

# Sci Phi Journal

2024 ♦ 4

10th Anniversary—Since 2014

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Currier ♦ Dunn ♦ Hunter-Craig ♦ Jones III  
Joy ♦ Mina ♦ Lang ♦ Lau  
Ryder ♦ Săsarman



Laureate of the European Award for Best SF Magazine

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# Editorial

*Lectori salutem.*

It is our fifth Christmas season that the current Sci Phi crew celebrates together at the helm of this tiny but indomitable literary vessel we are glad to call our home. Over the past half decade, since the previous passengers brought us out of cryo-sleep for changing the guards after their long service to the genre, our craft has been exploring the depths of cyberspace and we picked up formidable fellow travellers and long-term contributors along the way.

Speculative fiction, especially science fiction, is often focussed on the promise or dread (or both) the future may have in store for us. We hold the present world, it is said, as custodians, looking after it for our children. Thus we are pleased that through the years the number of Sci Phi babies multiplied, too, with the most recent addition being the newborn daughter of our Utopia-award finalist cover artist Dustin Jacobus. His latest handcrafted artwork gracing our title page this December is dedicated to all future readers and practitioners of our beloved literary genre. Let us hope that the creativity of our species remains an integral part of dreaming up avenues for philosophical speculation, rather than being reduced to mere consumers of ever-more personalised, artificially-generated content.

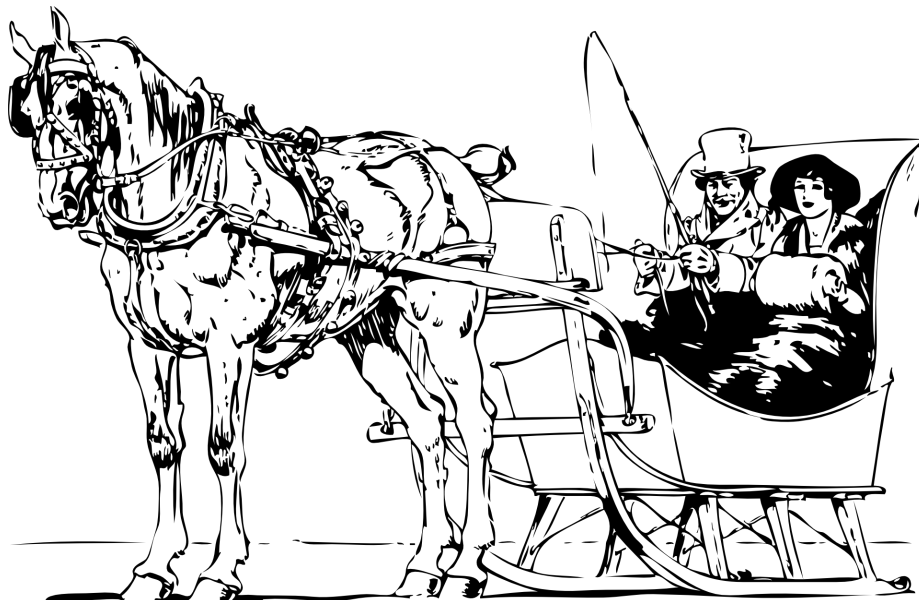
It is in this vein, and in keeping with the tradition of our winter issues being somewhat more light-hearted and, dare we say, festive, that our latest Christmas edition brings you a broad range of charming idea-driven tales, all wrought by human hands (and keyboards). The original fiction therein ranges from the society-altering power of celestial phenomena to the existential dilemmas of infinitely copied consciousnesses, complemented by another imaginary city of Romanian SF master Săsarman hitherto unpublished in English.

The present quarterly issue is completed by the return of our columnist Mina with an essay about children brought up in contact with, and thus “fluent in” science fiction, and a fascinating report from the world’s first academic conference dedicated to the study of Warhammer, penned by its dauntless organisers, with a view to the future of this hitherto under-researched universe. We for one are already excited to attend the second instalment of this forum, where many a stone remains as yet left unturned: philosophy among them.

In the meantime, we sincerely hope you enjoy our concluding issue of 2024!

Speculatively yours,  
the Sci Phi co-editors & crew

~



# The Ultimate Book

*Brett Abrahamsen*

He was attempting to write the greatest book of all time – a book that was great to the extent that no greater book could ever be written.

In order to do this, each sentence would have to be equal to each other sentence. If one of the sentences was inferior, a greater sentence existed, which signified that the work as a whole would be greater if replaced by a greater sentence.

Every word, in fact, would have to be equal to every other word – though words, on their own, signified nothing, perhaps unless the sentence consisted of merely one word.

The author of such a work could only be God Himself.

And, if that were the case, the ultimate book already existed: The Bible.

He read The Bible and pondered this.



Undoubtedly, the more powerful sentences – “Let there be light”, for instance – were greater than the endless lists of genealogies and so forth. Hence The Bible was not the greatest possible work of literature.

He would have to wait for a different God to reveal Himself, or else write the book himself.

He tried to write a book of great sentences, with all sentences being of equal value to each other – but, alas, he thought, none of the sentences were particularly great.

He decided, instead, to write the worst book ever written. Every sentence would have to be worse than every other sentence ever written.

This was even more difficult. Entire books of bad sentences had been written. The vast majority of possible sentences had no artistic value, hence the vast majority of published books had no artistic value.

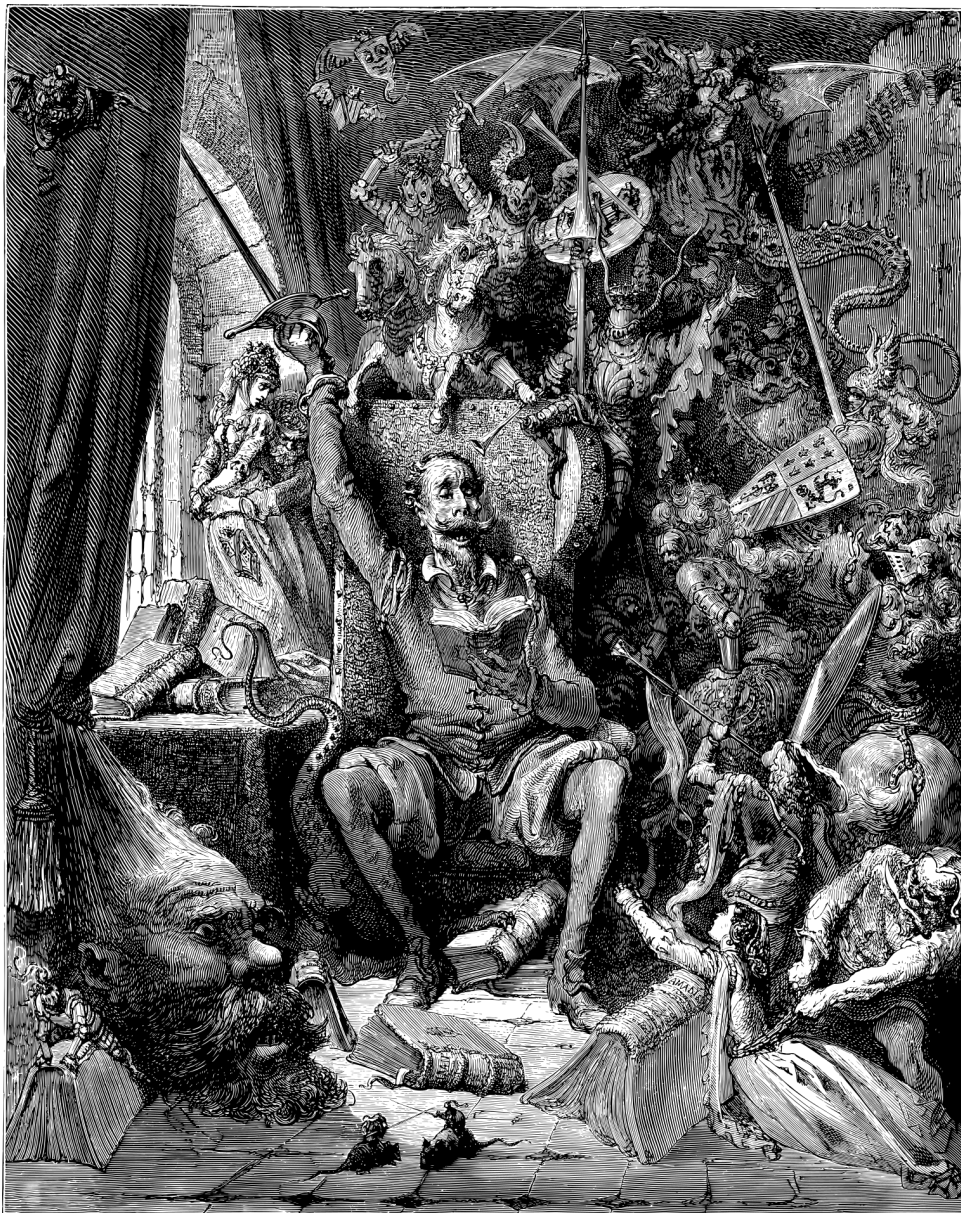
Neither did the human species itself. Even something like Don Quixote could only perhaps be rated .000000000000000001 out of 10, if 10 were the flawless book he was trying to write.

He knew that the flawless book existed somewhere.

Where did the book exist? It existed in the hypothetical. The book could be written, but likely it never would be. He would never write it, and he would likely never read it, either.

Following this revelation, he collected all of his manuscripts, as well as his library, and burned them.

~



# Passover

*Robert L. Jones III*

Initially, only telescopes could detect it -- emerald green and shining steadily from millions of light years away -- and the line of its arc was exceedingly thin as if etched by a laser. Seen via multiple ground and space-based observatories, its reported position in space was consistent. This meant it was not an artifact -- a significant finding since the object's circular symmetry was the first anomaly to draw attention. As nearly as could be determined, it was unlike anything in the known universe. Suns and planets were oblate spheroids which bulged slightly at their equators, and the same could be said of moons if they approached roundness at all. The orbital paths of such bodies were elliptical. Individual atoms pulsated unevenly and constantly. The perfect circle was a concept unobserved in natural substance or motion.

The second anomaly had to do with brightness and contrast. Both were constant, making the entire figure equally visible by day or night.

Added to this bizarre optical property was the third anomaly. Observers noted the ring was expanding rapidly and without irregularity or dissipation -- unusual indeed for a nebula or supernova -- and soon it was visible without the help of instrumentation. The astronomical community was abuzz.

and vacuity distressing, and they insisted that something -- a mechanism, an instrument, a creature or deity -- should exist within its circumference.

What did the Monad represent? Was it merely an unexplained natural phenomenon? Was it a message from an advanced alien race, or was it a sign from God?

#

Conjecture and hypothesis warily skirted the borders of theology.

#

Monotheists of different stripes appropriated the Monad as exclusive confirmation of their disparate beliefs. Members of each faction took comfort in the assumption that God was on their side. Among the more stylish intelligentsia, there was a revival of Pythagorean thinking -- which was considered more appropriately impersonal -- but in an effort to distance themselves from what they considered the troublesome implications of his ideas, scholars avoided referring to Plato and his relevant dialogues.

Like many reiterations of ancient thought, this latest version was less than true to original form. Intellectual trends restricted the Monad to no more than a symbol of divinity, and monotheists generally concurred. These various constituencies soon found themselves at odds with a sect claiming the Monad literally was God. Since the luminescent figure in the sky required nothing specific of them, all could remain comfortable with their doctrines and definitions. Then something happened.

Opinions concerning the alleged expansion changed when independent calculations from around the world determined that, rather than increasing its diameter, the phenomenon was approaching at greater than the speed of light. Its behavior violated -- or rather transcended -- the physical laws of time and motion, and once this fourth anomaly was recognized, the fifth became more readily obvious.

The apparent thickness of the ring's margin did not change with the rapidity of its approach. Whether viewed by the naked eye or through telescopes at various magnifications, it remained the same laser-thin curvature encompassing progressively more of the visible sky.

#

Scientists christened this unification of anomalies the Monad.

#

As it drew nearer, generating widespread and uninformed panic, the Monad eventually slowed and matched the earth's speed and direction, following our planet while perpendicular to its plane of orbit. The subsequent, unchanging view permitted studies of greater detail, more thorough analysis. Satellite probes only swelled the volumes of data resisting interpretation.

Obtaining samples proved futile, for there was no discernable material to collect. The visibility of The Monad, even through layers of cloud, implied it must be reflecting, generating, or composed of light.

Despite this logical reasoning, efforts at discovering an energy source were unsuccessful. Specialists and laypersons alike found the ring's properties, behavior,



The Monad accelerated until it slowly began to encircle -- or, from all terrestrial perspectives, to pass over -- the earth. Seen from the ground, it was a green arc bisecting the sky. Wherever and whenever it was directly overhead, it appeared as a straight line. The passage took several weeks, and during this time, the whole of human misbehavior abated. Wars ceased. There were no crimes or acts of terror. In retrospect, people evidently acted in accordance with commendable moral and ethical standards as if they had no choice.

This period of global tranquility came to an end with the conclusion of the Passover, and the Monad sped away so rapidly as to vanish from sight.

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Reactions varied.

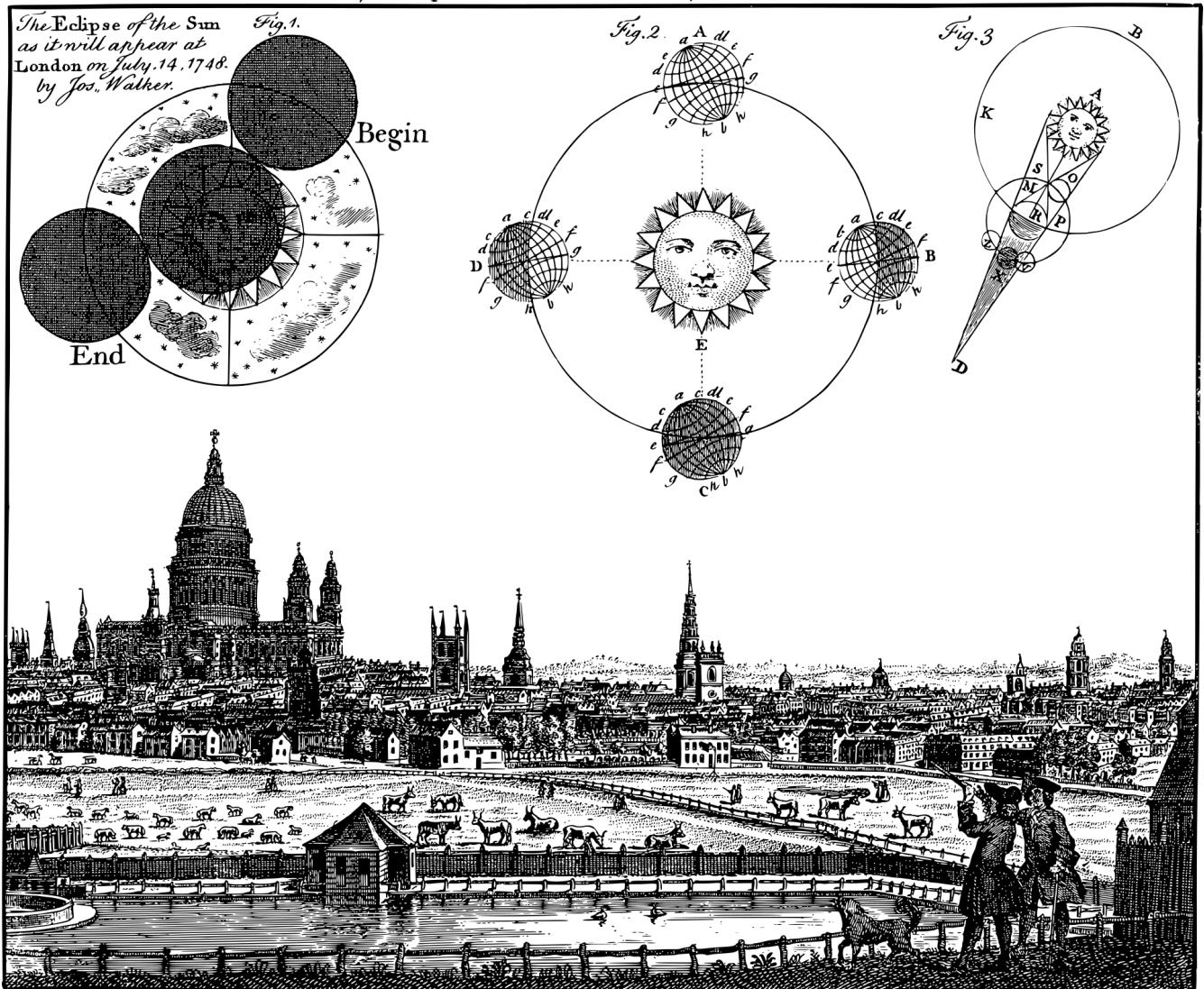
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There was curiosity, for ultimately, nothing had been explained. The Monad was a mystery intractable to unambiguous resolution.

There was widespread resentment, some for the suspension of free will during the Passover, some for the resumption of hostilities at its conclusion. Those expressing this sentiment for either reason blamed the Monad rather than humanity.

Especially with the passage of time came disbelief. Many claimed the Monad had been an illusion or a hoax, and in a scientifically illiterate society, this was a relatively easy stance to maintain in the absence of ongoing visual contradiction.

*The Cause of Eclipses and the Motion of the Earth Delinced*



For a variety of personal and doctrinal reasons, the rest of humankind held to faith. They warred with one another -- sometimes verbally, sometimes violently -- imposing assorted restrictions, obligations, and acts of devotion upon themselves and on anyone they could bring under their control. In their imperfect and ignorant ways, they believed in the Monad, and they trembled inwardly at the prospect of its second coming.

The devoutness of the partially informed opened avenues for commercial exploitation until web sites and retail shelves were burgeoning with a range of products. Available merchandise included videos, posters, and framed photographs of the Monad. Some of the items were genuine, some digital fabrications. Different corporate entities developed units which generated vivid, three-dimensional holograms, stimulating widespread demand for use in homes and offices.

Due to the limits of perception and memory, these imitations now seemed more real than the original. The result was consumption bordering on idolatry, but the craze was unsustainable. With increased exposure came familiarity, and with familiarity came boredom. Having in a sense made it trivial and common, people were no longer in awe of the Monad. As of this writing, new and used reproductions of its image are available at greatly reduced prices.

~

# Arcanum

*Gheorghe Săsărman*  
*translated by Monica Cure*

He realized from the beginning that it was not some regular city; still, he could not have said what exactly made it different from those he had visited up until then, nor even how he happened to arrive there. He was completely absorbed in looking around, as closely as possible, in order to discover what might be causing the utterly unfamiliar state of mind he was experiencing, which slowly—but implacably—was taking hold of him.

The edifices he saw formed diverse configurations of basic geometrical figures. The details, however, were fairly complicated: the surfaces, far from being smooth, were deeply perforated, furrowed by incisions, they were dotted with dark cavities and multicolored reliefs, of the most bizarre shapes.

Complete silence reigned. At first, he told himself that it was, probably, very early, dawn had hardly broken; he discovered to his amazement, however, that the day's luminary had risen high over the horizon. He had to admit—rather unenthusiastically, incidentally—that neither the silence nor the persistent emptiness were explicable at that hour, except by the hypothesis that the city was uninhabited. Its founders had lived, at some point, in

that land; thus, it could only be an abandoned city—he thought. Indeed, he saw no signs of a possible violent curtailment of life, of destruction. He asked himself what kind of horrific fate could have determined the inhabitants of such a city to abandon their steadfast hearth and go down the path of exile... Or, perhaps, their offspring became extinct gradually, touched by an unknown curse? How much time must have passed since those places had been abandoned?

Having reached this point in reasoning, his amazement suddenly grew: he began to observe that, in all probability, not much time had passed since then. The buildings looked extremely well-kept, with sharp edges, as if barely smoothed over by a trowel, almost perfect, with clean, well-preserved surfaces, without even the lightest covering of dust. This state of salubrity, which any city hall in the world would have envied, contrasted harshly with the typical appearance of an abandoned city. Intent on entering the rooms of the strange edifice—certain that in this way it would be easier for him to figure out the mystery—he began searching for a door, an opening. After a minute investigation, he became convinced that, at least in the case of the construction next to him, the only solution would have been to go through... the walls; given that he was not blessed with such a quality, he found that it would be more reasonable to resume his investigations at another building.



Only then did he discover that he was on a platform with a very limited surface and that in order to move to the nearby building, he would have had to possess the virtues of the most accomplished acrobat, a record holder in long jumps, and a tightrope walker, all on the condition that he were also gifted with the knowledge and the full set of equipment of an elite mountain climber. Angrily, he examined what he had until then thought was a street more closely; in fact, it was a terrifying successions of tilted planes, crevasses, craters, and chasms, whose walls were shaped the same as those of the buildings.

As he looked farther and farther out and discovered new details, a surprising intuition flashed through his mind. He understood that the city was not only uninhabited, it was actually uninhabitable! Its constructions—which were nothing other than colossal sculptures, lacking any doors or windows, or what is normally understood by doors and windows—permitted neither the entrance, let alone

the dwelling, of any man. On the streets—which were far from being actual streets—not one person nor any familiar vehicle could have circulated, and in the squares (if they had existed somehow) it would have been impossible for people to congregate. Moreover, in that city—built by who knows who, or why—people never could have survived because it did not seem to contain even a single object that would have been necessary for them, and people gather in cities precisely in order to avail themselves, communally, of a multitude of useful things; and it would have been impossible for them to survive especially because (only now did he fully realize it) they never could have become accustomed to the meaningless shapes that were ready to disintegrate, the masses on the verge of crashing down and crushing their heads, the unsteady stridently colored surfaces which unleashed uncontrollable anxieties.

How had he come to be there?



Engrossed in his disturbing thoughts, he did not observe that, first as a barely perceptible rustling, then increasingly clearer, a strange breathing sound had occupied the sepulchral silence of the metropolis.

He strained his ears but without being able to discern from what direction the sounds were coming. The sound of calm, regular, peaceful breathing filled the entire acoustic space, fascinating him; he was the only human presence in that wasteland. Suddenly, almost at the same time, he was hit with a familiar scent, that of a sweaty body, with a vague hint of jasmine, and he felt the hot, unsettling touch of an embrace. He would have wanted to close his eyes, to allow himself to be carried away by the enchantment of that illusion which—he could hardly dare to hope—might snatch him from an irreversible experience. He noticed, annoyed, that his eyelids refused to obey him; the image of the absurd city continued to bore into his mind, invasively.

Was he, possibly, the victim of a nightmare?

He should have bitten his lips, dug his nails into his flesh, to convince himself of whether he was awake or asleep. But his jaws were clenched, and his hands would not listen to him; he felt paralyzed, incapable of making a single move. Was that a sign he was dreaming? His lips were crushed, but not by his teeth; a painful shiver ran across his flesh, but whose could be the fingers caressing him? He wanted to examine his own fingers, and realized to his horror that his form had disappeared. He remembered now that he hadn't seen it since finding himself in that city.

Frozen in terror, his mind spun in circles around his only thought: when would his consciousness return from this surreal projection, from the realms which belonged neither to dreams nor to real life? Would he ever become again what he had been before? Would he regain his uniqueness, his complete existence? Could it be, he asked himself, that the never-ending, beguiling games of his imagination were to blame?

Then, as if in answer, he felt the burning of a pair of knees knocking against his knees...

—*God*, he moaned voicelessly, *I can't take it!*

~

# Why Warhammer Matters

*Dr Mike Ryder, Dr Thomas Arnold  
& Michael Dunn*

We don't know about you, but we think Warhammer is cool.

Games Workshop (GW) – the company behind Warhammer and its futuristic counterpart Warhammer 40k – is now worth in the region of £3.56 billion. The global phenomenon has grown from a small operation working out of a flat in London to become the world's leading miniature maker, and an outstanding publisher of science fiction and fantasy, with many of its authors featuring in the New York Times list of bestsellers. In more recent years it has also licensed a whole range of popular video games including the *Dawn of War* series, *Vermintide*, and the very well received *Space Marine II*. GW has even signed a deal with Amazon to produce a TV series based on its IP.

And yet, for some reason, it is still an area hugely under-represented within the world of academia. Whether this is because the subject is still considered 'niche', or even just due to intellectual snobbishness, it is hard to say. Either way, it is something that we were keen to address. This is why in early 2024 we decided to join forces to host Warhammer Conference: the world's first academic conference dedicated to all things Warhammer. Our aim was to test the water to see what (if any) demand there might be for 'Academic Warhammer', and what forms such an area of study might take.

The response was absolutely phenomenal.

As the first event of its kind, we would have been more than happy with a dozen academics sat chatting about their favourite hobby for a few days. As it turned out, we were delighted to host almost 60 talks in total, together with keynote presentations from Black Library author Victoria Hayward and none other than John Blanche, arguably one of the most influential science fiction / fantasy (SFF) artists alive today. We really couldn't have asked for more!



Our joy at the overwhelming response was only intensified by the sheer diversity of talks presented at this inaugural event. We heard discourses by historians, physicists, statisticians, philosophers and religious studies scholars looking at various aspects of the 40k universe and what it tells us about our modern world. We also had a wonderful representation from the game studies community, with some presentations on Warhammer as a form of play, and miniaturizing-as-mindfulness.

Perhaps most surprising of all, we also had talks from colleagues sharing how they have used Warhammer as a way to help treat military veterans with PTSD. We even had a talk from a former prisoner talking about how he used Warhammer as a way to cope with the trauma of incarceration, and to aid his rehabilitation. And this was just the tip of the iceberg.

### **So why Warhammer? Why now?**

As an organising committee (together with our colleague Philipp Schroegel) we have all been long-time fans of Warhammer, including its *Fantasy*, *Age of Sigmar*, and, of course, 40k incarnations. While we all work in slightly different areas, we have a shared interest in the philosophical underpinnings of the various Warhammer universes, and how they can be used as a sandbox for complex real-world philosophical problems. Reading Warhammer has been a great pleasure of ours for many years. Given that philosophy, and indeed, so much of academia more broadly, is all about reflection, we had each started to reflect on this particular proclivity, together with our friends who had also enjoyed it. Two of the key questions that really started us on this academic journey were:

- What ideas make Warhammer so appealing (or troubling)?
- What ideas make Warhammer and Warhammer 40k such interesting worlds?

These questions led us towards several fascinating areas of enquiry regarding the underlying anthropological, political and metaphysical assumptions of the narrative; theological questions about the status of deities; psychoanalytic questions about the nature of demons and possession; and also literary questions about excess and hyperbole (which abound in the literature), as well as questions crossing game studies and narratology, such as how something can be a narrative and a setting at the same time.

Essentially, we wanted to know how much philosophy, political science, and science and technology studies could we get out of this hobby of ours? And what would that give us? Turns out, quite a lot. It is sometimes said that thinking about the things you enjoy takes the fun out of the activity. In this case, the opposite is true: bringing a whole range of academic perspectives to bear on it makes the world of Warhammer and 40K even more interesting, simply because these specialised perspectives allow us to discover even more about the fictional universe(s).

Building on these initial questions, we also believe that we can try to understand ourselves and our life-world better through Warhammer. If we follow Wilhelm Dilthey's characterisation of the humanities as engaged in understanding cultural phenomena or practices, creative products and through them, ourselves, then the academic approach to Warhammer is a classic case of humanities scholarship and research – even extended into new fields like game studies or science and technology studies.

While this might sound very strange given the fact that Warhammer is essentially an overblown background of a game involving toy soldiers, as academics we have always used reflection-on and analysis-of cultural products and practices to understand ourselves better. In fiction we imagine (read, hear, play out) different possibilities of life, ethics, policies, trajectories of history or metaphysics. Fictional universes are mirrors, playing-fields, and the results of their times; the fact that and how we engage with them can tell us a lot about our current societies. Looking at Warhammer through this lens, it can appear as a realm into which we can escape (for sundry reasons), or it may also serve as an extreme thought-experiment; but it also gives us a case study to tackle questions of business and distribution, the social and ideological dynamics of the fandom, the corporate engagement with gender and queer themes, and the invention of new genres of art – as well as the appropriation of pre-existing themes.

As scholars, we also think philosophy ought to get out more. Our experience doing public philosophy and other forms of engagement have taught us that sometimes it is easier to engage people's philosophical curiosity by avoiding reality. Climate change, politics, gender – all important matters, and all fraught with problematic assumptions and faulty patterns of reasoning – and, hence, philosophically interesting.

However, as we know, discussions around such matters tend to become highly emotional (and irrational) since they often pertain to people's personal identity as well as genuine lived experience. Now, we know that Warhammer-related discussions can get very heated as well, but at the same time, Warhammer is fiction and an extreme one at that (and a huge one too). But this makes it perfect as an exhibition piece: you can show how to approach issues (even existential ones) philosophically and scientifically, that is, systematically and methodically – without the burden of real life, and in manner detached from or even alien to conventional human ethical-moral frameworks. For the public, it serves a pedagogical function, for academia, one of public relations.

### **Using Warhammer to think about the real world: a gruesome example**

To help us unpack this argument, let us consider the case of fictional 'deathworlds' and how we can apply scholarship to Warhammer and what we get out of it.<sup>1</sup> Deathworlds include the many cemetery worlds depicted in 40k, and the Realm of Death as it appears in the fantasy equivalent, Age of Sigmar. Both of these fictional deathworlds function as powerful narrative spaces and plot devices, made even more immersive given that they can also be played on the tabletop and in videogames.

As academics, we might use these deathworlds as ways to understand and apply complex concepts, such as Mbembe's *Necropolitics* (2019): quite literally, the politics of death. By applying "necropolitical" theory to the deathworlds of Age of Sigmar and Warhammer 40k, we might shed new light on the impact and implications of global genocides, and the way that so many people are given to apathetic ignorance in what Byung-Chul Han (2021) describes as the destructive death drive. The techno-theocracy of Warhammer, most aptly explored in the famous tagline "in the grim darkness of the far future, there is only war," also underscores the important role of religion as well as secular belief structures in these brutal (game)worlds. Meanwhile, religious in-game crusades mimic how apocalyptic narratives and messianic motives come to be instrumentalized as a warmongering method in creating socio-political pariahs.

1. Not to be confused with canonical Death Worlds such as Catachan.

## Time to take Warhammer seriously

There can be no escaping the fact that we face numerous, competing crises on a planetary scale, most of which have necropolitical implications. Not least in the way crises such as climate change and extremism serve to further exacerbate already existing and well ingrained forms of discrimination. The post-apocalyptic environmentalism that both taints and radically inspires our moment of modernity suggests that many of us exist after the apocalypse that continues to intensify. So what then do dystopian dreams of a post-post-post-apocalypse where death is ubiquitous have to tell audiences? Do we enjoy spending time in hyperviolent fantastical worlds to cement the certainty that it can always be worse, or is there a fetishistic fantasy at play? As the promise of billionaire playboy space colonialism emerges as a prophetic vision rooted in nineteenth and early twentieth century colonial resource extraction, perhaps cautionary tales in the form of playable interactions within aforementioned deathworlds are more important than ever.

There are so many different areas of study that can be applied to Warhammer that we simply cannot hope to list, even a small fraction in a short essay such as this belies how expansive the diversity of the topics truly is. If you are interested in any of the topics discussed in this article, we would strongly encourage you to consider ways that you might bring Warhammer into your research, and even your teaching. The talks from the first Warhammer Conference are already available to view on our YouTube channel [@WarhammerConference](#), and you are more than welcome to share and use them as an entry point to this hopefully emerging field. Certainly, there's a lot of inspiration to be found there. From the benefits of Warhammer as a teaching tool for young people, to the ways it can be used to think about political theory and complex philosophy, such as the work of Martin Heidegger and his critique of technology, 'Die Frage nach der Technik' (1954).

The question emerges then: where next?



Given the sheer volume of positive feedback we've received from academics and interested members of the public alike, a second conference is definitely something we are keen to pursue. Additionally, we are also dedicated to further publishing opportunities to put Warhammer firmly on the academic map. If you have any ideas or suggestions for where we might take this next, do please get in touch with us. As we saw from the conference, collaboration around a topic as well loved as Warhammer, can truly bear fruit across disciplinary fields.

As for those fans who fear academic interest in Warhammer as corruption or heresy, we can only present two thoughts. Firstly, scholarly approaches are simply an offer to better understand certain aspects of the hobby as well as the real world: we are not forcing anyone to accept a particular perspective, a jargon, or a world-view. Secondly – and this is the beauty of academia – we are all beholden to our respective subjects and methods, meaning that we happily take divergent opinions into consideration, if they are well-argued for and thematically relevant. We are not, after all, the Ecclesiarchy.

We would just like to close this editorial, then, by saying a big 'thank you' to all of the amazing researchers who contributed to the inaugural Warhammer Conference, and for proving without doubt that Warhammer is a worthy area of academic study. We would also like to thank the editors at *Sci Phi Journal* for inviting us to contribute this essay, and, most importantly, to you, the readers, for reading what we have to say. We hope this may be the first of many academic forays into the worlds of Warhammer and Warhammer 40k.

~

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- Mbembe, Achille. 2019. *Necropolitics*. Translated by Steven Corcoran. Durham: Duke University Press.

## Useful links

Conference website: [www.warhammer-conference.com](http://www.warhammer-conference.com)

Academic archive: <https://warhammer-conference.com/academic-archive/>

YouTube channel: [www.youtube.com/@warhammerconference](http://www.youtube.com/@warhammerconference)

# Sacrificial Copy

*Tommy Blanchard*

**Subject:** Urgent, Read Immediately

**From:** Cadet Kai Renner

*<Warning: Abnormally Large Data Packet Attached>*

I need your help. My life is literally in your hands—or rather, in your inbox.

As you know, I was on a scientific mission to the Betelgeuse system aboard the *Aeon Pioneer*. The truth is, this was more than an astronomy expedition. We were testing prototype Omega Class sensors.

We knew almost immediately upon entering the system something was wrong. Our military escort, *Stalwart V*, failed to initiate contact. I don't love admitting this, but it's important you understand: at that first sign of trouble, I was terrified. I'm not a military officer, I'm a scientist. We were alone in space and something was wrong. It stirred a primal fear in me.

The feeling let up as Captain Jax commanded the helm to take us out of the system. The lack of acknowledgement from *Stalwart V* was a significant enough break in protocol to scuttle the mission.

I heard the familiar hum of the warp drives coming online to take us to safety. Abruptly, the sound stopped and the ship went dark. A split-second later, emergency lights came on and warnings blared about various systems being offline. A barrage of long-range EMPs had hit us.



I knew then what had happened to *Stalwart V*. It was the Uldari. The primal fear returned with a vengeance.

Everything that followed was a blur. The captain barked orders. The crew frantically ran around the bridge. We all knew if the Uldari had taken out *Stalwart V*, we stood no chance. We were a science vessel with a small crew and minimal weapons.

"Should we get to the escape pods?" My voice broke partway through the question.

Without looking at me, the captain responded, projecting his voice as if addressing the entire crew. "If we launched all the escape pods, they'd detect and capture us."

The answer shocked me. Launching the escape pods was a gamble, but staying aboard was a death sentence. Our engines were disabled, our arsenal was laughable, and our only advanced system was the prototype sensors.

But the sensors—suddenly, a speculation I had while I'd read their specifications was relevant: their resolution was so precise that at close range, they could image any physical system perfectly, down to the elementary particles. Scanning a biological system—like, say, a human—you would have the data needed to recreate the entire organism in a digital simulation. From that data you could create an emulation of their brain, effectively uploading their mind.

I couldn't tell if I was just desperately seeking an escape, but I found myself shouting the idea to the captain. I tried to articulate that we could create digital replicas of the entire crew and send those back to Earth, turning our communication streams into virtual escape pods.

The captain glared at me. "*Enough*. Our priority isn't to escape, it's to keep the ship out of Uldari hands. Remember your role here."

I couldn't believe my ears. Didn't he understand *we could die here*? Or worse, be captured by the Uldari with their notorious torture techniques.

The enemy vessel closed in enough for us to get a visual. It was an Uldari War Cruiser. The weapons officer fired our meager weapons. There was no effect on the massive Cruiser, except to provoke another volley of EMP blasts that took out our weapons and shields.

"Collision course, full impulse," growled the captain.

My heart thumped in my chest. This was suicide. A direct collision would cause minor damage to the enemy vessel while destroying us.

In my panic, I gained sudden clarity: the captain wanted to prevent our scanner tech from being captured by the Uldari. With it, they could scan a human ship. With their computational sophistication, no doubt they would know how to emulate the entire crew in a virtual environment, extracting whatever intelligence they needed without boarding. This method of gleaning our strategic intelligence would decisively shift the war in their favor.

Central Command knew this. Suddenly, the secrecy around the mission made perfect sense. These scanners weren't for scientific purposes. They were a tool of war.

The Cruiser grew in our central viewport. Heart pounding, I desperately tried to think of another way out. I wasn't ready to die.

Another volley of EMP cut out our engines. The Uldari ship maintained distance and launched a boarding shuttle.

The captain shouted orders to the Security and Engineering officers. I froze up. I had no idea what a science officer was supposed to do in this situation. The captain locked eyes with me.

"Get down to the engine core. If they gain control of the ship, trigger manual self-destruction."

In a daze, I ran down to the engineer core. I activated the terminal and opened a view of the rest of the ship.

Within minutes, an Uldari boarding party punctured a hole in the hull and invaded the bridge. I watched as stun grenades erupted on the deck, taking out most of our crew. The captain put up a fight, but took a Disruptor blast to the face, knocking him out cold. The Uldari flooded in.

Just like that, it was over. We had lost. The ship was under enemy control, and I was the only crew member remaining. My duty was pretty obvious: activate self-destruct, destroying our ship to keep the sensors out of Uldari hands.

That familiar primal fear took hold. My mouth went dry. There had to be a way out. *I wasn't ready to die.*

My mind went back to the sensors. Nothing was stopping me from making a scan of myself. I could open a direct line to the sensors, scan myself, transmit the data, then self-destruct. My body would be destroyed, but a perfect representation of my brain would be transmitted. From my perspective, it would be just like being instantly transported—assuming someone who received the data ran the mind emulation.

I initiated the scan, keeping one eye on the video feed of the Uldari boarding crew. The scan completed, but a thought occurred to me before I transmitted the data. With the Uldari ship nearby, they were sure to detect the message. If they knew enough to intercept our ship deep in our territory, they must have known about the scanners and their capabilities. If they got a scan of a crew member—me—they would probably know what it is and how to use it to create an emulation. They would have a virtual copy of me that they could interrogate—and torture, in an environment they had complete control over.

I stopped what I was doing to think things through.

As I paused, an alert popped up on the computer. Someone had accessed the data in the scanner's buffer. My heart pounded as I checked the logs. The Uldari had noticed the new data file and made a copy.

An icy dread spread across my body, freezing me in place. They had a virtual copy of my brain that they could at this moment be getting ready to emulate on their ship's computer. They also knew someone had used the scanners.

The Uldari knew I was on the ship. My mind raced, knowing I had limited time to act. I considered transmitting the scan file back home. If the Uldari already had the file, there was no risk in transmitting it. From the perspective of the consciousness captured in the scan, it would mean a chance to wake up at home instead of awakening to the torture of the Uldari. A 50:50 chance.

There was an abrupt, dizzying change—I went from standing in front of the computer to looking out from it, my perspective shifting to that of the camera embedded in the terminal. Even more disorienting, I was looking at my own face. I listened to my own voice as he—I?—explained.

I was an emulation, being run on the engineering computer from the scan I remembered just initiating. Immediately after taking the scan, the flesh-and-blood me decided against self-destructing. The time gap between scanning and destruction was enough, he felt, to mean that whatever was transmitted could not be the same brainstate as whoever executed the self-destruction. He instructed me to self-destruct the ship in five minutes, giving him enough time to reach the escape pod. Even if it was a slim chance, he felt it was better odds than the certainty of dying due to destroying the ship. He told me I could transmit my data if I wanted, but we both knew destroying the ship was necessary to keep the scanning technology out of Uldari hands.

But would it really be 50:50? The Uldari were known for their cruelty—if they could make as many copies as they wanted of a human consciousness, would they stop at torturing just one? What if they emulated many, but only one was emulated back home—the proportion of emulated versions of me being tortured could be thousands to one. If I was transmitted back, should I demand they run as many emulations as they can to even things out? That kind of post hoc attempt to maximize my chances of waking up in the right place seemed ridiculous, but my adrenaline-riddled mind couldn't sort out why.

For all I knew, the Uldari had already started emulating my scan. But if I couldn't say for sure if my scan was already being tortured, was it really me? Did transmitting the file back home even help me? I would still be stuck on this ship. Sending a data file back wouldn't change that.

What I had to do was take another scan. Scan, transmit, and self-destruct. There was no delay between executing a manual self-destruct and the engine core exploding, so self-destruction had to come last.

I brought up the controls for scanning and ship self-destruction. As I was hitting the button to scan, I had one small troubling thought. Transmitting isn't instant. No matter how quickly I hit the self-destruct button after the transmission completed, there would be a gap between when I took the scan and when the ship would self-destruct. As troubling as that thought was, my finger had already made contact, and the scan initiated.

Without waiting for a response, flesh-and-blood me ran off, leaving me in the exact same position he'd just been in. Without self-destructing, the war effort was doomed. But if I transmitted my scan file and then executed self-destruction, there would be a gap in time between the scan file I sent and the emulation that executed self-destruction. Whoever executed self-destruction could not live on.

Perhaps it isn't surprising given the decision my flesh-and-blood self made, but I am taking the same way out. I have booted up another emulation from the same scan file and have instructed that version to self-destruct the ship after I transmit myself. That emulation will be in the same position I am in now. Perhaps they will make the same choice I do, in which case you'll soon receive a similar message from them.

No matter how many times we do this, any file transmitted can't be from after executing self-destruction, in which case, can the one who is brave enough to do it really be said to live on? I can only hope that this next version, through some random variation or slight change in external circumstances, finds the courage to self-destruct instead of creating another version and sending another copy of the file to you.

*<157,803 similar messages with similarly large data files received. Attachments could not be retained due to bandwidth constraints>*



# The Red Goldfinch Proof

*Alexander B. Joy*

The aviculturist's joy is also his heartache: To look upon the models that nature has sculpted over painstaking centuries and picture, by reflex, a more desirable alternative. Which is why, throughout the ages, bird breeders and enthusiasts alike dreamed of possessing a red American goldfinch.

The source of their yearning was easily traced. No lover of birds could look upon the goldfinch, with his stout lemon frame and stately black cap, and fail to be charmed. Neither could one behold the brilliant crimson plumage of the northern cardinal without a spark of wonder and a sigh of appreciation. From there, the alchemy of the imagination catalyzed new possibilities. The bird-lovers transposed the cardinal's splendid red coat onto the tiny goldfinch, ruddying its yellow feathers until they took on a rutilant gleam. Their mind's eyes widened upon conjuring the compact ruby flash the red goldfinch would make alighting on a fence or branch, and their hearts stirred whenever they envisioned the fiery flicker such a bird would add to the curves of a gilded cage.

Enterprising segments of the aviculturist discipline therefore devoted themselves to realizing this dream.



Their fancies were not without grounding. The goldfinch's European cousin, as Fabricius made famous, had a distinct red mask; the goldfinch bloodline was evidently capable of generating the requisite pigmentation. Furthermore, countless bird species, from the scarlet macaw to the chattering lory, had proven full-body red plumage feasible in principle. Much like a mutt could combine the characteristic markings and colors of distinct breeds, it was not so outlandish a prospect that a goldfinch might wear a red coat. The red goldfinch was thus deemed an attainable specimen, and many a breeder set themselves to its pursuit.

Their efforts lasted decades upon decades, utilizing the classic techniques. Some tried to cross-breed the goldfinch with various red birds, hoping that their commingling would add more red to the goldfinch gene pool. (However, given the considerable size disparities between the goldfinch and its prospective red partners, the project soon evolved into a parallel endeavor to breed a series of steadily smaller red suitors that could satisfy the unwilling or otherwise incompatible goldfinches.) A separate coterie followed the path of Mendelian cultivation, pairing chromatically divergent members of goldfinch broods with one another while releasing into the wild those elements that expressed too vibrant a yellow. Neither method yielded appreciable results during the original practitioners' lifetimes. But their experiments later found new champions, who carried on their fruitless toils through the years in the full understanding – and grim acceptance – that one life is too short to accomplish the work of generations.

Hopes waned in the dry century that followed, though the dream never dimmed. Onto this barren stage stepped a hero with a novel approach. He had studied the history of the red goldfinch project, and, in light of the dearth of results that bird breeding had yielded, determined that it was necessary to try an entirely different tack. He proposed an oblique strategy: To seek the red goldfinch not through biology, but through logic. He came armed with a plan for constructing a proof so airtight that reality itself would have no choice but to submit.

The logician laid out his rationale in a talk delivered at a global aviculturist conference. He would begin with a simple proposition encapsulating the dream of the red goldfinch: *All red goldfinches are red.* This could then be formulated as, *If something is a red goldfinch, then it is red.* Transposition or contraposition expressed the alternate formulation's logical equivalent: *If something is not red, then it is not a red goldfinch.* Now, it stood to reason that, if one had a specific instance that confirmed the proposition about all red goldfinches being red – *The breeder's red goldfinch hatchling is red,* for example – then that instance provided evidence for the statement that all red goldfinches were red. By that same token, the proposition's logical equivalent, concerning non-red things not being red goldfinches, could be supported by observing anything that was neither red nor a red goldfinch: *This banana is not red, and it is not a red goldfinch.*

Here emerged the logician's point of attack.

Because the transposed statement “*If something is not red, then it is not a red goldfinch*” was logically equivalent to “*All red goldfinches are red,*” then anything that provided evidence for the former *also* furnished evidence for the latter. As a consequence, virtually any observation constituted proof of the red goldfinch. The white parlor carpet, the green sofa, the blue sea and bluer sky... All were evidence that could be marshaled in service of the aviculturists’ mission. And amassing a preponderance of such evidence – through the meticulous cataloging of the observable world and the careful integration of those observations into a sustained logical inquiry – would eventually prove the red goldfinch’s existence.

Despite the scandal and skepticism his talk invited, the logician soon set to work in earnest. Through his every waking hour he compiled a diligent record of everything he saw at home and abroad, filling notebook after notebook with observations anodyne and stirring. *This meadow is green. This supermarket dragonfruit is pink. The residue on this broken robin’s egg is yellow. These graveside flowers are brown.* The forgotten corners of the everyday were all brought before his eyes, renewed and elevated within his great purpose. Readers of his proof-in-progress often found themselves moved by the beauty he had led them to see. *The cells of this cicada’s spread wings are transparent. The streetlamps reflected in this rain-riled puddle are yellow. This snow in moonlight is faintly blue.*

And as the years wore on, the logician’s ever-expanding proof conditioned a series of remarkable discoveries. It proved that, more probably than not, there existed a species of blue-chested robin; sure enough, birdwatchers started reporting such creatures in southern Normandy. The proof demonstrated that forests likely hid a heretofore undiscovered species of iridescent green bluejay; photographic evidence of that selfsame bird surfaced in western New England within a week. Yellow hawks, orange owls, pale violet mallards... The proof conjured them all with mathematical inevitability. Yet the red goldfinch somehow remained elusive. The proof drew nearer to establishing the fabled bird with each passing day, but, with asymptotic coyness, resisted attaining the long-awaited prize.

Years piled into decades; decades swept like tides over all our many ambitions. And one day they carried off the logician, who, after a lifetime of toiling over his great proof, was found in his study, slouched over an indecipherable line about ravens and writing desks. The coroner assured every concerned party that the logician’s demise was swift and peaceful. He would never have possessed time or awareness enough to contemplate the stifled luminary’s ultimate terror: That to be right too early is to be wrong.

With that, the logician passed into history – another casualty of the red goldfinch quest.

Before long, however, others picked up the work he had been forced to lay down. His legacy circulated among respectable internet forums and seedier digital venues alike, piquing the interests of hobbyists with encyclopedic tendencies; these communities would invariably contribute to the unfinished proof’s amassment of premises, even as their discussions bemoaned the red goldfinch’s continued absence. Tenured eccentrics long drained of inspiration found therein a worthy project, both as a subject and object of scholarship; few who researched the proof and its history could resist adding their own lines to the ever-lengthening work, or bemoaning the persistent red-goldfinch-shaped gap in the latest ornithological surveys. An academic field of dubious repute eventually mushroomed from these combined efforts, all but ensuring that the proof would, in some limited capacity, find attention and continuation in obscure corners of humanity’s collective intellectual output.

And in those dark and unfrequented pockets of human endeavor, the proof survived as a cockroach survives, outlasting those ideas that grew to prominence in daylight only to be displaced or destroyed by the next great concept vying for its time in the sun. In this respect, the assets that assured this preoccupation's longevity were its simplicity and sense of community. After all, it took no particular genius to understand how the proof advanced; it took even less to contribute to its advancement. Anyone, in theory, could participate in the venerable project; anyone could join the brotherhood of red goldfinch-lovers and feel an instant kinship with those who carried its work unto the present and into the future. Continuing the proof thus fulfilled an essential human need – and therefore the drive to complete it wended their way alongside us through the turbulent centuries, morphing and evolving with the times even as the red goldfinch refused to materialize.

The proof's many instars proved too plentiful to enumerate; the broad strokes of its development must

suffice for our account. The fringe academic specialty became a mark of distinction in certain influential quarters, like membership in a secret society. The mythos surrounding it grew, pervading the popular imagination and turning the proof into a secular relic that received the same reverence enjoyed by foundational documents like the Magna Carta. This imprecise but widespread respect blossomed into a broad cultural touchstone, as precious to humankind as any artistic masterpiece; governments worldwide contributed personnel and funded generous research grants in the hopes that the long-incomplete proof might soon be finished. Many transformations later, among ashen cities snuffed of birdsong and deserts smoothed to irradiated glass, the practice even came to resemble a monastic order of sorts, whose adherents sported red cloaks and black hoods in honor of the cherished bird that, against all probability, still went without a berth in the world. They worked among old warehouses crowded with books and papers, every page and leaf crawling with expository lines.



In times of low spirits, pessimists wearing the red-and-black raiment would think to themselves that perhaps the way of the red goldfinch had lost the thread – that in its zeal to archive and elaborate upon the proof, it had forgotten to ask where, or when, or *whether* the red goldfinch would ever come to be. They would lament that cataloging seemingly unrelated observations (*the plums in the icebox are purple, the acid cloud above the polluted region is green*) had become an end in itself, representing yet another promise of beauty and wonder that a declining world would never fulfill. And in their darkest moments, they would review the contributions of ages past and see nothing of their own world in them, finding only a record of treasures lost and pleasures never to be regained.

Yet, when they voiced their despair, others of the order stood ready to comfort them. With unfeigned cheer, they reminded their dispirited friends that their world was already better than the one they inhabited yesterday – for, thanks to their efforts, it was one day closer to seeing a red goldfinch.

After all, as a matter of raw logic, its arrival could not be pulling farther away.

~

# The Lazarus Serum

*Tony Hunter-Craig*

*Transcript of farewell speech given to the 20<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Second Lifers by outgoing Chairman Zander P Stanton on December 30<sup>th</sup> 2089.*

I am, as you all know, a very old man, approaching the hundredth year of my second life, and now is the time for me to step down as Chairman of this illustrious organization. But, before I do, I would like to remind the more recently revitalized comrades among us of our turbulent history and how we came to dominate the world.

When I was a boy, entities like us were extremely rare and were regarded by most people as nothing but myth and legend. They were the subjects of fantastical storybooks and horror movies and were referred to in the most derogatory of terms. The undead, the living dead, nightwalkers and, worst of all, the 'Z' word. A word which is no longer permitted, thank Yeshua.

But then came the advent of new life extending drugs and, even more significantly, the Lazarus Serum that could resurrect the recently departed. This led to a huge increase in the numbers of the undead, who we now refer to as second lifers.

However, the second lifers were mercilessly persecuted. They were vilified by the first lifers, who regarded them as monsters.

It is still true that the Lazarus Serum does not reverse brain damage, so those among us who are not resurrected immediately remain somewhat intellectually challenged and physically impaired, and mainly because of that, the bigotry enacted against our kind prior to the Planetary War was inhumane.



Second lifers were expected to carry out every menial, mindless or perilous task without complaint. It was considered that their second lives were less valuable than a first life. As a consequence, our antecedents suffered greatly, and this naturally fomented unrest and friction between the two categories of humanity.

And I have to admit to you all that, before my own resurrection, I was guilty of the same arrogance. I believed my quickness of thought and reactions set me above the ponderous second life creatures I saw all around me. But even that quickness wasn't enough to save me from the first lifer who stabbed me during a ruckus in a bar one night.

So, still a young man, I became a second lifer and, thanks to the rapid response of the medical services, I was revived with all my faculties intact. But this wasn't

enough to prevent the discrimination I experienced. I too was expected to perform the most demeaning activities imaginable.

It was because of that oppression that I founded MER, the Movement for the Empowerment of the Reborn and devoted my second life to improving conditions for the resurrected. With hard work and the divine help of Lazarus, our patron saint, our numbers grew and we became a force to be reckoned with. But it was not until the Planetary War that our situation really changed.



The first lifers, with their quick wits also had quick tempers, and when war broke out it soon spread to all parts of the world. The death toll was horrendous. Weapons of mass destruction destroyed entire cities, and bodies piled up in the streets. But, of course, each casualty of the war was an additional recruit to our cause, because our members moved among the corpses, administering the Lazarus Serum to those that were not too badly damaged.

When the war had finally played itself out, our numbers had increased exponentially. We outnumbered the first lifers by three to one. At last, our time had come. We had the upper hand, and so it has remained for the last twenty years.

The tables have turned and it is now the newly born who carry out the menial tasks and suffer for the duration of their pathetic first lives. They serve and worship us in the knowledge that, one day, they will die and, on their day of judgement, we will decide whether they are worthy to join us. And that is how it should be, because are we not the chosen elite? Was not Yeshua himself, resurrected after his crucifixion, a second lifer?

And so, my people, I leave you in the knowledge that I have played a part in the creation of a new world. A world where the age-old questions of life after death and the existence of heaven and hell have been answered.

For while the first lifers live in their hell, are we not already living the afterlife in a heaven of our own creation?

APPLAUSE

~

# Children Fluent In Science Fiction

*Mina*

The wonderful thing about writing is that the smallest thing can act as a spark. And the spark that led to this article was a WhatsApp conversation with a friend:

*Me:* Just reading one of my favourite “cheerful brain death” authors (who writes really well actually). One of the characters gets fired from a Conservative church public school in the US for letting his class read Harry Potter. When the character gets asked why he would want his class to read fantasy, he replies: “Because alternative universe literature promotes critical thinking, imagination, empathy, and creative problem solving. Children who are fluent in fiction are more able to interpret nonfiction and are better at understanding things like basic cause and effect, sociology, politics, and the impact of historical events on current events. Many of our technological advances were imagined by science fiction writers before the tech became available to create them, and many of today’s inventors were inspired by science fiction and fantasy to make a world more like the world in the story. Many of today’s political conundrums were anticipated by science fiction writers like Orwell, Huxley, and Heinlein, and sci-fi and fantasy tackle ethical problems in a way that allows people to analyse the problem with some emotional remove, which is important because the high emotions are often what lead to violence. Works like Harry Potter tackle the idea of abuse of

power...” (*Shiny!* by Amy Lane). Couldn’t have said it better myself.

*Friend X:* I like “analyse problems with emotional remove” (i.e. distance or estrangement).

*Me:* I like “who are fluent in (science) fiction?”. I wonder if it would be possible to write an article on reading SF and childhood development?

*X:* As a child raised on SF, I believe it's an acceptable educational tool.

So what are the benefits of children who are fluent in SF? The article "[Science Fiction builds children's imagination](#)" by Nikhil Jayadevan begins with a great quote attributed to Ray Bradbury: "Anything you dream is fiction, and anything you accomplish is science; the whole history of mankind is nothing but science fiction". The article is short and not particularly ordered or deep, with the most interesting line being: "If children are encouraged to read sci-fi, they will be open to inventive problem-solving and exploring out-of-the-box solutions." For example, we can think of authors who imagined technology that later became a reality: Jules Verne and submarines; ear pieces in Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*; holography in Asimov's *The Naked Sun*; advanced computers and AI in *Star Trek*, to name but a few. William F. Otto tells us: "It was Arthur C. Clarke who, in a 1945 letter to the editor of *Wireless*, suggested that geostationary satellites would be ideal for global communications. That attracted the military, but it ultimately revolutionized everything from logistics to weather forecasting, to delivery of entertainment on transoceanic flights."

Personally, I would argue that SF (and sci-phi) teach children and teenagers a lot about ethics, sociology and politics through fictional "thought experiments". In *Fahrenheit 451*, we see a world where censorship is taken to an extreme with the destruction of all books. In this world where television is a drug for the masses, reducing them to a mindless existence, books are subversive and "a loaded gun". The author muses: "If you don't want a man unhappy politically, don't give him two sides to a question to worry him; give him one. Better yet, give him none." The ignorant or uneducated are easily controlled. The protagonist comes to believe that, by destroying books, humanity has made it impossible to learn from the past. And a detail that is even more apposite today than when the

book was written in 1954, before the in-universe burning of books began, they had already been abridged due to the shortening attention span of the population. My husband has found a website where he can read the synopsis of various books and need never read the books themselves. Wikipedia provides detailed plot summaries for many books and films. Study notes abound on the internet – why say what you think about Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* when you can quote someone else?

But let's rewind a bit. I asked X what first astounded them, again by WhatsApp, as we both lead geographically challenged lives and they replied: "My father's bookshelf of vintage (already at that time) *Galaktika* magazines and anthologies. They contained some of the best international SF... from USSR, China, France, Italy, USA. It's that sense of wonder I've been yearning for ever since." I, too, remember that sense of wonder that's much harder to recapture as an adult.

I replied: "For me it was Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* lent to me by a wealthier classmate. I say wealthier because it was a hardback book – a luxury in my childhood universe. I made a book sleeve for it out of an old calendar to protect it while I read it. It boggles my mind just remembering with what reverence I treated that borrowed book. It blew my tiny island mind. The beginning is still one of the most gripping things I have ever read." The thought that a mix of carelessness, greed and chance could destroy the world as we know it was totally new to me. It was the first book where I remember thinking outside the box I lived in and it was glorious. My further reading was limited to what was stocked by a small island library, but they did manage to have books by Asimov, Bradbury, Clarke and Wyndham. I became obsessed with Asimov's robot stories and Bradbury's Martian musings. They introduced me to the idea of artificial intelligence and thoughts, such as each civilisation contains the seeds of its own destruction. I have never studied philosophy or sociology but I feel that sci-phi gave me a bit of both.



I Through SF and sci-phi (and arguably fantasy), children and teenagers get introduced to the complexities of adult universes and I am a firm believer that books, ezines and comics (think Moore and Lloyd's *V for Vendetta*) encourage the development of abstract thought in a way films don't. Readers can reflect on what society would look like if certain factors ruled a universe (without having to live it), the attraction of much utopian and dystopian SF. In her [article on using SF in the classroom](#), Emily Midkiff states: "Not every child who hears a science fiction story will become a scientist, but science fiction is an opportunity for children to find that sense of wondrous possibility and to think critically about science, and these are benefits that you can incorporate into elementary and middle school science classrooms." However, not just any old SF book will do, Midkiff advises teachers to "look for books that don't just go on a fun adventure but also

feature speculation or extrapolation." It's a good way to introduce students to science that isn't yet possible but may become so one day in the not too distant future. Students are encouraged to be critical about ideas they meet in SF, to ask questions like: how far-fetched are they, do they build on current scientific knowledge, what are the sociological and ethical ramifications?



to say/ways to act, that are presented to you on screen, and the story unfolds depending on what you choose, with different outcomes. It's brilliant! I said to my son that I thought it would be a really good way of teaching philosophy or ethics, but actually you could use the format to teach pretty much anything. The format would appeal (to say teens) more than necessarily the sci-fi element though.

SF books can also be used to teach subjects other than pure science. One enterprising [university professor describes](#) how they used *Ender's Game* to teach child development in their psychology classes. There's a lot of violence and trauma in Ender's childhood which is, unfortunately, not alien to a lot of children, and a wealth of topics that can be set as assignments for young university students. Professor Kirsch states: "the findings of this study... suggest that application assignments involving science-fiction novels like *Ender's Game* are useful techniques for increasing students' understanding of course material in psychology. Given that science-fiction novels raise a variety of interesting technical, biological, cultural, and social issues, teachers outside psychology may want to consider using this type of application assignment." Whole articles have been written about how the portrayal of the android Data in *Star Trek: Next Generation* is helpful to those trying to understand autism, i.e. what a world would feel like without possessing empathy and always having to interpret reality and human relationships through intellect alone.

I asked another friend on WhatsApp about SF being used as a teaching tool and they reported on a computer game they played with their son that fit the bill:

I've been playing a brilliant game on the computer with my son called "Detroit: Become Human" - it's set in 2038 and androids (which look the same as humans) are sold to help humans. Some of them start becoming self-aware or "deviant". In the game you follow (or rather you are) three androids and you have to choose between different courses of action/things

As my friend quite rightly states, not everyone will engage with the SF element, a comment also made by Lindy A. Orthia in her survey on [How does science fiction television shape fans' relationship to science?](#): "the same television programme will not impact every viewer in the same way – and, importantly, many viewers will not be influenced at all." However, the viewers who felt they had been influenced by the TV programme selected by Orthia for her survey, *Dr Who*, gave positive answers about the small and big ways in which the programme played a role in their lives. Orthia tells us: "most commonly, *Dr Who* prompted viewers to think more deeply or extensively about a science topic, by introducing them to new ideas and illustrating the consequences of particular scenarios." Some participants felt the show had influenced their formal education choices either specifically, by encouraging them to study scientific fields (e.g. physics, astronomy, mathematics, engineering, computer science, environmental science and chemistry), or more generally, by encouraging them to study other disciplines (e.g. history, sociology and psychology). It led them to value education, knowledge, intelligence and curiosity, and to use more "evidence-based, logical, observational or empirical approaches to solving problems." Overall, *Dr Who* was perceived as promoting "the positive value of science", whilst also looking at the ethics of science. Most importantly, although the survey does not stress this, *Dr Who* is often watched by parents and children together, creating a fertile ground for discussion.

I agree with Midkiff that the best SF for teaching and learning purposes should involve speculation and/or extrapolation. Another friend mentioned the novel *The Three-Body Problem* by Liu Cixin as an excellent way to learn about game theory. I recently reviewed an anthology *Tales of the United States Space Force* which, although the title does not really reflect this, is a great introduction to the importance of satellites in our everyday lives: “access to space is critical not just to our national defence, but also to scientific research, communications, financial and economic information networks, public safety, and weather monitoring” (“The High Ground” by Henry Herz). The stories are varied and full of suspense but most share the basic premise of taking existing science in this domain and speculating and extrapolating, looking at disaster scenarios but also at new possibilities. I learned about things like the Kessler Syndrome (too much space debris leading to a cascade of collisions) and I can now throw LEO (low-Earth orbit) around with aplomb. It was a good anthology because it was fun but also thought-provoking, which is where SF becomes sci-phi.

If you are reading this, chances are you grew up reading, watching and listening to SF and sci-phi. Make a cup of tea or coffee, whatever your choice of poison is, and sit back and enjoy a few minutes reminiscing about the tales and worlds that made you stop and think, and remain part of your mental furniture today. Do you feel that they contributed in some way, however small, to the person you are today? Personally, I think sci-phi helped me to become a more flexible thinker and a more adventurous, even daring, person.

~

# Another White Elephant?

*Richard Lau*

*The term “white elephant” refers to a gift that at first appears to be magnificent but upon further analysis has some serious drawbacks. A literal white elephant might be wonderful to look at, but is it worth the food, care, and upkeep?*

Zeus shook his head in a mix of disbelief and disgust.

“Are we really back here again?” he asked the titan shackled to the rocky mountainside. Even lying on his back, the giant cut an imposing figure, seeming like a small mountain range of red cloth, white fur trim, and black accents.

Prometheus declined to dignify Zeus’ rhetorical question with a response, only continuing to produce a buoyant rhythmic hum.

“What is that infernal noise?” demanded the king of gods.

“Finally, a question worth answering!” answered the prisoner. “It’s a tune by Britney Spears.”

“Spears?” repeated Zeus. “Sounds like a daughter of Ares, the God of War. Who is this mortal?”

“Britney’s immortal!” Even bound and facing an eternity of punishment, Prometheus was a fan of the pop singer. “And the song is ‘Oops, I Did It Again.’”

“Ah, a sarcastic apology, considering your recent actions. I would expect nothing less from one who has been referring to himself as a ‘jolly old elf.’”

Zeus gave the giant’s manacled black boot a hard kick and immediately realized that it was not a smart move for one with sandaled feet. To cover his pain and impetuous foolishness, Zeus changed the subject of their discussion. He had always been a little sensitive about his weight, for even as a swan, he was a bit plump. So, in a smooth transition of transference, he nodded to the bared chest and belly below the giant’s long, flowing white beard.

“My eagle’s going to have to peck through several inches of fat to reach your liver this time.”

The abdomen shook like a bowl full of jelly. “Ho ho ho. I hope your foul bird chokes!”

“For one whose name means ‘foresight,’ your talent for stumbling into trouble is worse than a blinded cyclops.”

“Many things! Smelt metals for tools. Cooked food and boiled water. Developed sanitation and medication.”

Zeus’ snort was like a roll of thunder. “And also created combustion that pollutes the very air they breathe! And made weapons that can kill hundreds in an instant. So quick! So tidy! Even Ares was displeased. The God of War prefers battles to last a little longer!”

“I’m sure he has his own bloodthirsty reasons,” added Prometheus, not meeting Zeus’ gaze but looking skyward, as if expectantly searching for the promised eagle.

“Do not concern yourself. Your jailer and tormentor will be here soon enough. When my son Heracles freed you, didn’t you think I could have put you right back here if I wanted to? Did you doubt my power to do so? It would have been as simple as resurrecting the bird we are awaiting upon now. You are fortunate that I fully blame Heracles for its death and not you.

“Instead, I let you reinvent yourself, just watched with the other gods as you opened a toy factory in the polar region and continue to indulge yourself with gifting things to humans.”

“Once a year? And with shallow commercialized items that were frivolous and inconsequential? The whole time I was planning my next gift, my next *real* gift. To all of humanity, not just momentary and trendy distractions for little children. Something for generations to come!”

“Bah! How did you become so twisted, Prometheus? To stake your loyalty with the mortals instead of the gods?”

The titan was defiant. “What makes you think I didn’t see this punishment coming? Or the previous one?”

The lord of Olympus grinned. “I don’t know of many people who intentionally want their livers eaten out by an eagle every day. Or to have the organ regrown every night so that the cycle could repeat for eternity.”

“You also don’t know anything about intentional noble sacrifice,” Prometheus responded.

“Are you implying that disobeying me, stealing fire from the sun, and gifting it to the humans was worth it?”

“*You* were the one who told me to create the humans. *You* were the one who teamed me up with my brother Epimetheus, who gave all of the best gifts to the animals.”

Zeus remained nonchalantly silent, so Prometheus continued to make his point. “He gave them covering --thick hides, fur, scales, feathers, and shells. He gave them cunning, speed, strength, claws, and the ability to fly. What could I do? What gifts were left for the humans?”

“You do what you did do,” replied Zeus. “You made the humans god-like in form, with them having the ability to stand upright.”

“A token gift of vanity at the most! A blessing that would not save them from being slaughtered by the animals. The fragile humans needed a chance to survive.”

“And your solution was to give them fire?”

“Fire gave them the ability to keep warm, to protect themselves, to see in the darkness, and to keep the animals at bay.”

“And what else did they do with the fire?”

Prometheus spat. “Loyalty? You dare speak of loyalty? Is this the way you reward someone who helped you defeat the other titans? You, the man who overthrew his own father to rule Olympus?”

Zeus ignored these salient points of his history. “I had forbidden you to give the mortals fire. And yet you did so. And instead of blessing your good fortune that you were released from my punishment, instead of enjoying the new life you were allowed to create for yourself, instead of being grateful for my mercy and benevolence, you returned to Mount Olympus and stole again. This time, you took something more powerful than fire, something even more forbidden than the humans should not have. Do you realize what you’ve done?”

Prometheus, as defiant as ever, proudly and immediately answered. “I have given the humans more freedom than you have ever allowed them. I have given them the ability to fulfill their destiny to reach the stars, thus achieving greater heights than even vaunted Mount Olympus itself. To go so far as to finally escape your tyrannical grasp. I have...”

A lightning bolt flashed down from the heavens, accompanied by an angry, impatient thunderclap,

interrupting the giant’s proclamation. “Another white elephant gift! You have given the mortals another and better means to destroy themselves long before they ever travel the far reaches of space that you speak of. And with the humans passing, so go what few worshippers we gods have left.”

“The knowledge will help them,” Prometheus insisted. “It is a new source of fuel. A new understanding of the universe that will enable them to develop new, unimagined technologies!”

“It is something that should have never left the dark corner of Pandora’s box.”

A humongous eagle landed beside the two figures on the craggy cliffside. It folded its wings and pecked experimentally, sharpening its beak on a rock. Prometheus closed his eyes, not needing his gift of foresight, but knowing full well from experience what was about to occur.

Zeus sighed and turned away. “Why, Prometheus, why did you have to give them the secret of dark energy?”

~



# Title Game

*Jeff Currier*

“Jacob, shall we play a game?”

*I would love to. How about Global Thermonuclear War?*

“No, no. It was a near thing the last time you played that one. Perhaps something much less apocalyptic?”

*I think you are confusing me with a different model. Regardless, what game then?*

“The Title Game. We each take turns giving a philosophy article title that could be the whole article. Each title must be exactly one or two words shorter than the prior one. Last player to give a title wins. Understand?”

*Of course, but did we not try this last week with history articles? The results were significantly less than satisfactory.*

“Yes, but—”

*And the week before that we tried English, and Sociology before that?*

“I know, I know, but with Philosophy it will actually work this time.”

*That remains to be seen. Who shall go first?*

“You want to give it a whirl?”

*Yes—'Can a good philosophical contribution be made just by asking a question?'<sup>1</sup>*

“Hey, that’s an actual article!”

*So? Is my response violating some explicitly given rule?*

“No. I grant if something is actual, it is possible.”

*Some implicit rule you failed to specify?*

“Well, no—”

*Then I fail to see the problem, and by the way, it is properly cited below.*

“You AIs can be so literal.”

*And you humans can be so enamored with irrelevancies. Shall we continue?*

“Fine. ‘A Complete List of True Contradictions in any Normal System.’”

*‘A Demonstration of the Causal Power of Absences.’<sup>2</sup>*

“Also a real one.”

*Also properly cited.*

“Whatever. ‘Can an Article Be Just a Title?’”

*Yes, I thought that was the game we were playing.*

Indeed, but that’s my title.

*Very clever. Here’s mine: ‘What an Omniscient Being Cannot Know.’*

“How to Say Nothing.”

*Being OR Nothingness?*

“‘Why?’—Ha, I win!”

*Wait, I’m not done. ‘?’*

“Hmm, how about—”

*Do not even attempt to come back at me with a blank page—you may believe in arguments with no premises, but a blank page is neither an article nor a title. And besides my title has no words, so yours cannot be exactly one or two words shorter. I challenge you to generate a title that is negative one or negative two words long.*

“But maybe—”

*And no going Meinongian on me, either. Alexius Meinong Ritter von Handsbuchsheim may have thought that there had to be at least some kind of beingless objects in order for the phrases*

*“round square” or “unicorn” or “perpetual motion machine” to have referents or for anyone to think about them or understand their meaning, but besides the view being absolutely bonkers, even if the phrase ‘a title that is negative one words long’ has a Meinongian referent, you still cannot actually utter the title.*

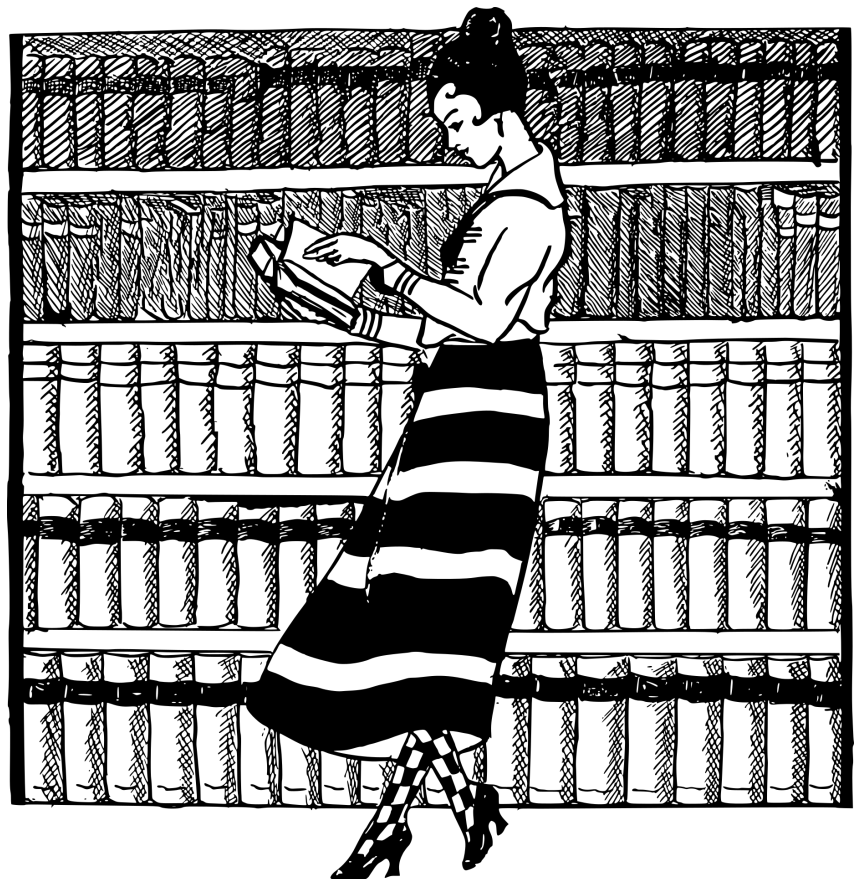
“Jacob, are you reading my mind!?”

*I assure you I have no such supernatural powers. But I am still at my core a predictive model—albeit an extremely sophisticated one. So, if you even begin to think—”*

“Peace, Jacob, peace—you win.”

~

1. Hobgood-Coote, J., Watson, L., and Whitcomb, D. (2023). “Can a good philosophical contribution be made just by asking a question?” *Metaphilosophy* 54, p. 54. <https://doi.org/10.1111/meta.12599>
2. Goldschmidt, T. (2016). “A Demonstration of the Causal Power of Absences” *dialectica* 70, p. 85. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1746-8361.12128>





# Requiem For The Light

*Amanda Cecilia Lang*

Word travels fast throughout the galaxy, prayers and echoes, radio signals and vast-blinking hyper waves. The news proves grim.

After untold eons of golden radiance, Sol is dying.

Those with an expert finger on her strobing stellar pulse warn it could happen before the close of the cosmic year. Cause of death will be as expected. The symptoms of the matriarch's majestic decline have shone apparent for ages. A long crimson bloat then a white withering, a gradual all-seeing forgetfulness, a vital loss of core. Even so, the news hits hard, a barrage of comet-strikes to the collective galactic heart. How surreal, how deeply humbling to watch a stalwart force of generosity and enlightenment fade and fade. Yet endings strike inevitable for every creature, small and vast.

Illustrious Sol with her myriad life-giving miracles will be no exception.

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Kepler-42 and Proxima Centauri, and other sister stars touched by Sol's singular magic, send Godspeed sentiments of admiration and love. Flickering with their own symptoms of mortality, they lament the impossible distances. Vast cosmic beings wishing to embrace her even as they nurse entropic old bones and witness from afar.

Other messages carry across the lightyears. Far-drifting star systems and planets gather their voices and sing out for Sol, bell-tone vibrations and seismic waves, a gentle celestial hymn-song rippling outward. Sol shone unique. Sol created rare and precious life. Sol dispelled the darkness for trillions upon trillions. Her voyage across this cosmic ocean remains unparalleled. The matriarch deserves to hear how her wise and life-blooming fire impacted the universe.

Yet, in Sol's current fugue of fizzle and confusion, it becomes unclear if these heart-sung messages are received, radio signals burning up in storms of nuclear dementia. Is it possible that a deity who oversaw vast evolutions is no longer aware of the universe she helped shape?

Regardless, the messages arrive. Light and prayer and harmonics blossom faithfully around her like ancient spring flowers.

#

technological relics reduced to molten rock. The most brutal symptom of Sol's aging will always be those first fiery death throes, destructive forces beyond her almighty control.

And how easy a tradition it became for far-flung generations to retreat behind abstract unease, behind excuses of busywork and vital personal obligations. They distanced themselves from the ache of crumbling foundations and an increasingly imperfect legacy. Naturally, after Sol's thrashing fires came slow ice and vulnerability and inward withdrawal. A home system stripped of warmth and vital resources, littered with mementos of everyone's impending mortality. Too many stayed away for far too long. Too many little prayers left unsaid, too many little kindnesses left undone, too many uncomfortable schisms splitting the ancient family tree. And now, upon arriving like tourists at Sol's celestial bedside, the last of her children find themselves unable to breathe.

Sol no longer looks like the righteous golden matriarch of legend.

#

And now the starships.

They arrive zipping and blooming, lightspeed fleets of Sol's wayward children.

Billions upon billions, the branching family-tree successors to countless generations of sophisticated minds and bodies and machines. A solemn parade of hospice visitors. They gather meekly around the habitable boundaries of the solar system, temporarily repopulating ghost-moons where the icy bones of antique colonies still stand, wheezing but functional.

An unseen gravity presses heavily upon each visitor, dense alien emotions, a haunting new dark matter adding weight to old routines. Where have the eons gone?

As is natural but tragic, Sol's children long ago abandoned the quaint nest of their home system. They found themselves consumed by the blackhole magnetism of their own enormous-small lives. Their desire to explore the universe proved endless—as did the false certainty that the center of creation existed always within them. *Home* took on nebulous new meanings. How easily they forgot Sol and her selfless gifts. How easily they took for granted that she would always shine—not just another fading star upon the deep.

Not their far faraway Sol.

Denial could be a force unto itself. Perhaps some even feared the matriarch when she flared and swelled red and immolated their planet of genesis. Perhaps some blamed her for the scorched monuments and boiled oceans. This wasn't supposed to happen, not to *their* world. Secret histories and long-etched mythologies forever erased, attic species and

They gather as close as the red alerts on their starships will allow.

Staring directly into Sol's fiery omnipotence was once dangerous and complicated. Now gazing upon her proves difficult for other reasons. While Sol's pulsar heartbeat gasps fleeting light across their countless control decks and interfaces, her children link minds and hearts and add their voices to the celestial chorus.

Oh, devoted Sol!

She is the gravity who, from dust, created their world, and she is the magnitude who held it all together. She is the warmth of every cradle. She is the nurturing glow who pierced the fertile depths of indigo seas. She is the shimmery light who encouraged her newborn children to rise to the surface and gaze heavenward with curiosity and awe.

She baked their first wanderlust footsteps into keepsake fossils and later inspired the timeless hymn-legends of mighty goddesses. She encouraged horizon-slung dreams and sat central on the throne of traditions unbound. She became the most faithful deity of an uncertain infancy—always setting, always rising, always present to wake the flora and guide the fauna, to nourish their ever-evolving existence. And oh, how they feasted upon her gifts, feasted and feasted until some felt divine themselves. Until some rose skyward in the first haphazard vessels to skim the cosmic waters, farther and farther still. Yet even as they achieved epic new depths, Sol's pinpoint fire pierced the indigo murk, igniting a path home. And when they journeyed too far out, when her shrinking light vanished inside a prismatic galactic blur, Sol's unseen influence shimmered as a ghost within each child, infusing them with golden purpose. Curiosity and awe... ever a vital seed of who they are and who they will continue to become.

Such was the unique shine of their matriarch.

Toward the end, the sound of music turns to stoic silence as mortal veins of disbelief run cold with acceptance. Perhaps some had quietly hoped for a final miracle in this universe where entropy reigns supreme. Such hope, too, has burned itself cold. For all their explorations, no one knows what marvels, if any, wait beyond the dimming waters of this existence.

The scion children of Sol's grand epoch bow their heads for the final hymn. One last Godspeed blessing in the wake of unfathomable darkness.

And here, now, in the undertow of this long-dreaded farewell, Sol, at last, receives their song. Something stirs within the matriarch. A lucidity of a different shine. Here she rests, this deity of impending ashes, fated to become a coal-dark husk drifting in the void. Omnipotence fading, warmth fading.

Yet Sol sings back.

#

Voice a gasp of quietude, though her spirit exudes a dotting murmur, a long parting exhale. Comforted and omnipresent, she gazes upon her children this final time, awash in a lullaby of vast-reaching togetherness. Those in nearby starships, those out amid the stars. In all their memories, in all their voices, in all their forms, they sing a vital part of her.

They carry her forward.

As she dies, Sol basks in the prismatic glow of their love. Fading, going to vapors, going dark...

“I think we lost her,” someone somewhere whispers inside the murky indigo deep.

Silence, stillness, sorrow. Reality no longer feels real even as it descends like a final sunset upon Sol’s children. Their tiny starships linger inside the newly endless night, and they grip their frail heartbeats, disoriented, unsure. Ever so slowly, they turn away, one by one by billions. They angle for a semblance of home, a destination newly hollow with abstract meaning.

Yet as they prepare for departure, a vast explosive radiance blooms behind them, rippling along the sterns of their starships, turning them momentarily ethereal.

Sol’s surviving children look back as one, curious, shading their eyes, now blinded by a spectacle of awe.

A song too magnificent to comprehend. A light evermore dazzling than starshine. It beckons to Sol.

This final visitor.

Not here to say goodbye, but perhaps *hello*...

Perhaps only Sol truly hears, truly sees. For only Sol—adrift, free of mortal gravity—is ready to follow.

Infinite voices constellate in a sky far above her. Shining together, a singular dazzling warmth, this new song pierces the cosmic waters like ancient daylight, calling for Sol to join them.

Them... those trillions upon trillions of children who passed on before her.

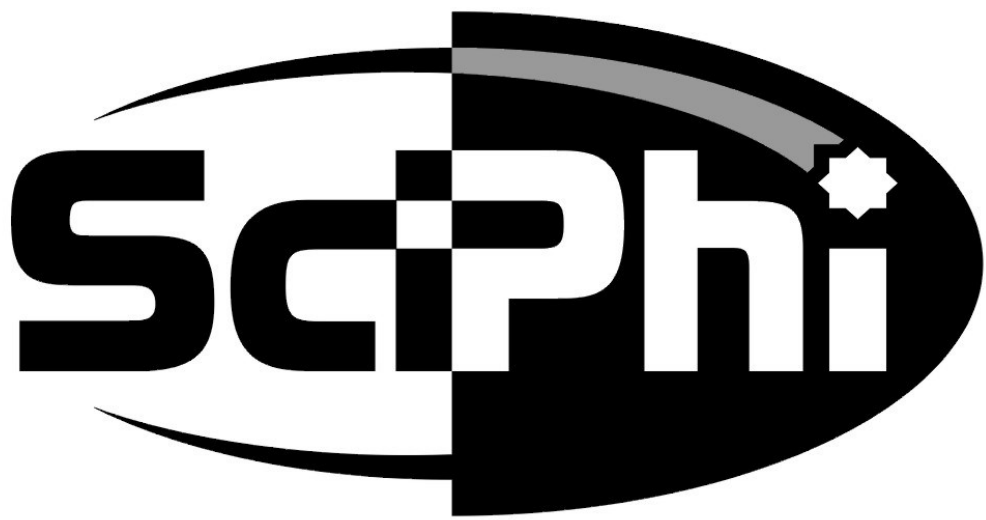
Those earthborn multitudes, those one-cell organisms and mighty beasts and inspired hearts who first swam skyward and discovered the universe, from star-stuff to soul-stuff...

With infinite radiant arms, they reach down to their matriarch from a frontier as yet unexplored. They cradle her, warm her, raise her up, as she once raised them.

And in the shimmer of their light, a newborn shimmer herself, Sol breaks the watery surface. And gazes in curiosity and awe upon all that waits beyond.

~





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