquitous throughout the book. Third, the resolute Canadianness of *Hominids* offsets its imaginative impossibilities, giving good counterpoint to futuristic elements. All of the Earth-based situations and

events have a contextual plausibility, yet the rest, occurring on an "alternate world," adopt a conventional genre hokeyness. One either accepts SF stock-in-trade in alternative descriptions — time cannot be in years, months or days, but is instead divided into "ten-months" and the like — or one revolts against the rose-is-a-rose modifications to contemporary concepts.

Sawyer sells so well in Canada because of his celebration of our culture; citizens seek him out for both a good story and affirmation of our identity. Where else in commercial science fiction would Canada's book-trade magazine, Quill & Quire, be mentioned? (I experienced a slight nationalist thrill when I read that detail.) Who else offhandedly mentions 24 Sussex Drive as residence for a leader? I hope foreign editions preserve our home-and-native-landisms.

In the opinion of this aesthete, Sawyer has written a rapidly plotted, anthropologically saturated speculative novel, endearing because of its counter-economic Canadianness and its Sawyer-signature wide appeal: The author refuses to limit his audience to spaceship aficionados and "galaxy far, far away" freaks. By writing about us, he has pruned himself loose from the SF purgatory of adolescent males and role-players, and onto the bestseller lists.

*Shane Neilson is a Labrador writer who usually has no taste for SF.*



# When mammoths roamed

## Hominids

By Robert J. Sawyer  
Tor Books, \$35.95

Reviewed by MOIRA L. MacKINNON  
Special to The Hamilton Spectator

Some scientists call it the Upper Paleolithic Revolution, others The Great Leap Forward. Approximately 40,000 years ago, something happened to our ancestors. Suddenly, after 60,000 years of banging stones together to create crude tools, they began to paint beautiful pictures on cave walls. They started to wear jewellery, and to bury grave objects with their dead.

Whatever caused this spark, this flowering of cognition only occurred in one of the two species of hominids then occupying our planet. Cro-Magnon made the leap, Neanderthals didn't, and by 27,000 years ago only one of the two species was left. In what was possibly the very first example of genocide, Cain killed Abel.

Quantum mechanics postulates the existence of alternate, or parallel, universes. Every time a quantum interaction occurs, every time a decision is made, a new universe is created. What if, in one of those alternate universes, Neanderthals received the spark? What if they, not Homo Sapiens, became the dominant species?

That is the premise Robert Sawyer examines in *Hominids*, his latest science fiction novel.

Ponter Boddit is a quantum physicist. He is also a Neanderthal. He and his partner Adikor are working in their quantum-computing lab deep inside a mine when something goes cataclysmically wrong. Ponter is catapulted into another world, a parallel universe where scientists are also working in a mine.

Louise Benoit, a postdoc at the Sudbury Neutrino Observatory deep inside Inco's Creighton Mine, is stunned when a man suddenly appears inside the 12-metre acrylic sphere that holds the heavy water crucial to their experiment. Questions about how he got there are less immediately important than saving him from drowning. It is only when they reach the nearby hospital that she and her colleagues discover that the man they have just rescued is not human.

*Hominids* is an ambitious work, the start of a trilogy (*Humans* is due in February 2003, with *Hybrids* following in December). David Hartwell, Robert Sawyer's editor at Tor, compares *Hominids* to Robert Heinlein's 1961 seminal classic *Stranger in a Strange Land*. Although Sawyer may be flattered by this comparison to one of his heroes, the two works are very dissimilar. They do however share one thing, what one might call the data perspective: examining our world from a perspective that is not quite human.

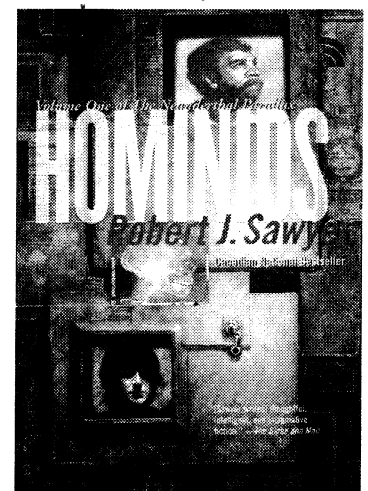
Comparing the two books overlooks what I think is one of the major strengths of *Hominids*, the depiction of the Neanderthal society. Heinlein never goes into much detail about the Martian way of life, whereas Sawyer has given much thought to how a very different species of hominid might arrange society and impact the world. Imagine a world where houses are grown and mammoths still roam. A world where privacy is non-existent, but crime is almost unknown.

Maclean's magazine calls Robert Sawyer one of the most successful Canadian authors with 25 national and international awards, including the Nebula Award for Best Novel of the Year for *The Terminal Experiment*, and no less than seven Aurora Awards, Canada's top science fiction award.

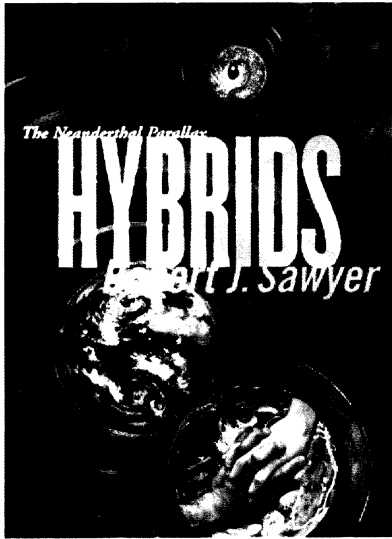
What makes his novels so memorable is the combination of thought-provoking ideas with detailed research, served up with Canadian backgrounds and believable protagonists.

Although I had a little difficulty believing that any race of people as obviously intelligent, peaceful and well-adjusted as Ponter Boddit and his fellow Neanderthals would actually want further contact with us, I look forward eagerly to seeing more of them. Hopefully, they will survive the experience, unlike their ancestors in our universe.

Moira L. MacKinnon is a writer in Gloucester, Ont.



★ **Sawyer, Robert J.** *Hybrids*. (Sept. 2003. 368p. Tor, \$24.95 (0-312-87690-4). SF/Fantasy



In the conclusion of the Neanderthal Parallax trilogy (*Hominids*, 2002, and *Humans* [BKL Ja 1 & 15 03] precede it), scientists and lovers Mary Vaughan, who is human, and Ponter Boddit, who is Neanderthal, embark on the harrowing adventure of conceiving a child together. To overcome the genetic barbed wire of mismatched chromosomes, they must use banned technology obtainable only from a Neanderthal scientist living in the northern wilderness, alone but not isolated, for Neanderthals prefer a nonprivate society in which injured persons are quickly rescued, theft is unknown, and personal violence is contained, thanks to permanently implanted personal monitors—a society whose benefits Sawyer persuasively describes. The Neanderthals' electronic surveillance is compatible with their basic peacefulness, however, and can't begin to cope with human craftiness or the malevolent racism of one of

Mary's colleagues, who considers Ponter's world as a plum ripe for picking. If his ambitions constitute one alarming threat to a society, the imminent collapse of Earth's magnetic field constitutes another, for it is feared that this will wreak havoc with human consciousness. In an excellent closing twist, a New Year's celebration is disrupted in a very alarming, uniquely human manner as a few Neanderthals watch dumbfounded. A fine combination of love story, social commentary, and ecotriller closes a terrific series with a bang. —*Roberta Johnson*

## Booklist

Published by the **American Library Association**

★ "Starred review," denoting a book of exceptional merit

September 1, 2003  
v100 i1 p75(1)

contemporary audiences, King James–era readers, and Paul’s original addressees. This poem is much more of a lecture, losing most of the personal narrative tone found elsewhere in the book, and as such seems out of place. Yet in the final two stanzas, it gives the resolution needed. Luthor, in a more introspective move than any of the other narrators, turns inward to transcend Superman as an independent entity, and finds his true meaning is in ourselves:

. . . We, the world we read, are Torah.  
Superman, the constancy of his concupiscent star,  
is less than this. A big red S. A text  
we read too lightly.

In the end, the S, which according to Clark was not even a letter originally, becomes a variable cryptogram, not only for Superman, but for all the myths, social, political, and religious, that are built on the concept of the superbeing—from Nazi to savior. If the poems in *Krypton Nights* are sometimes obscure, and if the questions they pose

are never satisfactorily answered, perhaps that is as should be. Like the best prose sf, this book examines the paradoxes that haunt the human race, and opens doors to greater mysteries. In a broader sense, the text Luthor refers to is not just Superman, or the three Supermans, but any text, any ideology, that we read too lightly, accept unquestioningly. In a recent interview, Dietrich addressed the problem of interpretation:

See, the poems, the “answers,” are only ever questions. All words make us associate, and in association lies all beauty, all context, all meaning, all metaphor. What we want to believe, the “maybe,” is what matters. Not what “is.” Because there is no is. . . . None of which means the same exact thing to each of you reading this. Does it mean nothing then? No, it means everything. Thus “maybe” is the universe. ▲

---

*Curtis Shumaker lives in Owatonna, Minnesota.*

## Richard Parent Double Vision: Robert Sawyer’s Utopian Dystopia

Robert J. Sawyer’s ambitious new trilogy, *The Neanderthal Parallax*, presents a provocative challenge to literary analysis—its hybridized nature brings together utopian, dystopian, and traditional sf tropes. Though genre seepage is not a new phenomenon by any measure, Sawyer’s series shifts tone and emphasis at breakneck speed, switching between its personalities with *Sybil*-like suddenness. What begins as page-turning sf quickly becomes old-school utopia, abandoning all signs of sf. Soon enough, utopia itself is replaced with dystopia, and it is almost as if Bellamy’s Julian West, from *Looking Backward*, had awakened in 1984, not 2000. For the rest of the trilogy, Sawyer flashes moments of each of his three modes before our eyes, never allowing any one of them to become dominant and thus define the series. Even more intriguing than Sawyer’s deftness at writing in multiple styles, though, is his ability to make the *Neanderthal* gestalt an enjoyable read, no matter how much or how often each of the traditions interferes with the others. In this article I will explore the resonance and interference resulting from Sawyer’s blending of genres and traditions into a single narrative which, I will argue, gives rise to a revitalized reformation of the utopian tradition.

*The Neanderthal Parallax* is composed of three novels, symmetrically titled *Hominids*, *Humans*, and *Hybrids*, describing the adventures and experiences of *Homo neanderthalensis* physicist Pontor Boddit and *Homo sapiens* geneticist Mary Vaughan. In the first book, *Hominids*, Boddit and his man-mate (more on this later) Adikor Huld inadvertently punched a hole from their world of evolved Neanderthals to a parallel world of evolved *Homo sapiens* through a quantum computing mishap, stranding Boddit on the parallel Earth. The second book, *Humans*, continues the parallel-reality exchanges between Neanderthals and humans, as Boddit has further adventures in the human world and Vaughan travels to the Neanderthal world. Throughout, the nascent emotional and sexual relationship between Boddit and Vaughan grows and deepens.

In *Hybrids*, Boddit and Vaughan continue their cross-species romance and decide to use a Neanderthal DNA codon writer to conceive a child together — one of the many “hybrids” of the novel’s title. The cultural differences between Barast and Gliksin (the Neanderthal terms used throughout the series to designate his and her respective species), as well as the machinations of the scheming U.S. government and its secret think tanks, pose a series of obstacles for the lovers as they struggle to solidify their new relationship. Along the way, the trilogy’s doubled stranger-in-a-strange-land premise allows for a potent blend of outsider and insider perspectives on the imagined world of the Barasts and on our own world.

### Speculation, Criticism, Hybridization

As a speculative mode of fiction, sf usually engages in cultural criticism of some sort. Without a firm, comprehensive sense of the world as it is, the sf writer is unable to speculate on what might be. For speculation to function, it must be plausible, which is a function

of the author’s ability to discern trends that are immanent but not yet fully emergent in contemporary culture. A true sign of the sf author’s skill, then, is his ability to create plausible worlds, with “plausibility” being an indication of the correspondence between the author’s creation—no matter how distant spatially or chronologically—and the present, and the level of insight the author’s analysis of contemporary life demonstrates.

In Sawyer’s *Neanderthal Parallax*, the nova that define the novel as sf are all introduced via the Barast Earth existing parallel to the more familiar Gliksin one. Having an entire world to play with—though much, if not all, of Sawyer’s extrapolations of an evolved Neanderthal world and its civilization are based on current research into hominid development and culture—allows Sawyer to depict the fictional Gliksin world as being indistinguishable from our own. In fact, as in his earlier novel, *Calculating God*, Sawyer goes to great lengths to establish the Gliksin world as not merely a recognizably realistic and unfantastic setting, but as recognizably *our* world. By staging the Gliksin-world scenes at reasonably well-known, extant locations such as the University of Toronto, York University, and the Sudbury Neutrino Observatory, and by including a multitude of references to current papal encyclicals, popular culture, and a wide array of recent scientific research findings, Sawyer intensifies the reader’s sense that the world and the time about which she is reading is her own. The reader is thus led to believe that Sawyer’s criticisms of this narrative world are meant to be read as criticisms of our world.

Sawyer has titled the trilogy *The Neanderthal Parallax*, a sly double reference to the books’ doubled settings on the Barast and Gliksin Earths, as well as an indication of Sawyer’s vision of the relationship between the utopian and dystopian elements of the trilogy. “Parallax” refers to the optical maps created through stereoscopic binocular vision—because our eyes see from slightly different positions on our heads, the brain is able to combine the two images into a 3-D representation of the world. Similarly, Sawyer positions the two Earths, one with strong utopian elements, the other strongly dystopian, in order to create a more complete, more realistic, more highly nuanced portrait of both fictional worlds and, at the same time, of the real world.

### Utopia with a Pronounced Brow-Ridge

In traditional utopian narratives, (e.g., More’s *Utopia*, Bellamy’s *Looking Backwards*, Morris’s *News From Nowhere*), the imperfect protagonist reaches utopia, is given a tour of the environs and lectured by a knowledgeable utopian local, and then leaves or is ejected from the perfection of utopia. Returned to our imperfect world, the protagonist reports back on what he has seen, presumably to foster progress toward the more exalted state he has witnessed. In traditional dystopian fiction, on the other hand, the protagonist is not an outsider to the imagined world, but is a resident. This makes dystopian narration not so much travel reportage as the author’s presentation of

the daily life of a dystopian subject, presumably presented to readers to prevent degeneration toward the abject state the author has imagined. In other words, both utopian and dystopian narratives advance an essentially *optimistic* vision of humanity. In the utopian mode, the author's imagined paradise is presented as achievable by current peoples, though often only through much long and difficult work described in the narrative as the already-achieved utopia's history. Even dystopian fiction operates on an essentially optimistic premise—though the protagonist may not be able to escape the dystopian world, the readers possess the power to effect change and avoid this undesirable future. Analyzing the form of Sawyer's optimism in *The Neanderthal Parallax* should, therefore, provide a clue as to whether the series is essentially utopian or dystopian in its worldview.

As the trilogy's titles suggest, the series focuses on the two parallel worlds, Barast and Gliksin, and on the eventual hybridization of their species and cultures. In Sawyer's formulation, the Barast Earth is a veritable paradise, environmentally unspoiled, unburdened by overpopulation, and free of practically all crime and violence. In most respects, Sawyer's world of evolved Neanderthals seems an ideal fulfillment of Ruth Levitas's pronouncement that "The essence of utopia seems to be desire—the desire for a different, better way of being" (181). Levitas's description is broad enough to include the traditional utopias as easily as contemporary sf texts, many of which—like *The Neanderthal Parallax*—deviate from the classic model of utopian literature. As Levitas explains, utopia "involves the imagining of a state of being in which the problems which actually confront us are removed or resolved, often, but not necessarily, through the imagining of a state of the world in which the scarcity gap is closed or the 'collective problem' solved" (191). This definition seems an especially useful one, as it can accommodate the utopian elements in a non-utopian or hybrid text just as easily as texts whose narrative structure does nothing but depict a fully actualized utopian state, such as Book II of Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*.

Sawyer's *Neanderthal Parallax* approaches both the "scarcity gap" and the "collective problem" in interesting and culturally relevant ways. Following current anthropological and paleontological evidence, Sawyer's Barasts are strict hunter-gatherers, eschewing agriculture and the rise of the large cities that agriculture allowed. Because of the limited sustainability of the hunter-gatherer way of life, Sawyer portrays his evolved Neanderthals as being forced to avoid overpopulation through a strict policy of zero population growth. Additionally, the high-protein, low-carbohydrate diet of hunter-gatherers closely resembles current diet crazes, such as the Atkins and South Beach diets. Sawyer seems to take great pleasure in describing the health benefits gained by the Barasts from their diet, especially when compared with the high-carb diet of the Gliksins. Sawyer's descriptions of the *nutritionally* utopian elements of the Barast world are wry and unanticipated pleasures, unusual for the genre.

Though utopia has been understood and depicted in countless ways, the paradigmatic model metaphorically and literally reflects the essential elements of Plato's *Republic* and Thomas More's *Utopia*. As Laurent Gervereau explains, "Utopia presents itself as the epicenter of truth" (358), harkening back to both the circular nature of More's *Island* and Plato's *City*, as well as their enlightened systems of government and daily life. Ideal utopian rule prevents the unwanted, unexpected, and unpleasant from occurring. As the epitome of human social evolution, further change and progress is not only unnecessary but completely unwanted in utopia. Any further tampering could only bring about its diminishment.

Sawyer's Barast world can be interpreted as an attempt to portray what Gervereau describes as the utopian "end of time" in the most positive possible light (360). Though birth rates must be firmly regulated, couples do not exist in a state of continued procreative frustration. Instead of imposing birth control technology upon themselves, the Barasts in Sawyer's novels have reconfigured their social arrangement to maximize personal and emotional satisfaction, while preventing unwanted pregnancy. They achieve this through a system of universal bisexuality and enforced gender-segregation. For four days out of each month, "Two become One" on the Barast world, and opposite-sex couples freely cohabit and have sex—each female Barast with her "man-mate," and each male with his "woman-mate."

The remaining days of each month, female Barasts live in the city centers, and male Barasts live in the outlying suburban rims. During this time, each Barast lives and has sex with his or her same-sex man-mate or woman-mate. As the female Barasts all live in close proximity in the city centers, their menstrual cycles are uniform and synchronized. This allows for the calculation of optimal times to schedule Two-becoming-One to prevent pregnancy. Only once in each decade is Two-becoming-One scheduled to occur at a fertile period, thus giving rise to the next generation of Barasts.

As a model for optimism, Sawyer's Barast world presents a utopian situation that has no real connection to our own worldview or lifestyle philosophies. No matter how enlightened we poor Gliksins become, we cannot achieve the Barast ideal without a radical reconfiguration of our sexual identities and relationships, a nearly complete rejection of the current mode of food production and consumption and a mass extinction of humanity (there are only 185 million Barasts on their entire globe, compared with the 6 billion humans on earth now). Of these, the first two might be considered par for the course in utopian thought, but the requirements of the last point make this solution unworkable and of questionable morality.

### Dystopia in Our Own Backyard

In contrast to the idyllic Barast world, Sawyer's Gliksin Earth is depicted as being overcrowded, polluted, chaotic, prone to warfare, and filled with powerful individuals and governments twisted by perverse dreams of conquest, entitlement, and the accumulation of power and resources. In other words, it is easily recognizable as a mimetic representation of the real world. Sawyer's Gliksin Earth is replete with dystopian elements. For instance, on Gliksin Earth, unlike on the non-violent Barast Earth, women are not safe. Book One of the trilogy quickly introduces this theme through a major plot point: the rape of Mary Vaughan by an unknown assailant. Vaughan's reactions to the violation propel her into the trilogy's parallel worlds plot and motivate her willingness to consider an emotional relationship with Boddit. As the series progresses, we see that Vaughan's attacker has no plans to stop and rapes the female chair of Vaughan's department at York University. In his exploration of the Gliksin Earth, Ponter Boddit's prodigious olfactory sensitivity is a torment to him, assaulted by the ever-present stench of pollution that we have learned to ignore. Used to the low Barast population density, Boddit is appalled at the deprivations that poverty imposes on so many Gliksins. Attempting to foil the first Barast diplomatic mission to the Gliksin United Nations, a religious fundamentalist attempts to assassinate the visiting Barasts. And as if adding insult to injury, the U.S. government plans ways of eradicating the Barasts so that the U.S. can colonize and control the unspoiled environment of the Barast Earth. Add to these large-scale issues the multitude of small observations Sawyer includes on the daily indignities, wrongs, and prejudices Gliksins must both perpetuate and endure, and the dystopian portrait of the Gliksin Earth—*our* Earth—is devastating.

In his book *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, Tom Moylan summarizes the traditional dystopian plot as following the "everyday lives of everyday people." He explains that "The story line then develops around that alienated protagonist as she or he begins to recognize the situation for what it really is and thus to trace the relationship between individual experience and the operation of the entire system" (xiii). In the case of *The Neanderthal Parallax*, Mary Vaughan's journey to dystopian awareness begins with her rape and continues throughout the trilogy as she discusses, and is often forced to defend, the unpleasant aspects of her world. Put into sharp contrast by Boddit's descriptions of, as well as her own experiences in, the Barast world, the dystopian nature of the Gliksin world becomes an inescapable conclusion for Vaughan. Traditional dystopian narratives such as this one support Mark Rose's conclusion that "The issue in these narratives, then, is ultimately one of opposed points of view, and thus the dystopia . . . readily becomes a drama of consciousness" (167). This is doubly true in Sawyer's *Neanderthal Parallax*, as the plot follows both Mary Vaughan's evolving awareness and consciousness of her position in both worlds, as well as the phenomenon of consciousness as it developed, evolved, and is still being manipulated on both worlds.

M. Keith Booker points out the connections between utopia and dystopia, paranoia and consciousness, glibly noting that "one man's

utopia [is] another man's dystopia" (15). The interconnection between utopia and dystopia entails the interpenetration of utopia and dystopia at all points, differentiated only by the subjectivity of perception. This commingling led Gary Westfahl to coin the neologism "pointopia" to describe more accurately the conflated states of utopia and dystopia in most sf texts. For Westfahl, a pointopia "presents a clearly imperfect society; is a story with an ongoing melodramatic conflict between good and evil; and is a story where scientific progress and inventions provide moments of joy and incremental improvements but promise no final perfection" (229). Westfahl's pointopias lead not to the establishment of utopia but rather to a heightened awareness of the factors retarding such an establishment.

Sawyer adds a welcome complication to his utopian and dystopian worlds—providing enough information about each to recognize the incompletely perfect or imperfect nature of each world. In other words, Sawyer's Barast Earth contains few but severe dystopian elements, and his Gliksin world similarly contains a few moments of goodness and beauty. Thus, *The Neanderthal Parallax* seems an excellent example of Westfahl's notion of pointopia. As we have already seen, Sawyer's utopia is out of reach unless we countenance deliberate depopulation and eliminate 97% of currently living humans. Sawyer's dystopia, as well, works to preclude the usual sense of optimism. Instead of presenting his readers with a relatively comforting "if this goes on" scenario, Sawyer has gone to great lengths to force the realization that "this is *already* going on." Thus, no amount of societal correction can avert the dawning of Sawyer's dystopia and, simultaneously, even achieving his pointopian utopia would necessarily entail the creation of dystopian elements.

Sawyer shows us that maintaining the static near-perfection of civic order and peace of the Barast utopia requires that its members adhere to strict rules and impose harsh penalties for individuals who break the laws. The tremendous physical strength of the Barasts makes them lethal, able to kill with a single punch to the skull. Regulating against this potential destructiveness is a legal prohibition against violence that mandates that anyone convicted of violence will be executed and, to eradicate any genetic predisposition toward violent behavior, all individuals sharing fifty percent of the criminal's genetic code (parents, siblings, and children) are immediately sterilized.

Compounding the dystopian impression, Sawyer achieves Ruth Levitas's utopian goal of solving the "collective problem," the dilemma of how to exist as an independent individual while remaining an obedient member of a social collective, through the introduction of mandatory "companions." During childhood, each Barast receives an artificially intelligent computer monitoring device implanted in his or her forearm. These companions connect the Barasts to the global information networks, but they also record every action undertaken, the location, and the spoken and written words of each Barast. These records in the "Alibi Archives" at the central "Hall of Records" are kept absolutely private except in case of legal investigation. In this way, the safety of all Barasts is ensured, as false accusations and mistaken identities are impossible. It also, however, turns the Barast Earth into a surveillance state reminiscent of Orwell's "telescreens," even if the Barasts welcome the trade.

Furthermore, as might be imagined, Sawyer's Gliksin protagonist, Dr. Mary Vaughan experiences a great deal of trouble adjusting to the segregated lifestyle of the Barasts. She follows Boddit to his world, intending to spend time with him in his own environment. Her unhappiness at learning that she will be required to live with the females for the majority of each month, however, is eclipsed by her feelings when she realizes that during this time Boddit will be living and sleeping with his man-mate, Adikor Huld. If Sawyer's resolution of Vaughan's reservations feels a bit facile, it is necessary, as the progression of the novels reveals that these books are more concerned with detailing Mary Vaughan's development than Ponter Boddit's. Vaughan must find a way to adapt herself to the pointopian Barast world, even as her expectations of a perfect world are, in her view, cruelly betrayed. Vaughan's emotional ideals, her sexual orientation, and her notions of privacy are all violated by Barast society. A major subplot in the third volume of *The Neanderthal Parallax* involves Vaughan's attempts to reconcile herself to living as a Barast so that she may establish a life for herself with the Barast she

loves. This does not represent a dystopian element in Barast society, as much as it demonstrates the subjectivity inherent in delineating dystopian from utopian. And, of course, the subjective perspective arises here and is strongly influenced by the stereoscopic resonance of the two worlds. Boddit sees nothing wrong with his society's sexual segregation but admits, after experiencing the lack of regulation and control on the Gliksin Earth, that sexual liberty is an appealing system. Similarly, Vaughan is initially repulsed by the easy bisexuality of the Barasts, but she comes to appreciate its utopian possibilities as compared with the prejudice and violence homophobia causes on the Gliksin Earth.

### Reading Hybrids/Reading *Hybrids*

So what is the reader to make of Sawyer's mix of utopian dystopias and dystopian utopias, dressed up in sf finery? Reading the books as straight sf—a reasonable strategy for anyone familiar with Sawyer's previous work—yields a frustrating and unsatisfying experience. The books are simply too full of utopian expository dialogue to be exciting. Long stretches of time—though logically established through quarantines, long car and airplane rides, and other periods of stasis—interrupt the flow of Sawyer's plots. Sawyer seems to have recognized this and incorporated tension-filled subplots into each book, as if to help the reader through the slower bits.

Obviously, the utopian tradition requires these sorts of lengthy descriptive and "historical" passages, a fact that can make reading the classic utopian novels difficult for readers accustomed to modern notions of pacing. But even when read on their own terms as utopian novels, *The Neanderthal Parallax* remains somewhat off. The pointopian nature of both Barast and Gliksin Earths seems to contradict the utopian project in the novels, as the Barast world explicitly demonstrates that though it's better than ours, it is still not perfect. In this sense, then, the Barast world fails to meet the traditional requirement for utopia—it is neither perfect nor static, but continues to struggle with its own problems and eagerly anticipates assimilating Gliksin technologies and culture. The very progressiveness of the Barast worldview is mutually exclusive with utopianism. Further, Mary Vaughan's solution, her own hybridization of Gliksin and Barast worlds creates, in her own words, "The very best—of both worlds" (394). Navigating between the pointopias on each parallel earth, Vaughan becomes a utopian singularity. Sawyer's solution to the problem of utopia, then, is to reject social change altogether, instead advancing a notion of solipsistic individualism.

On its surface, the most satisfying approach to *The Neanderthal Parallax* is as dystopian literature. As I mentioned in my review of book two of the trilogy (*NYRSF* 177), Sawyer's cultural criticism is consistently astute and biting ... and provides readers with definite pleasures. Reading the first book, *Hominids*, during a tense visit to Manhattan during the holiday season, I found myself agreeing with everything Sawyer wrote about Boddit's views of the Gliksin world, laughing aloud at times, so relieved was I to read about someone else suffering from the same miserable, overcrowded, and filthy conditions I was forced to endure. However, Sawyer's resolution of many of the dystopian themes in the trilogy seems open to charges of reduction and stereotyping.

Sawyer's depiction of Gliksin men ... for instance ... is, with only one exception, uniformly negative. In *The Neanderthal Parallax*, the only good man is Ruben Montego, a Jamaican physician who first treats Ponter Boddit upon his arrival on the parallel Gliksin Earth. Aside from Montego, the rest of the Gliksin men in the trilogy are depicted as rapists driven psychotic by political correctness and affirmative action, cold-blooded murderers, or government-sanctioned sociopaths. Sawyer ties his narrative perspective to Mary Vaughan, whose traumatic rape experience makes her distrust Gliksin males, which helps to explain the consistently unfavorable descriptions of Gliksin men and their motives. It also, however, enables an old and patently offensive stereotype about female sexuality.

Sawyer's depiction of Barasts as being inherently bisexual is an interesting speculation, and leads to many intriguing consequences and observations throughout the trilogy. Importantly, though, it also establishes an immediate conflict with Mary Vaughan's heterosexuality. If Vaughan is to form a hybridized life with Boddit, she must adapt

herself to the Barast sexual dynamic and become bisexual, which she does, though admittedly only after hundreds of pages of soul-searching and squeamishness. In a nice glimpse of psychological depth, Sawyer allows Vaughan to second-guess her attraction to Boddit, wondering whether her feelings are caused by the fact that he is a Barast ... and therefore not a Gliksin male, like her rapist. But the fact remains that, after her rape, Vaughan becomes bisexual and lives most of the time in a lesbian relationship with the Barast who will eventually become her woman-mate when Two-are-not-One.

Finally, *The Neanderthal Parallax* is obsessed with the question of the validity and origin of religious experience, returning to issues raised in Sawyer's earlier novel, *Calculating God*. That book depicted a lengthy debate between an atheist human paleontologist and an alien whose race implicitly believes in the existence of God. Throughout *Calculating God*, the human and the alien each presents reasons for his belief or non-belief, and each counters these with scientific or theological refutations. The debate is only resolved by an Act of God, the creation of a shield protecting both Earth and the alien home world from the destructive energy of a new supernova. Both recognize that only God, or a being indistinguishable from God, could have created such a shield, and so scientific disbelief is shown to be logically incompatible with the reality of God's existence.

In *The Neanderthal Parallax*, Mary Vaughan and Ponter Boddit engage in many lengthy discussions of religion, as Vaughan is a practicing Catholic and Boddit (like all Barasts) is a complete atheist. In the third novel, *Hybrids*, Sawyer introduces current scientific research about a possible neurological basis for religious belief and experience. The persistence of belief on the Gliksin Earth, and the complete lack of it on the Barast Earth, Sawyer explains, is caused by the development of a "god organ" in Gliksin brains during evolution. Late in *Hybrids*, fluctuations in the Gliksin Earth's magnetic field result in the stimulation of each Gliksin's god organ, producing a global outbreak of "religious" visions which are thus revealed to be merely electromagnetic hallucinations. Like the supernova shield in *Calculating God*, the Gliksin "god organ" conclusively settles the debate over the validity of religious experience and belief, though this time granting victory to the atheists. The complete reversal of position from his 2000 novel, *Calculating God*, to the 2002–2003 time span of *The Neanderthal Parallax*, is intriguing, but Sawyer's reliance on conclusive proof lacks subtlety. A more nuanced psychological depiction of Vaughan's loss of faith, as in Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow*, would have been welcome.

Of course, the solution is to read *The Neanderthal Parallax* as a hybridized form incorporating utopian traditions, dystopian traditions, and classic sf in a blend that, though not free from

difficulties, nevertheless manages to remain consistently thought-provoking and entertaining. In this, Sawyer has succeeded in bringing the utopian form into the twenty-first century while avoiding the danger of falling into utopian stagnation and boredom. An excellent example of this is Kim Stanley Robinson's *Pacific Edge*, the utopian volume of his *Three Californias* trilogy. Though *Pacific Edge* is extremely well-written, the book labors under the burden of the fundamental problem that utopia—perfection achieved and maintained through stasis—is *boring*. *Pacific Edge* lacks the drama of the other two books in the series, *The Wild Shore* and *The Gold Coast*, written in the apocalyptic and dystopian modes, respectively. Sawyer, though, infuses just enough dystopia into *The Neanderthal Parallax* to create tension and avoid the sometimes over-sweet tone that afflicts the utopian tradition. In addition, Sawyer's addition of traditional sf elements keeps the books moving along at an enjoyable pace overall. Sawyer's *Neanderthal Parallax* suggests that the utopian mode, though it lacks the sexiness of dystopian or sf narratives, can bring valid and valuable insights and perspectives to contemporary literature. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the popularity of the series indicates that current readers are having no trouble navigating the shifting registers Sawyer employs; They seem to be thoroughly enjoying his hybrid vision of the modern utopian narrative. ▲

---

Richard Parent lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

### Works Cited

- Agatson, Arthur. *The South Beach Diet*. Emmaus, PA and New York: Rodale, 2003.
- Atkins, Robert C. *Dr. Atkins' New Diet Revolution* (1992; revised, 2002). New York: Avon Books.
- Bellamy, Edward. *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* (1888). Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1995.
- Booker, M. Keith. *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1994.
- Gervereau, Laurent. "Symbolic Collapse: Utopia Challenged by Its Representations." Trans. Nadia Benabid. In *Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World*. Ed. Roland Schaefer, Gregory Claeys, and Lyman Tower Sargent. New York: New York Public Library Press/Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Levitas, Ruth. *The Concept of Utopia*. New York: Philip Allan, 1990.
- More, Thomas. *Utopia; With Erasmus's The Seleni of Alcibiadiabes* (1516). Ed. and trans. David Wootton. Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1990.
- Morris, William. *News From Nowhere and Other Writings* (1890). London and New York: Penguin Books, 1998.
- Moylan, Tom. *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 2000.
- Orwell, George. *1984* (1949). New York: Signet Classic, 1981.
- Parent, Richard. "Humans, by Robert J. Sawyer." *New York Review of Science Fiction* 177, May 2003.
- Plato. *The Republic* (c. 370 BCE). In *Great Dialogues of Plato*. Trans. W. H. D. Rouse. Ed. Eric H. Warrington and Philip G. Rouse. New York: Mentor Books, 1984.
- Robinson, Kim Stanley. *The Gold Coast*. New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 1988.
- . *Pacific Edge*. New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 1990.
- . *The Wild Shore*. New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 1984.
- Rose, Mark. *Alien Encounters: Anatomy of Science Fiction*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981.
- Russell, Mary Doria. *The Sparrow*. New York: Villard, 1996.
- Sawyer, Robert J. *Calculating God*. New York: Tor Books, 2000.
- . *Hominids*. New York: Tor Books, 2002.
- . *Humans*. New York: Tor Books, 2003.
- . *Hybrids*. New York: Tor Books, 2003.
- Schreiber, Flora Rhea. *Sybil* (1973). New York: Warner Brothers, 1974.
- Westfahl, Gary. "Gadgetry, Government, Genetics, and God: The Forms of Science Fiction Utopias." In *Transformations of Utopia: Changing Views of the Perfect Society*. Ed. George Slusser, Paul Alkon, Roger Gaillard, and Danièle Chatelain. New York: AMS Press, 1999.

## The New York Review

### of Science Fiction

#### Readings

at the South Street Seaport Museum's Melville Gallery  
213 Water Street (near Beekman)

June 7, 2004

**John C. Wright**  
**Rachel Pollack**

Admission: \$5 donation.

Doors open at 6:30,

and the readings will begin promptly at 7!

All readings subject to change without notice.

To join the Readings mailing list,  
or change an address, or remove yourself,  
please send a note to <NYRSF\_Readings@hourwolf.com>.

# Intoxicating imagination

Robert Sawyer's stories could convert sci-fi unbelievers

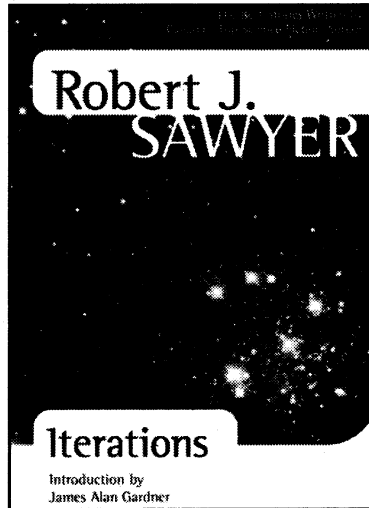
## BOOK REVIEW

### ITERATIONS

by Robert J. Sawyer  
Red Deer Press, 303 pp.

Ideas. Inspirations. Robert J. Sawyer's stories are embodiments of IBM's philosophy: think. He's Canada's top science-fiction writer; the first anthology of his short stories trumpets the fact with blaring clarity.

Every damn story simmers with originality, with outrageous ideas that Sawyer gives plausibility. To read him is to take a breathless run. He twists urban legends of alligators in sewers; delves into a paleontological discovery of vampires; regards the possibility of a man murdering himself in parallel universes; examines God and the Devil betting on humanity. But I haven't even mentioned the two best: "Just Like Old Times" has



history's most prolific serial killer hunt the very origin of humanity as a Tyrannosaurus Rex, and "You See But You Do Not Observe" has Sherlock Holmes jump to the end of the 21st century to solve a case of galactic proportions — he has to find *trillions* of missing humans. Way cool.

These are stories to make you

drunk on imagination; they're narcotics of science and philosophy. Yet they carry a resonance of Sawyer's deeper visions. He's concerned with man as man, with woman as woman, how we find ourselves in the universe, how as an individual and member of a race a man's fate is a product of his choices. He speculates, as James Gardner writes in the book's introduction, on "what would have happened if you made a different decision at some crucial moment, if you turned left instead of right?"

These stories turn left and right, and then go down, twist up, unfold themselves inside out, make you peer beyond the looking-glass. This is Sawyer's Wonderland; those who normally disregard sci-fi (I used to be one of them) may be converted, gain an affinity for sheer speculation. And that's an idea that touches Sawyer's purpose: to remake ourselves simply by thinking differently.

TREVOR KLASSEN

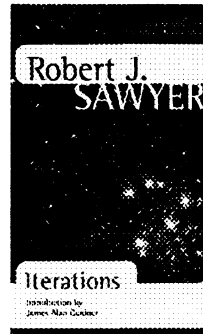


# Book Reviews

*Iterations*, by Robert J. Sawyer. Red Deer Press, 2004 ISBN 0-88995-303-1 \$22.95

One Canadian in no danger of fading into obscurity is Robert J. Sawyer. His fifteen novels have won so much by way of critical and popular praise (he's the only person ever to have won five of the world's major SF awards) that it's easy to overlook his superlative (and award-winning) short stories. *Iterations* demonstrates that Sawyer is very much in command of the short-story form, and has been for a long time: the collection spans over twenty years' worth of writing.

What's surprising here is not the consistently high calibre of the stories, but the range. Fans will recognize some of the themes from Sawyer's novels—dinosaurs, parallel (or not) universes, Canadian identity. But there are also surprises.



He can write crime, horror and fantasy with the best of them, and of course the way he can bring ideas together is always a surprise. Sherlock Holmes and Schrodinger's Cat? Why not? Canada Post and free will? For sure. If you've ever wondered why many insist SF stands for speculative fiction rather than science fiction, this is the collection to read.

It's also an excellent introduction to the field for those who may wonder what all the fuss is about (SF is just *Star Trek*, isn't it?). Sawyer's down-to-earth prose never gets in the way of the story, although (no surprise) he can also wax lyrical, as in the gripping "Fallen Angel." And, of course, he can make you laugh. His website's an award-winner too: [www.sfwriter.com](http://www.sfwriter.com)

# Publishers Weekly

THE INTERNATIONAL NEWS MAGAZINE OF BOOK PUBLISHING AND BOOKSELLING *April 19, 1999*

---

## ☆ FLASHFORWARD

*Robert J. Sawyer.* Tor, \$23.95 (320p)  
ISBN 0-312-86712-3

A science experiment that unwittingly shuts down all human consciousness for two minutes is the catalyst for a creative exploration of fate, free will and the nature of the universe in Sawyer's soul-searching new work (after *Factoring Humanity*). In April 2009, Lloyd and Theo, two scientists at the European Organization for Particle Physics (CERN), run an experiment that accidentally transports the world's consciousness 20 years into the future. When humanity reawakens a moment later, chaos rules. Vehicles whose drivers passed out plow into one another; people fall or maim themselves. But that's just the beginning. After the horror is sorted out, each character tries desperately to ensure or avoid his or her future. Trapped by his guilt for causing so much destruction and driven by a need to rationalize, Lloyd tries to prove that free will is a myth. Theo discovers that he will be murdered and begins to hunt down his killer—tempting fate as in the Greek dramas of his ancestors. Some people start on their appointed roads early, others give up on life because of what they've seen. Using a third-person omniscient narrator, Sawyer shifts seamlessly among the perspectives of his many characters, anchoring the story in small details. This first-rate, philosophical journey, a terrific example of idea-driven SF, should have wide appeal.

☆ *Starred reviews denote books of exceptional merit.*

# A GUIDE TO THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR

OTTAWA CITIZEN

November 29, 1998

Pages D7 & D8

## FICTION

### **The Love of a Good Woman**

By Alice Munro

McClelland & Stewart; \$32.99

This latest collection of stories from Canadian author Alice Munro shows that she truly has a talent that comes into the world perhaps once in a generation. Her subtlety and control in creating layers of depth and meaning are unequalled, certainly in Canada, if not the world. There are eight stories, each quite long, and each combines a fragile delicacy with an almost mordant and unflinching look at how love between men and women finds its way into the world. These are ordinary people in ordinary homes and families. Munro makes them all extraordinary.

### **Lambs of God**

By Marele Day

Riverhead Books; \$32.50

This is a delightful novel about a long-forgotten cloister of nuns on an island. Most of their order has died out. They have seen no outsiders in decades; men, they have scarcely any idea about. Then one day a brisk young priest arrives with a plan that can only bring them calamity. This isn't a comedic work, although neither is it heavy hearted. It has an acute view of women and men, worldliness and transcendence. Day has that most rare of writerly gifts: The ability to imagine truly original characters and their world with respect instead of derision.

### **Archangel**

By Robert Harris

Random House of Canada; \$34.95

A thinking man's thriller, this book taps into one of the world's richest natural sources of horror: Josef Stalin. Harris's anti-hero Kelso, a seedy, not-quite-successful historian, is approached by a former NKVD officer who claims to have been present at Stalin's death. There was a notebook, the old spook says, that his boss, the secret police chief Beria, stole from Stalin's private papers. Kelso tries to verify the old man's story — and the plot breaks into a wild Cossack gallop that doesn't end until the last page.

### **Birds of America**

Stories by Lorrie Moore

Knopf; \$32

These stories have already garnered rave reviews and the concluding piece, "People Like That Are the Only Ones Here: Canonical Babbling in Peed Onk," won the O. Henry Prize this year for short fiction. So of course they're good. But the bonus is that they're funny, sometimes tender, more often edgy and cutting. That winning story is about a child diagnosed with cancer and the surreal, harrowing journey his parents take through the world of "Peed Onk" — pediatric oncology. Life teeters continually on the brink of unspeakable tragedy or at least despair; who wouldn't want to laugh nervously?

### **The Museum Guard**

By Howard Norman

Knopf Canada; \$32.95

Howard Norman weaves the stories of a museum guard, his girlfriend and his uncle into an elegant tapestry, convincingly turning outrageous and implausible events into the commonplace. The guard's first-person narrative is masterful; there's just enough naivete, self-doubt and unworldliness to convince you this is, in fact, a museum guard, writing down his very curious tale. Norman's style is lean and understated; his humour so wry it almost seems unintentional. The Museum Guard is one of those rare novels that can keep you up all night. The only reason to put it down before finishing it is to savour Norman's strangely lit world just a little bit longer.

### **My Year of Meats**

By Ruth L. Ozeki

Viking; \$33.99

You'll either love or hate this offbeat book, which won this year's Kiriyama Pacific Rim Book prize. A young, hip Japanese-American TV director produces a weekly series designed to encourage housewives to buy American meat. The sponsor of the show insists his downtrodden, bulimic and infertile wife make the recipes each week. The director finds the meat industry so riddled with unsafe practices that she is moved to produce an exposé; the housewife, inspired by one of the segments, leaves her husband and moves to the U.S. This book is not for the squeamish.

### **Four Letters of Love**

By Niall Williams

Picador; \$29.99

A man quits his job and abandons his family when he feels called by God to paint. A young girl, disappointed by life, decides to settle for a tweed merchant's offer of marriage. Williams masterfully sends the two stories spiralling into the funnel of their unavoidable convergence. His writing is deft and evocative, his descriptive passages cutting to the lyrical heart of the matter. His linking of life, land and weather is also a very Canadian theme, and perhaps accounts for our love affair with Irish authors.

### **Understanding Ken**

By Pete McCormack

Douglas & McIntyre; \$18.95

Told from an 11-year old's perspective, **Understanding Ken** recounts more than just the passage of a B.C. boy's PeeWee hockey season in the early 1970s. Egged on by his loud, expletive-hurling father, his immediate goal is to reach the B.C. Championships. But there are more difficult "seasons" he must pass through as well; the sour divorce of his parents and, perhaps most disturbing, goaltender Ken Dryden's traitorous retirement from the Montreal Canadiens. McCormack's writing is very energetic and extremely funny. There's something quintessentially Canadian about **Understanding Ken** that will appeal to those who don't know Dryden from a penalty box.

### **Factoring Humanity**

By Robert J. Sawyer

Tor; \$31.95

The story sounds hokey — an intelligent race from beyond the stars communicate the instructions for building a machine or ship that can travel through space and time to put the traveller in touch with the most intimate thoughts of other beings. But this is a terrific read, even — perhaps especially — for people who don't like science fiction. It explores the whole idea of global empathy and Jungian psychology.

# Science, soul and real people

## Accessible science fiction

### Factoring Humanity

By Robert Sawyer  
Tor Books, 352 pages, \$33

### Reviewed by Marc Piche

A Winnipeg freelance writer

**C**RACK OPEN a novel by Toronto science fiction writer Robert Sawyer and you will often find people trying to address an intensely personal crisis with the help or hindrance of technology.

In the end, you can be certain Sawyer's characters will find very human answers, but the confrontations between science and soul in between are often worth the ride.

In previous books, Sawyer has written about the anguish of a childless couple that wants a family and the relationship of a married couple facing the results of infidelity. These are hardly the expected themes of science fiction novels.

In his 10th book, *Factoring Humanity*, Sawyer tackles the sensitive issue of the possibility of false or implanted memories of child abuse, set against a backdrop of quantum computing and messages from outer space.

Kyle Graves and Heather Davis are



**Sawyer has written a novel that is accessible and interesting.**

a separated couple living in Toronto some time early in the next century. When they are confronted by their daughter's explosive accusation that

her father abused her as a child, issues of trust, truth and family secrets are brought to the fore. The parents, both professors at the

University of Toronto, have to deal with the crisis through their own disciplines. Graves is studying how to use quantum physics theory to build supercomputers. Since quantum theory suggests alternative universes running parallel to our own, he is tortured by the possibility that somehow, somewhere, there is a Kyle Graves who could have hurt the daughter he loves.

Davis is a psychologist studying indecipherable messages that have been received from aliens for the previous decade.

Similar to the protagonist of the recent movie *Contact*, Davis cracks a code that describes how to build an extraordinary machine. This vehicle sends her on a journey, not to outer space, but to the inner space of the mind and of the Jungian collective unconscious where the secret of her daughter's abuse can be confronted.

**O**N THE surface, Sawyer's work offers wish fulfillment through technology, similar to the work of the late Philip K. Dick. But like Dick, Sawyer's technology often raises more complications than it solves.

To his credit, Sawyer's characters still have to figure things out for themselves and face human consequences. This intimacy keeps the drama personal and meaningful.

Sawyer's combination of real people and real issues and the placement of the story in the very near future makes *Factoring Humanity* an accessible and interesting read, even for people who wouldn't normally try science fiction.

---

---

# It's murder being an alien

Review by  
MARGARET CANNON

**C**ROSOVERS — blendings of science fiction and crime fiction — have been around for decades. Arthur Conan Doyle tossed a bit of mystery into his Professor Challenger series of stories and Harlan Ellison charmed readers with the Lord Darcy investigations in a world where magic was legal and science outlawed. More recently, Sean Stewart's *Passion Play* explored the relationship between state religion and politics, while E. D. James set *The Children Of Men* in a society on the edge of extinction.

Now we have *Illegal Alien*, Robert J. Sawyer's ninth novel, and while I can't say definitively that the SF is great, I can certainly tell you that this is one fine courtroom drama, with enough twists in the plot to keep any mystery fan flipping the pages.

The story begins with a classy First Contact. U.S. presidential science adviser Frank Nobile and his long-time friend Cletus Calhoun are en route to meet the pilot of a ship that has landed in the Atlantic. The pilot, when he appears, is "not humanoid." He has four eyes, four appendages arranged around a circular body, and tentacles weaving on his

head. His name is Hask and he is a Tosok from a planet near Alpha Centauri. His mother ship is moored just outside Earth's atmosphere, damaged

---

## ILLEGAL ALIEN

By Robert J. Sawyer

Ace, 292 pages, \$20.95

---

and in need of repair. He and his fellows have come in peace.

Frank and Clete, along with all other scientists on Earth, are eager to see Tosok engineering, learn about Tosok biology, life and culture. Hask and his six crewmen are given the run of Earth, travelling from city to city, meeting with dignitaries, seeing Earth's wonders, sharing Earth science. But then, in Los Angeles, Clete Calhoun is found dead, savagely murdered and mutilated.

The evidence points to a Tosok. In fact, the evidence points to Hask, but what could have induced him to kill a man he called his friend? There is no motive, nothing in either Clete's or Hask's backgrounds to explain the crime. Hask insists he is innocent, but a crusading district attorney wants the alien tried and convicted, and he's ready to go for the death

penalty. Frank Nobile believes Hask is innocent and asks Dale Rich, famed civil rights attorney, to defend the alien.

This novel is far too good to attempt to summarize. Let's just say that Sawyer delves into all sorts of strange and wonderful conflicts, including the war between science and belief, and just what God may or may not be. There are fascinating philosophical discussions between unbelieving humans and aliens from a world where God is not personal but universal. There is a chapter on the moral issues, as well as the scientific problems, of how the state will, if necessary, execute an extraterrestrial, and courtroom dramas and confrontations that put Perry Mason and John Grisham to shame.

Sawyer, one of Canada's finest SF authors, has already won the Aurora and Nebula awards for science fiction, as well as an Arthur Ellis award from the Crime Writers of Canada for a short story. Expect to see *Illegal Alien* shortlisted for an Arthur Ellis this year, and for my vote, it's the best Canadian mystery of 1997.

---

*Margaret Cannon writes The Globe's Murder & Mayhem column.*

---

# Sawyer returns to his roots

## Out of this World

HENRY MIETKIEWICZ

Of course, unless you share Sawyer's understanding of the implications of certain astronomical data, you won't come close to collaring the crook. But at the same time you'll feel Sawyer has avoided the temptation to sucker you by withholding key facts about the extra-terrestrials.

Finally, sci-fi fans should note that *Illegal Alien* is as much a true science-fiction novel as it is a mystery. The climax contains not just the unmasking

of the murderer, but a clever comment on humans' assumptions that the first E.T.s will all share the same motives and goals in establishing intergalactic contact with us.

Among some other current releases worth noting:

■ The relentless deterioration of Anne Rice continues in her latest novel, *Violin* (Knopf, 289 pages, \$32.95). Burdened by plotting that's nearly incoherent and prose that sounds like bad grade-

school poetry, Rice spins a hallucinatory tale about a supernatural stranger who uses music in a bid to rescue a be-reaved woman from depression.

So many science fiction accolades have been showered on Toronto's Robert J. Sawyer that it's all too easy to forget his prizes include a 1993 Arthur Ellis Award from the Crime Writers of Canada.

That makes Sawyer a *bona fide* man of mystery. In fact, three of his earliest and most memorable novels, known as *The Quintaglio Trilogy*, were really an epic act of detection involving a complicated cosmic puzzle about the origin and destiny of a race of dinosaur-like aliens.

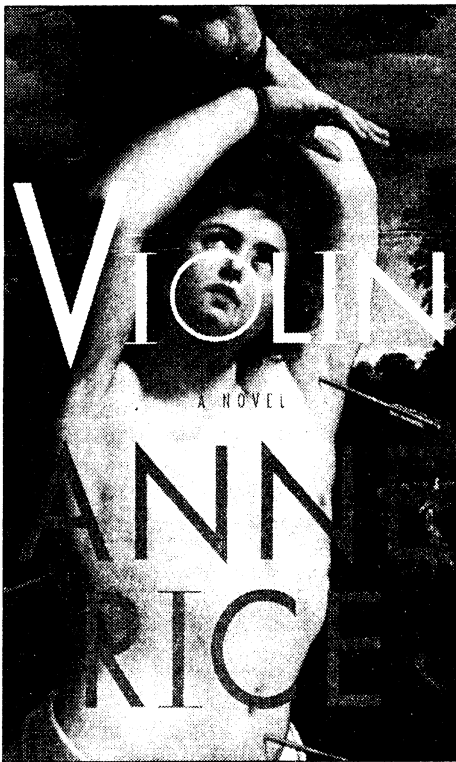
So it should come as no surprise to find Sawyer's latest book, *Illegal Alien* (Ace, 292 pages, \$30.95), embracing clues, criminals and cross-examination in an immensely satisfying whodunit.

The sci-fi twist is that the chief suspect in the brutal slaying of a Carl Sagan-ish

pop\_scientist is none other than the first alien to set foot — or should that be paw? limb? pod? — on Earth in the not-too-distant future.

The big danger in this kind of cross-over is that it can easily become a giant cheat. Since science fiction authors regularly rewrite the rules of physics and physiology, readers may feel they have no chance matching wits against a writer who can arbitrarily warp reality to suit his own purposes.

Pro that he is, Sawyer seems aware of these misgivings. That's why he takes pains to ensure that everything we need to know about the aliens is exposed early in the novel and that every piece of info pointing to the killer is right there in plain sight.



ROBERT SAWYER

Henry Mietkiewicz appears monthly in *The Star's* Saturday book pages, rotating with columns devoted to small press publishing, romance and poetry.

Sawyer's  
hero has

# TIME BOMB

in his body  
waiting  
to go off

HAYDEN TRENHOLM

# In

Frameshift, Robert J. Sawyer has taken the next step in his evolution as a writer, not only as one of Canada's finest science fiction novelists, but also as one of our best story-tellers. Not that this book will make the short list for a governor-general's award — but

that says more about the way lists are compiled than the quality of Sawyer's fiction.

This is a finely crafted novel with a riveting plot and complex characters that one can care about deeply. More importantly, it deftly explores issues of bio-ethics and moral philosophy that are vital in a technological society plummeting towards the 21st century.

Set minutes in the future, Frameshift tells the story of Pierre Tardivel, Canadian geneticist, in his frantic race to "be remembered" as a scientist before the deadly biological time bomb in his body goes off. For Tardivel may have inherited the gene for Huntington's Chorea, an incurable neurological disorder.

Although a test for the gene is available, Tardivel, like many in this situation, chooses not to take it, preferring uncertainty to a certain death sentence.

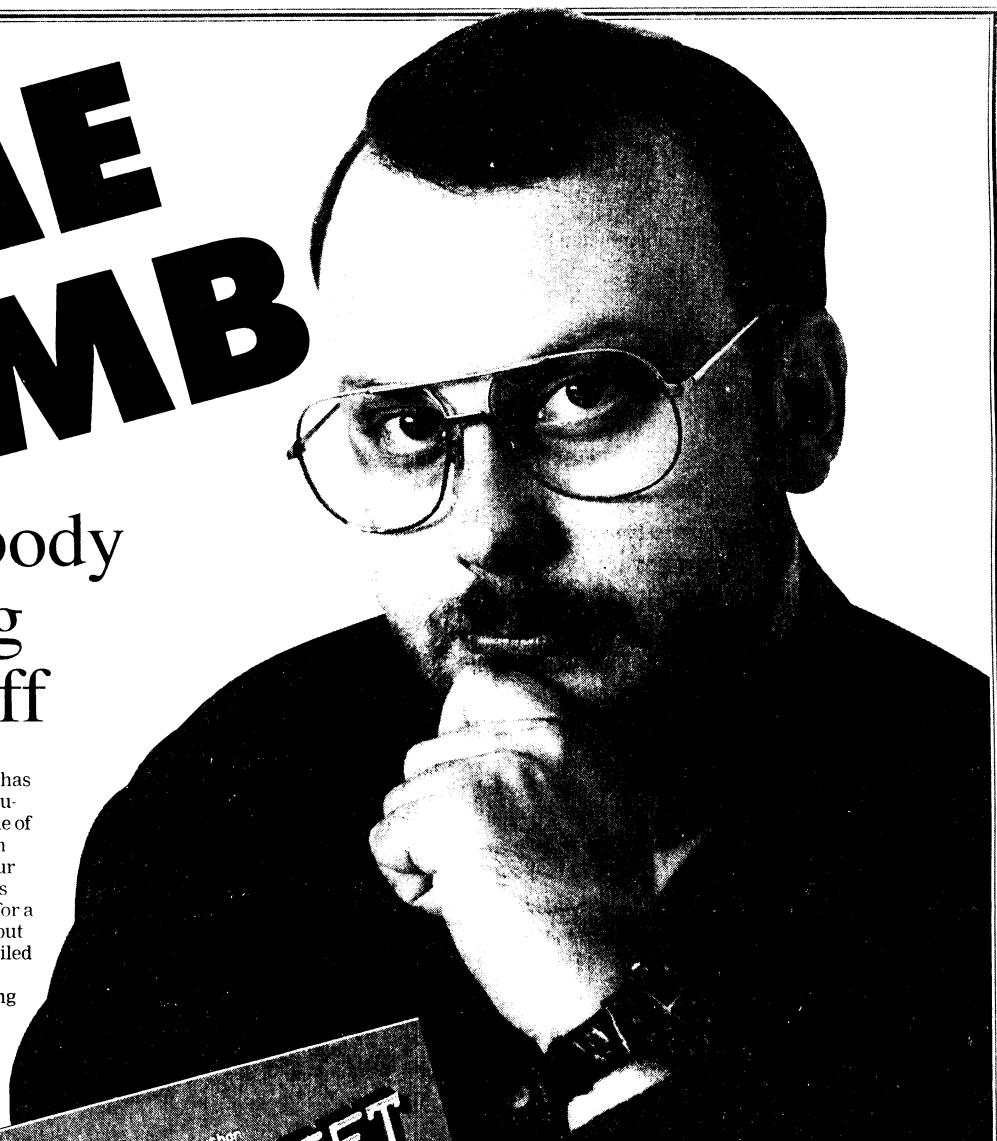
Yet, someone else seems to have made the decision for him.

In the opening scene of the novel, Tardivel is the victim of a violent attack from a known neo-Nazi. From that point on, we are taken on an amazing ride of mystery, intrigue, scientific speculation

and human courage.

At the recent ConVersion Science Fiction convention in Calgary, another leading SF writer, Kim Stanley Robinson, suggested the scientific process is not amenable to fictional treatment.

To some extent, Sawyer has proven him wrong. By using the metaphor of the murder



Carolyn Clink photo

**SAWYER:** Author takes short jump into the future



investigation, told in parallel to the scientific activities of Tardivel, Sawyer succeeds in illuminating aspects of science as a human activity — a process of gathering facts, proposing theories and following blind alleys, thinking logically and making leaps of logic.

He also does a fine job of showing that science is driven not merely by an objective quest for the truth but by human desires and agendas, not all of them upright or moral.

Unlike many novels of the near future, this is not an apocalyptic vision of a disintegrating society (even though it is mostly set in northern California). In fact, it is a rather hopeful vision, almost a return to the golden age of science fiction that believed in the future and the potential for human development.

Perhaps this is Sawyer's Canadian upbringing showing, a belief in the potential of civil society to overcome the narrow interests of profit and bigotry to create a better world. Sawyer sees the dark side of technological change and globalization, yet remains hopeful that we, as a society, can overcome them. After reading Frameshift, so do I.

*(Trenholm is a Calgary writer.)*



GOOD  
COMPANIONS  
Popular Reference — p. 34

# QUILL & QUIRE

OCTOBER 1994 ♦ CANADA'S MAGAZINE OF BOOK NEWS AND REVIEWS ♦ \$3.75

★ **END OF AN ERA**, Robert J. Sawyer;  
\$6.50 paper 0-441-00114-9, 240 pp.,  
5½ x 7, Ace/BeJo, Oct. *Reviewed from  
unbound galleys*

Robert J. Sawyer's fifth book departs from the previous three that made up his successful Quintaglio Ascension Trilogy in that the dinosaurs — here, again, there are dinosaurs — are separated from us not by space but by time.

Most of the action in *End of an Era* takes place in the Alberta Badlands, now and long ago. But the novel displays the Thornhill, Ontario, author's breadth of imagination and humanity. Sawyer writes in the mainstream of traditional science fiction with the scientific panache and grandeur of Arthur C. Clarke, but with the human touch of Isaac Asimov. It's not too much to say that this is one of the most accomplished SF novels of the last 10 years.

Brandon Thackeray is a Canadian paleontologist some 15 years in our future who is chosen by the National Research Council, along with his friend and rival-in-love Miles Jordan, to go back to the Mesozoic. The pair is ill-matched, the project is ill-fated, and the whole thing is ill-funded, which introduces opportunities to take shots at the Canadian-ness of the thing.

Thackeray and Jordan's goal is to discover the real reason why dinosaurs suddenly died out. That becomes the least of the scientific riddles uncovered (or created) as they tinker with the past. Indeed, Sawyer "explains" dinosaur gigantism and the odd geology at the end of the Mesozoic; he also manages to cover the creation of the asteroids, the genesis of viruses, and some neat speculation on the search for extraterrestrial life. The science is audacious; informed, and compelling in the fictional context, and time travel is treated with ingenuity and dignity.

All this talk of science is not to slight Sawyer's talents as a storyteller or as a creator of characters. *End of an Era* shows that he is accomplished at both. Since his first novel, *Golden Fleece* (1990), Sawyer has become a polished, exciting writer. If there is a fault found with *Era*, it may be that his polish makes this novel seem deceptively simple, even easy. But that's a problem that great writers have faced forever. The up side is much greater, even there: this book is both accessible and entertaining. — *by R. John Hayes, a writer who lives in Devon, Alberta.*

★ *Starred reviews indicate books of exceptional merit*

# The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction

## Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

*Golden Fleece*, Robert J. Sawyer  
(Warner/Questar, paper 250 pp, \$4.95)

THE COLONY ship *Argo* is completely controlled by a computer named Jason, who is a good deal smarter than he needs to be. In fact, he has so much spare time that he has found a hobby — trying to decode the binary message received from aliens only three months before the *Argo* took flight. After all, he was taking his ship and his people out into space; it was important to know who else was out there. So important, in fact, that the artificial-intelligence computers that first detected the message decided to keep its existence a secret from human beings until *after* the *Argo* left — so that the scientists aboard the ship wouldn't be tempted to stay home and work on the message from space.

Now, though, Jason has started killing. Not randomly, though; he kills only those who are coming too close to finding out a secret that he is determined to keep. *Golden Fleece* centers around the efforts of an engineer named Aaron to solve the mystery of the death of Diana, the ex-wife whose contract he recently neglected to renew. Jason has all the advantages. Not only does he control all the ship's systems, but also he has complete access to the neural-net simulations of all the crew. That means he knows every painful little memory in Aaron's mind. He knows how his opponent thinks. Aaron doesn't have much of a chance to solve the mystery; and if he does solve it, he has even less chance

of going on living.

What Sawyer sets up in the *Golden Fleece* is a damn good science fiction mystery. What he delivers is much more. Yes, the mystery is resolved to our perfect satisfaction. But more important, Sawyer gives us something far more rare in this age of the quotidian hero: a genuine tragedy. It is no accident that he invokes Greek myth in the title of the book. Sawyer is willing to play on the same field as Aeschylus and Euripides, and he proves himself equal to the task. Jason is, in my opinion, the deepest computer character in all of science fiction, which takes nothing away from HAL and MYCROFT. And Aaron is, in my opinion, one of the most well-drawn, fallible, *human* detectives I've encountered in mystery fiction — in a league with, say, Rendell's Inspector Wexford. And because Sawyer is clearly *not* setting up a detective series, Aaron is able to go through genuine self-discovery and transformation during the course of the novel.

*Golden Fleece* has, in its 250 pages, more than most novels twice its length: Tragedy. Mystery. Character. Since Sawyer is a long-time writer about hi-tech subjects, it has a completely believable milieu. And can he write? Yes — with near-Asimovian clarity, with energy and drive, with such grace that his writing becomes invisible as the story comes to life in your mind.

This is a book you won't want to miss. It won't be a snob hit — it's too accessible and exciting for the li-fi types to take it to their bosoms. In-

stead, it's the kind of book that you might as well buy two copies of in the first place — one to read and keep, and one to shove at your friends, saying, "Read this! Now!"

I say you won't want to miss this book, but there's a very good chance that you *will*. This is Sawyer's first novel, after all, and his short fiction has appeared only in *Amazing* (which is *like* being published) and in Canadian publications, so you probably haven't heard of him. Worse yet, *Golden Fleece* is scheduled as a December book from Warner/Questar, and it *isn't* their lead title (the lead is number five in some dragon series). In case you didn't notice, the December time slot is the kiss of death in science fiction — books published then are routinely ignored for awards; there's not even time for the title to float upward on the Nebula recommendations and attract attention that way. Warner isn't giving it much push as a secondary book; the cover is fairly ordinary hi-tech stuff; there's no commercial hype to alert you to the fact that this book is something special; you'll have about a month to pick it up before it gets swept off the shelves to make way for the January books.

All you get is this review — and any other reviews that might come out. But that's our job, isn't it? To find the good ones and tell you about them.

How good is *Golden Fleece*? A friend of mine — an English professor — used to ask, whenever he saw me, "Why are you still writing that space-ship stuff?" Now I can answer. Because *this* is possible. ■

---

Orson Scott Card is the Hugo- and Nebula-Award Winning Author of *Ender's Game* and *Speaker for the Dead*.