

PROBE

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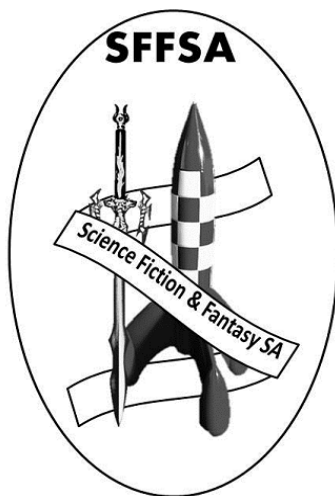
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As we come to the end of another year I am publishing the last of the finalists from the 2015 Nova competition and the winner of the 2015 Trofeo RiLL competition. This is the Italian concern whose aim is the publishing of Speculative fiction and who collect the winners from other competitions around the world and publish them in Italian annually. Fortunately for those of us who cannot read Italian this year's winner, "Not by Bread Alone" has been translated into English. I enjoyed it and I hope you will too.



I saw with sadness that Ron Glass had passed on at the age of 71. I will always remember him fondly as the Shepherd who was part of the crew of the "Serenity". I will always feel regret that there was only a single season of "Firefly" as I feel it was one of the best and most entertaining science fiction series ever made. Who will ever forget the horror on River's face when she saw the shepherd with his wild hair loose? We will miss his gentle but tough attitude.

Also in this issue are the "Wormholes" – the 99-word stories that are written at the MiniCon each year. Definitely not serious stuff this. It always amazes me that a bunch of people whom are not generally authors can get together in an hour and put together a short, short story that can usually make us smile.

I see in the L.O.C. from Lloyd Penny from Canada that Sheryl Huff, one of the Chairman of next year's WorldCon has resigned. That is also sad and I am concerned for the future of the WorldCon.

Last but not least I have to mention the after dinner end-of-year talk that was presented by our most favourite Digby Ricci. This year he gave us his view on the enormously popular "Game of Thrones" video series. (Not the books – not enough time in life to read them!) We continue to be astounded by the depth of knowledge of English history and literature that Digby has. Who would of thought of looking at the violence that was perpetrated during the "War of the Roses" in Medieval England and how it related to that in the series. As well as the incest and regicide that took place there as well. As well as his views and ideas as to where the series is going and how it will play out. We were entranced by a talk that lasted over an hour and yet seemed to fly by.

Digby, for not being a science fiction fan, you certainly keep a group of SF fans thoroughly entertained and we are already looking forward to next year.

Chairman's Note

Andrew Jamieson

Wow! It is almost December and it feels like the year has barely begun. What happened to the last 11 months? Every year seems to fly by faster and faster in a never ending cycle of more things to do, and less time to do them in. There simply seems to be too much... of everything... and not enough time to even try to do some of things you want to do? Or is it just me?



I am a single guy and thus probably have a lot more "free" time on my hands than most. When I get home I can make dinner, and then spend the rest of the night doing whatever I want, as late as I want... and yet this doesn't seem to make a difference. Why is it with all this free time I have I am falling further and further behind on the TV series I want to watch? As it currently stands I have 13 new seasons of TV series to start... and 12 seasons I am currently trying to finish! Okay, I probably shouldn't have started the eight new series this year, but with my free time I should still be able to manage watching just one episode a week when they come out.

What about the movies I want to watch? Or the comics I want to read (recall I mentioned I do comics, not books, but when you have about 15 or more boxes of comics, each holding about a 100 comics, that's a lot of reading!). What about the Steam games I keep on buying (on sale, I already have too many) but never actually play? When am I ever going to get the time to catch up on all of this? When I retire?

There just seems to be "too much" of everything nowadays, and with the hectically busy lifestyles the modern person now leads, we really don't have the time to do everything we want. Do you really think things will be any different in the future?

Cheers

Andrew

Magazines Received

Middle Tennessee Science Fiction Society (aka the Nashville sf club).

Reece Moorhead skywise@bellsouth.net

167 September 2016

168 October 2016

169 November 2016

Ansible

David Langford

348 September 2106 <http://news.ansible.uk/a348.html>

349 October 2016 <http://news.ansible.uk/a349.html>

350 November 2016 <http://news.ansible.uk/a350.html>

WARP 96 is now available from our website.

http://www.monsffa.ca/?page_id=952

As usual, the titles link directly to the articles, and the little icons at the ends of pages or articles take you back to the titles

Cathy Palmer-Lister

Ste. Julie, Quebec, Canada

cathypl@sympatico.ca

<http://www.monsffa.ca>

Books Received

Jonathan Ball*Publishers*

D. Nolan Clark. Forsaken Skies. Little Brown R285.00

Justine Hill Viking Fire Little Brown R310.00 (Not SF or Fantasy)

Wormhole by AL du Pisani, Gavin Kreuter, Juliet Gillies and Simone Puterman

The tension had been steadily increasing; Galaxies High was not a game for binxes. The Milky Way, along with MIB HQ, had been thrown into the pot long ago, and S was worried about F looking after B alone. She winced. Andromeda raised the stakes substantially; now only an elliptical would win. She reached for her last chance, pressing the screen gingerly -- "No, Baby, don't touch that!" F yelled through her earpiece. Molten air blasted through the arena, incinerating the projections. "Wildfire rules all!" she shouted. Safe in her suit, S scooped up all the galaxies and dematerialised.



Wormhole by Trevor Derry, Carla Martins, Nial Mollison, Gail Jamieson

Final day of the 300 000th occurrence of the Galactic Games!

"Wild Fire" under species representative from the slimes of the Outer Spiral Arm with "Earth Quake", "Lava Lady" and "Perfect Storm", survivors of the previous heats of triplanetary leaping, plasma surfing and planetary billiards, where most competitors were lost to an unexpected Black Hole.

The final: “Sun Diving” to retrieve the tetrakaidekahexadron of element 142, “Unobtanium”.

Plunging into the fiery furnace with a plasmamectronic sensor; Perfect Storm and Earth Quake obliterated each other. Lava Lady erupted.

Awarding “Wild Fire the winner’s planet, the judge proclaimed, “Wild Fire rules all!”



Wormhole by Iain Sinclair, Ron Cowley, Franz Tomasek, Stephen Tatham

Joe Wildfire strode into the bar on Proxima prime. “Gimmie a rocket fuel annihilate” he demanded of the bartender.

Downing it in one gulp he leans on the bar and surveys the detritus of the sector. Gasbag monster 3 gives him the hairy eyeball. He hands it back. Gasbag shouts “What’s wrong with my eyeball?” Wildfire responds, “Same thing that’s wrong with the rest of you.” That’s when the fight started. The fur and tentacles flew. Joe’s punch expelled a methane cloud. Striking a match as he exited he said, “Wildfire rules all.”

Nova 2015 Finalist

Error #451

Leon Louw

Error! #451 ACCESS DENIED

Well, this is unexpected, Mr Smith thought, staring at the little screen. The red light went out, with a message again indicating that he should place any finger of his choosing on the scanner. He complied, using his left index finger. He got the same message. A slight panic gripped him momentarily, but then subsided. Obviously this is a dream, granted a very unusual one. Heaven doesn't have access control. Well, maybe some old, bearded guy in sandals and a robe, telling you which way to go. But definitely not a row of fingerprint scanners, leading to – judging by the sign-posts – the Sorting Cubicles.

He started looking around. If it's a dream, and he knows it, he may as well enjoy it. The whole scene – probably dream, seeing as this isn't real – did have a kind of fluffy-cloud feel to it, such as you would expect from the entrance to heaven. He could see more fingerprint scanners on both sides, spaced about two meters apart, disappearing into the white hazy distance.

A polite queue was forming behind him, although some people have begun noticing that the lines at the other fingerprint scanners seemed to move faster and have abandoned his line. There was an old lady – looking for all the world like Mother Theresa – standing behind him. She grinned a toothless grin. 'You can press the Help button', she politely suggested.

He frowned, turning around. The dream wasn't going the way he expected. By now he should have been either a fighter pilot or off on a tropical beach flaunting his massive muscles – two of his default go-to lucid dreams. There was indeed a Help button, which he pressed. A bored female voice came over the speaker. He could just imagine her painting her nails and chewing gum while talking.

'Can I help you?'

'Uhm... yes... I seem to have a problem? It says something about an error.'

'What number?'

'Sorry?'

'The error. What number error is it?'

'Oh, uhm...'

'Put your finger on again.'

He complied. 'It says four five one, access denied.'

'Four five one?'

'Yes.'

'Yeah... it's probably broken. I'll send a technician.'

☐☐☐

Mr Smith was still taking in his breath to comment, when there was a not-so-polite cough behind him. He turned around to see a twenty-something technician behind him, wearing a faded blue, very oily one-piece overall. He had a spiky mullet, a few studs in each ear, some kind of hazardous material sign tattoo creeping out beneath the sleeve on each forearm and a fag end threatening to drop out of the left corner of his mouth.

He nodded at Mr Smith, then ignored him as he busied himself with the machine. He plugged some kind of electronic reader in it, commenting over his shoulder. 'Let me just reset this ____ thing.'

He unplugged the reader after a few seconds. 'Right. Try again.'

Mr Smith did so, getting the same message. The technician stared at him with a mixture of incredulity and amusement, as if he's just heard about an alcoholic cigarette. 'Well, ____ that! A real _____ four five one!'

He pressed the intercom button. 'Suzie! This _____ dude is the real deal! A real _____ four five one!' He didn't wait for a response, turning back to Mr Smith. 'Dude, you're in such deep ____! What the ____ did you do? Or not do?'

‘What’s going on?’

He grinned. ‘A four five one means-’

Mr Smith shook his head. ‘Not that. With up with your speech. Why the silences?’

He gave Mr Smith a look as if to say isn’t it obvious, and indicated with his head to the other booths. By now his line has been abandoned, save for the little old lady, patiently smiling.

‘Dude. It’s a _____ family friendly environment.’ There were indeed a few kids. There were in fact people from all ages, though mostly old people. Mr Smith raised his eyebrows in non-comprehension.

The technician grinned. ‘The _____ swear words get blocked out! It’s awesome. Check. ____! ____! ____! ____! ____!’ His lips moved, but no sound came through. Mr Smith, lip-reading some of the words, could understand why somebody would want to block them out.

A nasty feeling started creeping over him. ‘Is this a dream?’ The technician shook his head.

‘No. You’re dead.’

It came as less of a surprise to him than Mr Smith would have thought. ‘So a four five one means what exactly?’

‘You can’t move on.’ The technician turned around, ignoring the question Mr Smith was about to ask, and pressed the intercom button again.

‘Suzie, send Gabriel.’

‘Who’s Gabriel?’

‘Who do you think?’

ΦΦΦ

‘Does it look like I have _____ angel wings?’

‘No, but... I’m dead, and this is heaven and...’ Mr Smith’s voice trailed off. He suddenly wasn’t so certain anymore.

‘No it ain’t heaven. We’re on the _____ outside. Look, just follow me. I’ll take you to Hannes. He deals with this kind of thing. I don’t know why they even called me.’ Mr Smith wanted to ask who Hannes is, but he feared he may get a not-so-angelic answer from Gabriel, who – judging by his appearance – seems to be some kind of foreman. They walked in silence along a white corridor. Sort of what a hospital corridor looks like in a dream – with the details missing, only length, light and the occasional door making it into the dream.

They came to a door, with a sign saying Dr Cronjé. Gabriel indicated with his head that Mr Smith should go inside. ‘Don’t bother knocking.’ He seemed reluctant to go in himself.

As Mr Smith entered, the doctor, wearing a lab coat over his chinos, immediately got up from behind his desk. He looked to be mid-thirties, with only a slightly receding hairline.

‘Ah, you must be Mr Smith. Jonathan. Come, please. Come sit.’ He greeted him, then took him by the elbow and led him to a chair in front of the desk.

‘Uhm, listen, doctor-’

‘No, please, call me Hannes. Doctor is so formal, don’t you think, Jonathan? Do people call you Jonathan? Or John? Or can I call you Johnny? Johnny is so... friendly, don’t you think? You look friendly.’

Mr Smith got out a confused OK as he was caught up in a torrent of words again.

‘So, Johnny, you’re probably wondering why you’re here? It must have come as a surprise to you, to find out you’re dead?’ Mr Smith nodded, but wanted to indicate that all of this, whatever this is, is much more confusing than finding out he’s kicked the bucket. Hannes misread his confusion.

‘Don’t worry, it happens to everybody. One moment you’re fine, next moment, Poof! You’re standing at the fingerprint scanners.’ He gave what he probably thought of as

an encouraging chuckle. Mr Smith realised he'll have to use the chuckle to bully his way into the conversation if he wanted any answers.

'What is this? Where am I? If I'm dead, shouldn't I be going to heaven or to hell? What's up with the fingerprint scanners? Shouldn't there be some old guy deciding where I go?'

'Peter? No, he's retired years ago. They put in the fingerprint scanners to handle the workload.'

'Retired? But why?'

'Well, do the math. At last count, over a hundred and fifty thousand people were dying every single day. Not much of an afterlife, having to sort through that bunch, is it? No, the scanners give you access to the sorting chambers, from where you are told where to go. It's all automatic. I mean they've got your whole life on database – all your decisions and actions and thoughts – all of it. So it's usually pretty straightforward. Only special cases get taken on appeal from there.'

'So, am I here for appeal? Or what's going on?'

'No! This is what's so awesome! I never thought I'd get to see a four five one in my time. My predecessor only saw one in almost two hundred years! Granted his was Churchill's uncle, but still, he'll be so surprised when I tell him. And I've only been here for fifty years.'

'Two hundred years?' Mr Smith slumped in his chair, held his hand over his eyes, slowly shaking his head. 'Listen, please, if this is a dream, just let me wake up. If it isn't, just tell me what's going on. Who are you people?'

Hannes suddenly looked very surprised and somewhat confused. 'Oh! Has nobody told you? I'm so sorry. It must be so confusing. I'll give you a brief explanation.'

ΦΦΦ

A brief explanation turned out to be one of almost two hours – but apparently time doesn't matter here. They are in some kind of perpendicular timeline to the one that Mr Smith left when dying. For all intents and purposes, time is standing still for them.

That explains why Hannes could be working at the same desk for over fifty years and be still be thirty six. His predecessor was still thirty-nine, as he was when he started, after his two hundred year stint.

Apparently, since this time zone is perpendicular, they can be taken back to the point where they left off, without any interruption. They don't age here and they get plenty of time to rest, so there's very little downside. That part was weird but believable. The rest was just bizarre.

Apparently, with over a hundred and fifty thousand people dying every day, the admin of sorting through them all became a nightmare, so they were contracted in. They being a small consulting firm from Jeffrey's Bay. They were chosen partly because they had sufficient experience dealing with mountains of paperwork and red tape – courtesy of dealing with government bureaucracy almost daily. But mostly it was because their previous boss – having died and seen the chaos – made the suggestion just before he left to wherever he eventually went (apparently that's confidential in every case and doesn't even get stored in the database – which runs 128 gigabit encryption).

From then on, every two weeks – for a fraction of a second earth-time only – they would come here for six months at a time before going back home. Only to return here two weeks later – a fraction of a second after they left. Hannes is a grievance counsellor, for those individuals having a tough time excepting the finality of death. The ones that end up making a scene at the fingerprint scanners, usually refusing to get scanned. The maintenance guys are apparently subcontracted from an engineering firm.

It was all horribly confusing. But even that was less confusing than the explanation of a four five one error.

'It means you have unfinished business. There's just too much weighing on something you did or didn't do. You're too important to just let go. Don't you see? This is an awesome opportunity! You get to fix your mistake. Or mistakes. However many you made.'

'But... I'm dead.'

Hannes pulled his lip up, waving his hand. 'Heart attack. Nothing to worry about. We can change it to a near-death experience without so much as disturbing a fluttering butterfly.'

Mr Smith nodded uncertainly. 'But how will I know which one? I mean which mistake?'

'No, no, no. Don't worry. We've got you sorted. You'll go on a field trip with two of our agents. One will take you to your past life, one to your present life.'

Mr Smith, feeling slightly less confused, tried his hand at some humour. 'What about Christmas future?' Unfortunately, it was lost on Hannes, who only smiled a slightly confused smile.

'Sorry, no, we don't do future. And it wasn't necessarily Christmas. Why? Do you think it was?' He picked up the phone on his desk, dialled a few numbers and almost immediately began speaking.

'Suzie, send up Lwazi will you?'

☐☐☐

Lwazi turned out to be a nerd – large glasses and all – clutching a tablet to his chest like it was magical armour. He was probably in his mid-twenties, but looked like he was barely out of school. His clothes were neat in a way that suggested his mother probably still had a large say in his wardrobe. He greeted Mr Smith with a tender hand, barely looking him in the eye.

Hannes spoke behind his hand in a loud whisper, winking at Lwazi. 'Be careful. Lwazi is way too smart for normal guys like us.' Lwazi smiled shyly and busied himself on his tablet.

Hannes quickly explained the situation to Lwazi, ending with 'Look at his Christmases. I think it may be important.'

Mr Smith was still drawing in his breath to explain to Hannes when Lwazi spoke up, very respectfully. 'OK, Mister Smith. I think we should first go to your tenth birthday.' Mr Smith didn't have time to respond appropriately – seeing as an appropriate

response to such a statement isn't readily forthcoming to most people – before Lwazi put his hand on his shoulder.

There was a brief flash, an even briefer period of darkness and suddenly he was standing in his parent's kitchen, looking down at a table full of cake, marshmallows, chips, red cool drink and everything else essential to an 80's kid's party. Including lots of screaming kids, himself at the head of the table.

Lwazi spoke up, suddenly not so shy anymore. 'Don't worry. They can't see us or hear us. We're not even technically here.'

'So what are we looking for?'

'You're about to open your father's gift'

A sudden sense of guilt swept over Mr Smith. He remembered it as if he was seeing it for the first time – which of course in a way he was. His father – not a wealthy man – had saved up to buy him the Lego set he had been nagging about for months. But about two weeks before his birthday, he saw a different set that grabbed his fleeting adolescent attention. He turned out to be rather disappointed at getting the set he originally asked for, sharing his disappointment quite vociferously with whomever was within earshot over the following days.

A few lights were flashing on Lwazi's tablet. He looked up, smiling.

'I think we're getting closer.'

'It's because I never apologised to my dad?'

'No. You made it up to him. Keep looking.'

'What? I can't remember making it up to him.'

Lwazi looked down at his tablet, gave him a quick sideways glance and turned back to the party. He spoke out of the corner of his mouth. 'Says here you helped him with a woodwork project two weeks later. Seems like you both enjoyed it a lot. For him, it was as good as any excuse.' He turned to look at him. 'You know, that's all parents want, right? For their kids to be happy.' He turned back to the party. 'There. Watch that kid second to your left.'

Mr Smith watched. Another wave of guilt swept over him. That kid. The one his mother insisted he should also invite – out of compassion – because nobody ever invited him. He couldn't even remember his name. Surely this must be it. He looked at Lwazi, but he didn't look up from his tablet. He was frantically working on it, dragging things to and fro, seemingly cross-referencing them.

He tapped a few more times, then smiled at Mr Smith. 'I think we're done here.'

'So, do I need to find that guy and apologise to him?'

'What?'

Mr Smith indicated the lonely kid again.

'Oh, him, no it wasn't him. I thought so, but I quickly looked him up. He's fine. He actually became quite popular later on.'

'So why are we here then? Looks like it's a waste of time.'

Lwazi shook his head slowly, showed him the tablet. On it was what appeared to be a schematic of the world's worst fishing line entanglement. About three quarters of the fishing line was blue, with the rest a dark red colour.

'See this. This is a timeline of your life, after we've run a few algorithms on it. All the crossing points are nodes that connect different times in your life. You know how sometimes you smell coffee and suddenly you're back on that camping trip in the mountains you went on while still at university? The one where you met your wife?'

Mr Smith nodded uneasily. The camping trip coffee memory wasn't something he ever discussed with someone else. Not because there's anything to hide, but because it's just too ordinary to relate to anybody.

Lwazi pointed to a medium sized entanglement in the schematic. 'Well, there's the camping trip coffee memory. As you can see, it's blue. Everything that's blue, doesn't have to be visited. We started with this party, because it's the biggest node.' He tapped on what was indeed the biggest entanglement of lines. 'Once we got here, the program monitored your memories and started cross-referencing them. Now what we learned here, cancelled out a lot of things.' He indicated to all the blue lines.

‘But I hardly remember this party... Well, now I do. But it never crosses my mind.’

Lwazi shrugged. ‘Well, it’s not really memories. It’s more emotions. Feelings. How you feel when you hear kids screaming or when you eat cake. All those kind of things. Usually something in your childhood will have strong emotions attached to it. You don’t have to consciously remember it to have those strong emotions.’

Mr Smith nodded uncertainly. ‘So what’s that?’ He indicated the largest remaining red node.

Lwazi smiled. ‘That’s your next stop. But I won’t be taking you. Tubes will’

ΦΦΦ

Tubes, not surprisingly, turned out to be a surfer.

‘Dude, this is so awesome!’ He was checking the tablet, speaking to Lwazi. ‘You sure you don’t want to take these? They’re still a few years back.’

Lwazi shrugged. ‘No, it’s fine. Technically it’s in the past, but if you follow the lines, you’ll see it ties up more with the present.’

Tubes was nodding along as Lwazi spoke. ‘Sweet! Well, check you later, dude.’

He looked up at Mr Smith, down at the tablet, then up again, smiling. ‘So, shall we visit the big day?’

‘What big day?’

ΦΦΦ

His immediate thought was that he looked so much thinner on his wedding day. It’s amazing how much weight just creeps in unnoticed. He glanced sideways at Tubes, who was wearing a tie over his faded Billabong shirt. He smiled back at him.

‘You gotta dress the part dude.’

He was still grinning at the surfer’s sense of humour, with Tubes tapping away at the tablet, when a memory came back. One from only a few weeks ago. The tablet screen lit up.

Tubes looked up. 'Dude, this is awesome. Let's go.'

'But we've hardly been here a few seconds.'

He smiled, indicating the tablet. 'That Lwazi is one smart dude, hey. He programmed A.I. into this thing.'

'A.I.? Artificial intelligence?'

'Yeah, that kind. It learns more and more every time, so it sorts out your memories faster. And there's less red stuff remaining, so it's even faster. You'll see. The rest will be quick.'

Mr Smith nodded. 'So I guess we're going there?' He pointed to the largest of the remaining red nodes.

ΦΦΦ

Tubes was wearing a surgical mask, seeing as they were visiting the birth of his son. They were only there for a few seconds, but it was enough for another memory to flash through his mind. Mr Smith dreaded that he himself could also now make out a pattern.

ΦΦΦ

Tubes was wearing a party hat. This party at least he recognised immediately. It happened only two weeks ago. His son's fourth birthday party. But something was amiss, and Tubes also picked it up.

'Dude... why aren't you here?'

'I don't know. I remember being there. At least I think I do.'

'Oh, you definitely attended. Wouldn't have this memory if you didn't.' The tablet made a few beeping noises. Tubes looked down at it, a furrow across his brow. 'This is weird. It says here...' He looked up again, suddenly more stern. 'I see. You were here, but you weren't... here. Your thoughts were somewhere else. I think I know where we're going next. Would you like to guess?'

Mr Smith shook his head slowly. 'It can't be.'

ΦΦΦ

You didn't need more than a few seconds to see that he was flirting with his client – a very attractive woman in her late twenties, probably about ten years younger than him. They left almost immediately.

☐☐☐

He sat with Tubes and Lwazi in an office, shaking his head slowly.

'But we never did anything.'

'Other than lust, you mean?' Tubes wasn't his cheerful self anymore.

'Look, I told her this couldn't go anywhere. That I'm married. And I have children.'

'Did you tell your wife?' Lwazi was still polite, but less so.

Mr Smith shook his head. 'I didn't see the need. I told this woman I can't do her taxes anymore, didn't charge her for her last return and then referred her to a different company.' They sat in silence for a while.

'Look, why's it so important? I'm just a tax accountant. And I can't be the only guy who almost made a mistake, can I? Out of a hundred and fifty thousand people coming through here every day? What about the full blown adulterers? Those people registering on those websites with the express purpose of cheating. And the murderers and rapists? And in fifty years, I'm the only four five one? Why me? I mean I did the right thing. At least... I thought I did.'

Lwazi and Tubes looked at each other. Tubes nodded, indicating to Mr Smith. 'Show him.'

'We can't.'

'It's not a rule. Just a guideline.'

Lwazi sighed, beckoned Mr Smith to come over and look at the tablet. It still showed his lifeline, with only one red node remaining.

'You know this screen, right?' Mr Smith nodded as Lwazi tapped a few times. 'Well, this shows how your lifeline interacts with those of others.' It was an elongated tear shape bundle of lines, his own lifeline showing up clearly in the fat part.

‘Now as you can see, yours has an extremely long tail. That’s quite unusual. Extremely unusual in fact. It’s also just as unusual to find that in a tail.’ He pointed to a large red blob almost at the end of the tail.

‘What is that?’

‘That is the life of the second president of the Union, the guy that will avert the largest, most destructive war ever. He’ll bring the world back from the brink of complete annihilation, toward the first truly sustained period of peace ever. Only, at the moment, it’s not going to happen that way.’

He looked sternly at him. ‘Because of you.’

ΦΦΦ

Lwazi had on his usual nerdy office attire, but Tubes was wearing a Star Trek suit.

Mr Smith was confused. ‘Hannes said we can’t visit the future.’

Tubes shook his head. ‘Don’t, not can’t. We don’t visit the future. We can visit it, but we don’t, for fear of causing a catastrophe. It’s usually best not to know what’s about to happen. But I do like to think that my great-grandchildren won’t die in an H-bomb blast, so we’re making an exception. Just don’t tell Hannes, he’s a bit stuckup when it comes to rules.’

Lwazi was nervously tapping on the tablet. He looked up. ‘Right. I’ve found two points we can visit, without causing too much trouble and without...’, he suddenly looked very guilty, ‘...you know... without being caught.’

‘Relax, dude. We’re not breaking any rules, just twisting them around like a koeksister. And remember, this dude is dead already. We’re only showing him the possibility of what might happen, should we decide to send him back and he does the honourable thing. This isn’t his future set in stone. The set in stone future is the one where he’s dead.’

Lwazi, suddenly brightened up. ‘You’re right. I didn’t think about that.’ He smiled at Mr Smith. ‘Let’s go visit your house ten years from now.’

ΦΦΦ

He was glad to see he actually lost some weight again. Had they told him, he would have been less glad to know it was because of a non-deadly encounter with cancer.

The scene itself was a normal family dinner. His daughter looked as if she's just about ready to go to university. His wife looked barely a day older and his son... He smiled. His son definitely takes after his mother's side of the family. Lucky for him, otherwise he would have been a skinny wimp like himself.

His attention was drawn to the visitor, who appeared to be one of his son's friends. They were obviously having a good time, the visitor included.

'So, is that kid going to save the world?'

'Not that dude, no. But his grandson will.'

'So how can this be relevant?'

Lwazi and Tubes looked at each other, reaching some unspoken conclusion that Tubes should explain. 'That kid comes from a broken home, but what he gets here...', he indicated the family around the table, '...this is his anchor. This shows him what a family can be. Then, when he grows up and you help him get a bursary to go and study, he becomes a well-rounded individual. He eventually marries a great girl he meets at university and, for all intents and purposes, they live happily ever after – with an almost fanatical devotion to family values. And now we need to go to the next node.'

ΦΦΦ

It was some kind of inaugural speech. The guy standing on the podium was obviously a newly elected president. He just had the right aura – as well as a whole entourage of bodyguards and related hangers-on.

Lwazi nodded in his direction. 'Listen to this part.'

It was obvious that the president was a natural speaker, his speech being lively and engaging, not like he learned public speaking from a scratched CD. He didn't even have any notes in front of him. He was describing how his family values – instilled in him by his father and grandfather – will be the driving values of his tenure, and how

he will strive to instil a sense of mutual respect in everybody and especially between nations.

ΦΦΦ

They were suddenly back in the office. Mr Smith and Tubes looked slightly annoyed at not hearing the rest of the speech.

Lwazi shrugged. 'Sorry. If we stayed longer, we would have been found out. But you heard enough.'

Mr Smith's raised eyebrows prompted an explanation from Tubes. 'Dude, it's simple. Because that dude's grandfather learnt the value of family from your family, he himself will live those values. He will truly believe in it. And that's what the world will need at that stage. Respect. Somebody has to be willing to stand up and apologise. To not want to get in the last word.'

Lwazi nodded. 'More specifically the last punch. Or missile.'

Tubes nodded at Lwazi. 'Yeah, that. Somebody needs to be the bigger man – or in this case, nation – and offer a truce. Even though the other side was the last to launch a missile.'

Mr Smith nodded slowly, comprehension dawning at long last. 'So what do I do now?'

Lwazi was looking stern. 'You go apologise to your wife. You work at your relationship again.'

'But she doesn't even know. Our relationship isn't even bad.'

'You're dead, remember. The other woman will be at the funeral. Some secretary will end up saying the wrong thing. Something along the lines of that woman being here. Your wife will hear it. She'll put two and two together. Even if you live, and don't apologise in time, somebody will still say the wrong thing at the wrong time. Living or dead, that's where it will all go wrong. It will smash her sense of family values. Those self-same values that will save the earth. If you're dead, she'll fall from the arms of one unsuitable guy to the next. If you're still alive, she'll divorce you – and fall from one guy to the next. Either way, your kids will be the ones to suffer. And the president's

grandfather won't learn family values from your home, because there won't be any family to have those values. He'll still be president, mind you, but he'll be a different man. A man that will go to war, rather than to peace negotiations.' Lwazi was breathing heavily after the rant, staring him straight in the eye, no sign anymore of the shy nerd.

Mr Smith sat silently for a while. 'I see. I'm sorry.'

'Don't apologise to me. Go tell your wife.'

Mr Smith nodded. 'I will. Thanks.'

Lwazi's smile returned. 'Then I'd say we can let Hannes know you're ready to return.'

Mr Smith frowned. 'Just one more thing. What's this Union that he's the president of?'

Tubes shook his head. 'Sorry dude. Not important for you to know.'

☐☐☐

'Clear!'

A jolt shook him, followed by a sudden beeping noise starting up, somewhere beyond the fog. Cheering. Somebody was cheering. A thought managed to swim through the fog. So they do actually shout Clear! before they defibrillate you.

His eyelids felt like they were held closed with glue, but he forced them open. There was a bustle of activity around him. He appeared to be lying on his living room floor. His wife looked down at him, tears welling up in her eyes.

'I thought you were gone. I thought I lost you forever.'

He managed a faint smile. 'No. I still have something I need to tell you.'

She smiled back. 'Not now. You need to go to hospital. Just promise me you won't leave us behind.'

'I'm not going anywhere. That's a promise. But I have to tell you as soon as possible.'

☐☐☐

He came back from the brink of death to confess and make amends. Of course she forgave him. Why wouldn't she? He did the honourable thing anyhow.

When I was first asked if I would like to interview a young gentleman called Paul Crilley, who had his debut adult S.F. novel published, my initial reaction was...."who?" I then discovered that he has worked on over thirteen TV shows; has worked with Fox Television, written ten novels, worked on five computer games, and is now making his way in the comic book field. He came up with the idea of a six issue comic book mini-series, X-Files: Conspiracy, where he had to bring together, "The Transformers", "Ghostbusters", "The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles" and "The Crow", into one coherent story. He reckons it was "very hard!"

Paulo is from Dundee in Scotland, and arrived here when he was thirteen years old. Just before he left Scotland he went to a second-hand book shop and bought two books to keep himself entertained on his way to South Africa. The authors were Terry Pratchett and Douglas Adams, and he reckons that ever since then he was hooked on Science Fiction and Fantasy.

His bedside table always has at least ten novels on it, but he never seems to have enough time to read them all.

He enjoys Robin Hobb and Tad Williams for Fantasy and William Gibson and James S.A. Corey (who has written the "Expanse" series) for Science Fiction.

His ten previously published novels are for children of various ages, and he has the hope his books may encourage more children to take up reading. He does a lot of reading with his own children.

When at school in Dundee, at the age of ten or eleven, he wrote a story and was given an "A" for it, and that's when he knew he was going to be a writer. Some of the first books he read were "Hardy Boys" novels, and he has recently completed writing one himself.

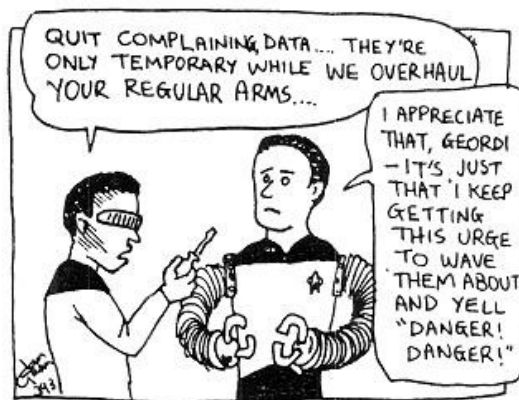
He doesn't believe in reading critiques of his own work, and tries not to, but then can't help himself, which, as he says, is usually a big mistake.

Paul is the kind of author who plans everything in advance for each novel, and only once this is done does he start writing. Then about halfway through he finds he has changed the story so much he has to give up his plan.

He completed his first adult novel, "Poison City", before letting his agent take it to a different publisher from the one he normally used, and it was accepted. He was obviously very pleased with this and is now working on a series based on "Poison City". The next book is called "Clockwork City"

He also enjoys watching Sf and Fantasy movies and really enjoyed the latest "Star Trek" offering.

As they say in Scotland "Lang may your lum reek", or as Mr Spock would say "Live Long and Prosper."

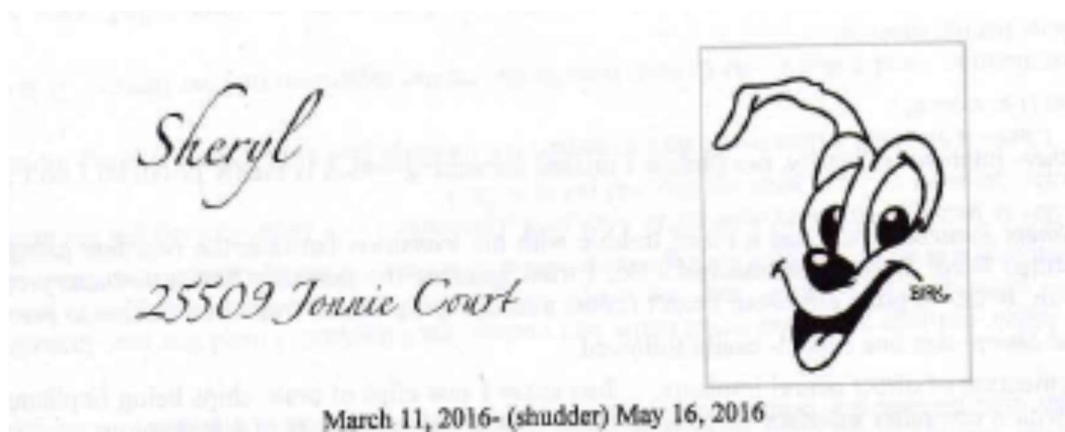


Best of SFSA Volume III

The Best stories from the Nova short story competitions in the 1990's.

If you don't yet have a copy contact the secretary and we will send you one.

secretary@sffsa.org.za



Dear Probies, Argh, if my (grated, usually a bit "off") records are correct, my last loc was mailed in February 2015. Here I have #161-164, which only get me up to June of 2015 sorry. The covers of 161-163 seem to be variations on a theme--with #164 being a much brighter image-- yet all are by the same artist. I'll do my best to get something done about a response and hunt further to see if more issues are hiding around here somewhere. No excuse, just apologies)this will, of necessity, be short---more apologies. FYI- the smoke alarms I have must be discarded in the trash and not recyclable since they do have small amounts of isotopes present. I am not exactly sure how it functions as a part of identifying smoke etc- but maybe(?) it is a step toward its use in actual batteries (again, not sure how, but..). Maybe, just maybe, the future is a little closer to today than we thought? I thought it was interesting that they have to go to a landfill and that regular trash collectors pick them up routinely. (Unreal City is a strong starter. Personally, the further I got into the story the more it appeared the terms were for terms sake rather than starting by defining the "new" things/ideas and then using the vocabulary to further the tale. I just couldn't get involved with the story- while facts abound, no tale with a beginning/middle/end. Uh, admission- the New York World's Fair was where my High School class went for our class trip. Unfortunately other than that sphere image, I don't remember anything else about the fair itself. The Last Dreamseer starts with some ground laying. It has some plot development, but is still top heavy with description rather than action. I liked it, but felt it needed heavy handed editing and expansion. There But for the Grace--more story and plot, but nebulous resolution. (Unconditional Love- I tried to read it, but am not exactly sure of

the vocabulary...it seemed as if it might be an interesting tale, but I'm really not sure when I was uncertain of about one word in 3 or 4. #762-yeouch- just looked at the date at the bottom of the page on the editorial-- December 2014. Silver-interesting read, but doesn't feel as if it is an entire product--beginning, middle, and end. It reads as if it might give information on a more fully formed and longer bit of writing. Thank you for the history lesson of the *SFSA* I had no idea the club had been in existence that long! The Last War-in a odd way this reminds me of the current US TV show Sleepy Hollow- although it would be quite a stretch to call the "visitors" as angels. Again, no real ending other than a full stop, but an interesting read. Mozie 950604030- I was really following the unfolding and...then it stopped. Enjoyed- just wish more and more plot. Wormhole 3 does pop up every now and then doesn't it!

#163 Chemical Creatures interesting. Many of the side trips (detailed information that could be a guidebook for tales to come-- backstories etc..) are very interesting-so much so that I was 10 pages in before I realized I had no clear-cut idea old where the tale was headed. I am ambivalent about that- ghod or bad? The details are good-as is my suspension of concern for a "road" map...unless suicide is the plot (or if I am completely off base). Be interesting to see if the *SFFSA* pursues participating the National Arts Festival in the manner suggested by Philip Machanick. (argh-commercial break--another ish, #166 just arrived--meaning #165 is hiding around here somewhere so I am further behind than I thought!)

Foxfather- interesting fantasy, but (unless I missed something-which is totally possible) I don't see an ending resolution. What Shem Remembered-I had a bit of trouble with the transition between the first few paragraphs and the section entitled I{that Shem Remembered. So, I tried ignoring the perfectly fine introductory paragraphs and went on with Sft. A good effort-but I can't follow a natural progression from introduction to resolution. Electric Sheep- this one I liked- easily followed. I see a mention of direct neural implants.... Just today I saw clips of brain chips being implanted in paralysis sufferers- with a computer interface directly to those muscles affected (sort of a technology way around the log jam blocking impulses) which allowed the patient being filmed to begin using hands-- this is just the start of the treatment. ! am just now seeing it- but apparently this actually was reported in June

2014. I have no idea where the technology stands today! As far as I can tell, there is an earlier (2011) patient--but I don't think of them as truly similar."-But, perhaps it is an indicator that things will be speeding up in this area of medical technology.

#164 String Magic-reminds me I have never really had nachos, but I digress! I liked this one. Introduction that sets things up - goal described, then-step-by step -Sounds to be the first-"complete" instalment in a layered...um. -universe (not sure what the right term would be when you add in all the extra dimensions). (argh- this is getting ridiculous now up to May first. I promise I will forgo looking for the missing #165 and get this mailed as soon as I can wrap up this and get to #166!)

Short Cuts-- a scientist's dream- all data streamed in directly.. just sitting there waiting for analysis and interpretation (i.e. a cure!). Congratulations (and a thank you to your benefactor) on the expansion of your library. It is always nice to get donations for the shelves!

Paige Unturned- if I were Mark I'd be a bit ticked off at having my time-stilled peace and quiet interrupted, but family is family.

#166

In case I continue to forget- do enjoy the Alexander Preuss wrap-arounds. Chairman's Notes--sad to say, I don't think reading will be a biggie in the future. I was amazed that cursive is no longer being taught in the public schools (after all, the kids today don't interact in print other than in um...er.. print).I'd be tempted to say that would mean they are incapable of reading a handwritten letter- but many of them would ask what that is. Sigh. It would seem an interactive communication will be more in line with their communication. Or face-to-face (not sure what you call it when all the face-t-face stuff is all electronic). I have read, listened to, and seen sf. Personally, the one that seems the most engaging is reading- that way I can envision characters any way I wish....listening constrains characters etc a bit more and seeing it restricts it even more. So, to me, the most imagination engaging is the most basic--reading. Ah well, this is what is called progress, whether I like it or not.

(I promise even though it is now Friday the 13th-May- I will get this done or send it off incomplete)

The Hour of the Rat--Cain and Frankie are believable at the beginning, but things get a bit disconnected as the story goes on. I thought the "ending" was telegraphed until realized it was an end stop and not an actual wrapping up of the story. Potential.

The Sanfey Cave- (Sussie?) I have a problem with the two main character being children:-but no age being implied--yet talking about the *very small brown creatures*. *Beings about the size of small children* Small doesn't tell the size unless there is context-if the speakers are children themselves- how small is small? I think this could really benefit from someone reading to edit for dialogue/text flow and agreement. There was resolution but I think the tale needs tightening.

In the piece about self-driving cars, in one of the recent TV ads about such things, it specifically said the car can stop before the driver is even aware of the potential collision. Okay, car take the "initiative" to *put* on the brakes-- and in the *ensuing non-accident*, the non-driver is injured or killed...but the mandate to avoid an actual crash has been fulfilled. -So, if any, where does the liability fall? At the very least this progress will create a whole batch of other concerns and law holes. We'll see how it all unfolds. Ah yes, another brand new world.

. At the Crossing of the Moons- I am by no means a critic--but that first sentence is a paragraph and should also be the hook. I'd start by simply making the first sentence and keeping the tense consistent-Mila tied the unicorn to the tree and walked away. She paced out exactly nine steps then turned widdershins three times and seated herself cross-legged on the ground. She sat beneath the sacred triple elm, with the setting crossed moons behind her. Well, that is not a good final draft, but... As I say, I am not (and don't pretend to be a critic--just thought it might give the author something to think about. With some tightening, I think this could well be a part of larger work- this being the explanation of how Mila came to rule.

That about does it for now-- which has actually spanned a few months in happening- - gads this is late. I'm really really sorry!

As always- thanks for all the work you



19 September 2016

Dear Gail

It was a while before I managed to get to a club meeting and I am so grateful to Gavin for driving all the way to my house to bring me some books a few times in the meantime.

On Saturday, 17 September, I joined some of the other SFFSA members at Ron's house for a day of sci-fi. Ron's house was perfect, with its big rooms and the doors opening onto the beautiful treed garden. The members were friendly and welcoming and I enjoyed the day on the whole. I was useless with the music quiz, but some of the clips were from such old or such hard-core sci-fi movies that I didn't feel bad.

There wasn't a sci-fi/fantasy literature element included in the programme, which I would have liked, but I realise that most of those who attended are long-time members and long-time readers of sci-fi, who pretty much do their own thing. I enjoyed Trevor's talk tremendously, especially the graphics and I learnt a lot from him.

It's a pity that more sci-fi/fantasy addicts aren't actively engaging in club activities and perhaps this suggests a time for research, and introspection and re-strategizing regarding the club.

I look forward to seeing you all again in the future.

Kind regards

Juliet Gillies



1706-24 Eva Rd.
Etobicoke, ON
CANADA M9C 2B2

November 22, 2016

Dear SFFSAns:

Within the space of one month, I have received two issues of Probe, 167 and 168. I suspect the international mails were playing around with one or both issues, but at least I have them both now. Time for a letter on the two.

167...Yes, Gail, we have been around for some time. As of next year, I will have been in fandom for 40 years. That's a truly scary thought in some ways. Old issues of just about any zine will show us how long we've been around. And yes, I do remember the original Battlestar Galactica from the late 1970s, with whom older Canadians know well as The Voice of Doom, Lorne Greene.

Tony, the only time I see you now is through the pages of Probe! Fandom for me has changed, as I am sure it has for many of us. It's not the way it was. Friends have moved on to other interests within what we might call fandom, as have Yvonne and I...after 30 years of con-running, we left that, only to find there wasn't much else going on, and what else could we do? We saw a display on steampunk some years ago, and being old-time costumers, we decided to look further into it. It isn't a mainstream fannish interest these days, but we are having some fun, and have made some friends. Facebook is helping us to keep in touch with friends who aren't around anymore. Even with all of our activities, we really don't have close friends, so we must go it alone to truly entertain ourselves.

Tony, I have a tablet, but no reader. My researches into the readers show me that the Kobo is perhaps the best of the lot, but getting reading materials for it is a real money sink, and right now, that's the last thing I need. My choice is books, and I still have a shelf bursting with books waiting their turn, but I really can't remember the last time I read any SF, so may still have quite a wait.

I see my two locs published here were almost a year old, according to the date I am writing this. I can say that the year 2016 was a poor year for everyone, a deadly year for the famous, and for me, a year with no employment to date. However, a recent major lead may yet blossom, and for me at this time, this would be the best Christmas present possible. Cross your fingers for me, and hope for the best. The toughest job is looking for one.

I very much enjoyed Mike Hardaker's '10'. As someone trained as a journalist, and works as a writer or editor or proofreader, when I find the work, I liked the premise of having filters and algorithms to sift the truth from the BS, which would act as a

valuable and possibly dangerous tool in this age of sudden right-wing politics. Ah, if only it was all that easy. I would use it myself.

Cosplay...I was at that Worldcon in 1984, so I have been around long enough to know when it was just hall costumes. In many ways, quantifying wearing of the hall costumes of cosplay has given costuming fans more opportunities to show off their creations, but some cosplayers get carried away, and I have seen a few of them bump into people standing around talking. I've been a little guilty of cosplay myself, with my steampunk costumes.

168...There's a name from the past, Neil van Niekerk. I don't go to Worldcons any more, but I have read that Cheryl Huff, one of the chairs of the upcoming Helsinki Worldcon, has resigned from her position.

Some of the fairs I have been to in the last year have 3D printers on display, and the technology is amazing. Now, there is software to allow you to design a 3D template, and then take it to the 3D printer at the local library (or the one you might have at home), and print it out yourself. I have heard of 3D-printed cars and houses. Who knows how far it can do?

My letter...we did go to England! The second half of August saw us in London for a week, taking in the sights, and going to Watford to see the big Harry Potter exhibits, and then four days in the town of Lincoln for The Asylum, the biggest steampunk event in the world. We had so much fun, mostly because it was so refreshingly different. We'd go back in a heartbeat.

The Office Dragon makes Nature look like an office. Maybe it's a branch of the Ministry of Magic? I am sure I would have enjoyed it more if it didn't sound so accurate.

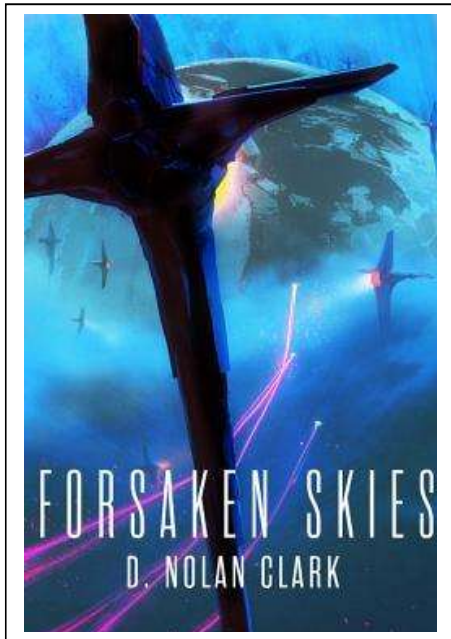
The big Star Trek exhibit in Seattle...I think it was also on display in Ottawa recently. I didn't find out about it until it was halfway through its run, so we didn't go to see it. I don't know, my interest in Trek seems to have faded quite a bit. I never saw the latest reboot movie, and I don't think I want to see it.

The fiction was read and enjoyed, but I am a poor critic...no comments. And with that, I think I am coming to the end of this letter. Given that we're less than five weeks away from Christmas, Yvonne and I would like to wish everyone in SFFSA a wonderful and fun Christmas season, and a Happy New Year. Take care, all...2016 was a terrible year for so many reasons, so let's hope 2017 is a better one. It could hardly be worse. See you then.

Yours, Lloyd Penney.

D. Nolan Clark

Forsaken Skies



Mankind has spread to the stars by the use of Wormholes. Niraya is a planet on the outer reaches of the systems, still in the process of terraforming and is very poor. The colonists discover that a huge fleet of starships is on its way to their planet, and its advance guard has already killed several hundred people. They beg the various governments to help them, but no one is interested in such a poor planet. By chance Commander Aleister Lande hears of their plight and decides to help them.

He gathers a small, a very small, group of experienced combat spaceship pilots and sets off to help Niraya.

When he arrives he discovers that he has to overcome the fears and prejudices of various religious factions, before he can combat the enemy.

The author writes very well, and in the main the book is very entertaining, but at 570 pages it is just too long. Here and there it needed some serious editing and I occasionally found myself skipping sections.

This is Book I of a series called "The Silence" and it does not finish as a story.

3/5

Ian

Blast from the past PROBE 126 Third Quarter 2004

The Crater Camping Expedition Gail Jamieson

On a fine and warm September morning several members of SFSA left Johannesburg for Parys in the Free State. We were headed for the farm of Colin Brown which is situated in the Vredefort dome, all that is left of the largest impact crater on Earth.

The Magaliesberg-Witwatersrand feature is a result of the natural upliftment from below of sedimentary sandstone layers – what was once the bottom of a sea – so that the Magaliesberg rock layers slope down to the north, while the Witwatersrand rock layers slope down to the south. The “Johannesburg Dome” in the centre of this feature is occupied by the Archean granitic crust, some 3000 to 3400 million years old.

The same rock layers seen in the Witwatersrand are found in the Vredefort dome hills, but here they are found standing nearly vertically – the result of extreme upliftment.

Geologists have found evidence that the cause of this upliftment was an extreme impact event, caused by an asteroid some 10 kilometres in diameter. The ring of hills we now see are the eroded remains of a dome caused by the rebound of the rock below the impact site after the asteroid hit. The original crater, now eroded away is estimated to have been 250 – 300 kilometers in diameter. Some 70 cubic kilometres of rock would have been vaporised in the impact.

The Vredefort structure is currently regarded as the biggest and oldest clearly visible impact structure on Earth. It has been dated at about 2.1 billion years. According to scientists the impact on the Earth's atmosphere could well have caused a setback of a few million years in the evolution of life as it existed at the time.

As we proceeded away from Joburg we could see the sky becoming increasingly dusty and by the time we got to the farm the wind was howling. Luckily by the time

we had all arrived it had dropped and we were able to set up our little tented village. At twilight we went for a tractor drive into the area of the farm where the Blesbok roam. I can't remember how long ago it was I went for a ride on a tractor-trailer sitting on bales of hay. I'm pretty sure it was before I would have gone with a bottle in my hand. However a good time was had by all and Ron has the pictures to prove it.

We got back as the sun was setting to find that the braai had been lit and we were able to get down to the serious business of eating and drinking. Unfortunately the clouds had come over and we were only occasionally able to see the stars we had hoped to observe. After eating we sat around the fire that had been lit in the "fire-pit" a circular depression surrounded by rock, the purpose of which is to prevent the fire getting into the surrounding very dry fields. After much conversation (use your imagination here) and roasting of marshmallows we all drifted off to bed. I know that I saw the magnificent stars far better when I got up during the night and I spent a little while just staring up at them.

In the morning, unfortunately the wind had got up again and it had been past all the snow on the Drakensberg on its way to us. It was freezing. We all put on all the clothes we had with us and broke our fast. Carla tried to make friends with the geese but they had little goslings and they were rather cool. We then went for a long walk. The group spread out as some looked for interesting rocks and others tried to get closer to the Blesbok. We also came across a number of late Iron Age structures, mainly closed circles which we guessed were probably animal pens.

We could clearly see the ring of mountains in the distance from the one side of the farm and it was thought-provoking to imagine that they are the edge of a dome that is the centre of a circle of destruction that is probably another 100 kilometres in the distance. Rikki said she would like to see a tiny little meteor land so we could have an idea of what had happened in the past, but I don't that any of us could really (no matter how many disaster movies we had seen),visualise an impact that would have destroyed the country-side around us for a great distance.

As we cooled down after our walk we realised that the wind was still gusting fiercely and its temperature was still arctic so we decided pack up our tents and head back home.

We were to note that 13 of our members had travelled almost 2 hours to come to an SF meeting and we are open to suggestions of other places that we can do the same sort of thing in years to come..

SF is indeed alive and well in South Africa.



Not by Bread Alone

Davide Camparsi

Winner of the XXI RiLL Trophy, 2015

Translated by Paul Virgo

God was coming for dinner on a Friday.

This had my mother in a panic: her culinary forte was roast, but could she cook meat on a Friday?

Inviting Him hadn't been hard: sending a request to His Facebook profile was all it took. Signing up had been one of the first things He'd done when He arrived on Earth, eight months before: now He had more than five billion friends. Contrary to what you might think, God had not made us beg. Metatron, His spokesman, had told my mother He was available that Friday, if it was convenient for her.

Mum was on edge; though Dad pulled her leg, deep down he was just as nervous; my sister, Anna, on the other hand, was in ecstasy. In her room there was a poster of Gabriel, the archangel, as handsome as a... as a teenage rock star; they said he was always present at such occasions, which had sent her loopy. Just like all her idiot friends.

I looked at the photo of Patrick on the desk and I didn't know what to think. Or what to feel.

The space ship had been a master stroke.

Who would have expected it, do you know what I mean? Two thousand years of the Book of Revelations, delirious announcements of Lovecraft-like cosmic terrors, threats of pestilence and cataclysms, abysmal monstrosities, horsemen bearing horrors and then, one fine September morning - at the end of summer - the space ship landed on a weed-infested field on the outskirts of Rome. A perfect tetrahedron of shiny, chrome steel, without any markings or decorations: Stanley Kubrick couldn't have done it better.

Perhaps with a touch of flirtatiousness, the flying object stayed still, hovering in the tense air at less than one metre from the earth, pointing one of its sharp edges at the shabby ground.

While journalists, television reporters, police and thousands of other curious souls clogged up the capital's roads to reach the landing spot, a group of boys who were playing football in the area broke off their match and gingerly approached the object. They were the first eye witnesses to the event.

Once the images started being broadcast live worldwide, you could see some of them from behind, a few metres from the tetrahedron.

Immediately after, while one of the ship's "bulkheads" disappeared into thin air, someone brusquely sent them packing: they got in the way of the shoot.

A flame of dazzling light, thick as honey, came out of a black hole that opened in the middle of one of the triangular steel sides. You can hear the gasp of surprise when you watch the amateur videos loaded onto YouTube. I have to admit, it was impressive.

An old man with long, white hair appeared an instant later in the centre of the threadbare pitch. He wasn't very tall and you could see He had a pot belly; it has to be said that the two humanoid creatures standing by him, who were almost two metres tall with statuesque physiques, certainly did not help Him.

"Klaatu, Barada, Nikto!", the old man called out in a serious, low-pitched voice.

I don't know how many people got the quote, Italy is not a country for science-fiction lovers.

Anyway, after a moment of confusion among all those present, he started laughing heartily, unable to stop himself.

"No" he said. "I'm joking: don't shoot. I'm God and, naturally, I come in peace".

The day after a selfie with one of the boys was published. God covered his shoulders with a big, warm, enthusiastic embrace, although half of His face did not appear in the wonky photograph. The boy's face was out of focus, but radiant, as he proudly showed the soccer ball he had got the Omnipotent One to sign.

You could clearly read the name, even though it was little.

I noticed because it was the first one underneath Totti's.

One of the first things He did was to go to the Vatican.

He shook lots of hands, thanked everyone, above all the Pope, who appeared to be very embarrassed, then he had the whole shack and the puppets closed down.

"I'm here," He told the microphones during the press conference while a mobile phone number made up only of 9s was superimposed on the screen.

"Now you know where to find me, you don't have to ask at reception".

Some questioned whether it really was God, but the doubts didn't last long. He knew loads of behind-the-scenes stuff about the Old Testament, including some spicy anecdotes, and He bestowed miracles for anyone who asked Him to. Healings, above all, even though people kept dying. Like with Lazarus, right? He was resuscitated, but then he died anyway, even though that was not written in the Gospel. Anyway a delay in the inevitable is nice. Some went out of their minds: I imagine this is normal when something of the kind happens, something extraordinary that you aren't expecting. Hardcore atheists, Universal Judgement fanatics, fundamentalists, advocates and television preachers: in short, people with no sense of humour. But in general it was a period of peace and prosperity: exactly what one would hope for if God walked on the Earth.

All things taken into account, the situation returned to normal quickly.

The world didn't end or anything like that. Maybe the Christians made a bit too much of it, making a big deal of it at first, generating some tension, but then, being as religion was no longer needed, even this lost much of its importance. The presence of God alone fixed things, it solved many problems: the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the hole in the ozone layer... the preposterous petrol duties.

He even acted in the remake of *The Ten Commandments*, playing Himself. He chose Johnny Depp for the role of the Pharaoh, in the place of Yul Brynner, but his stereotyped little moves didn't convince anyone any more.

Anyway, everyone was happy.

Apart from me.

The part that could not control the anger.

The part that burned. Inside.

Where no one could see it.

Patrick made me laugh a lot. I made him laugh too.

Together we laughed loads, above all about the most stupid stuff.

I imagine it's normal, when you're kids. I've noticed that grown-ups do it a lot less; too little.

I still don't understand why it changes, or when: I promised myself to watch out for it.

I'm not good at promises, but I made this one to Patrick, to be sure.

When I look at his photo all serious I know that I'll be able to do it. Even if my hands shake, even if my eyes wobble.

"I'll race you!"

Those were the last words I said to him. I didn't think he'd take me up on it, but he would do anything to beat me and then pull my leg. The same as me: that's friendship.

I didn't know it: that's what almost always happens with last things.

What stupid words...

We threw ourselves downhill, flying on the scabrous asphalt as if nothing could hurt us. Invincible. Untouchable.

All kids think they are.

Now that I think about it, maybe that's what stops you laughing: the realization how big this lie is.

A lie that everyone keeps telling, even when it's been found out.

When you're 13 you forget that your bike has brakes, it's the relentless speed that counts. Force taken to the limit, the quest to reach the invisible confines of the world you've landed in.

When you're 13 you spread out along the frame pedalling like a madman to win an aerodynamic advantage, without worrying about the fact that balance is, by definition, ephemeral. That you are just soft flesh, brittle bone and blood ready to spill at the first opportunity; and the rest is asphalt, metal, sparks and sharp glass.



You smile while you lay down the challenge to all of this, because that's what the scornful, invincible heroes do in the movies. As if celluloid were more immortal than the soul.

I glance at Patrick, bent down on the bike, the wind forcing together my eyes, the blazing afternoon sun ricocheting off the chrome steel to make me close them completely. He glances over and smiles too, gritting his teeth, leaning down even lower on his bike. The traffic light at the bottom of the hill comes at us at warp-drive speed, as Mr Spock would say.

We are shoulder to shoulder.

The green light turns amber, but there's all the time in the world when you are 13. Time doesn't exist at that age. Look at the summers: they never end.

We are half-way down, we can do it.

We fly a millimetre over the asphalt so we aren't slowed down by the ground: the light hangs on amber. It hangs on too long.

My fingers loosen their grip on the handlebars, and move down to brush against the brakes; Patrick, at my side, doesn't even touch them. I feel a bit of a coward, but we have almost devoured all the descent and that orange orbit of the Cyclops still stares at us. I caress the brakes. Patrick doesn't.

We get to the point like bullets. That point beyond which you either jump or you stay put. I don't know if it's really me doing it, but I pull those brakes with all the strength I have. At that moment everything changes.

Not for Patrick.

He doesn't even brush by the brakes: let's see who gets there first, I dared him.

He goes past the traffic light at top speed, metallic bike lights glimmer in the sun. Even now I'm convinced it was still amber.

The car ran into him an instant after, diverting his trajectory onto a bend that it's impossible to emerge from intact.

I let my bike drop between my legs, I buckle, stumble and I fall, I get back up and run breathlessly to where flesh and metal hit the asphalt.

Patrick looks like a lost rag doll, a knot of people are gathering around him, hands in their hair, their mouths making little "O" shapes filled with muted screams.

I take him in my arms, just like my sister used to do with her dolls, when she was nothing more than snotty nipper. I squeeze as he looks at nothing.

“Don’t die, come on, you idiot,” I stutter. And then, as he doesn’t seem to be listening to me: “I beg you God, don’t let him die, I’ll-do-everything-You-want-everything! I beg You I beg You I beg You... everything!”

But that was still two months before His arrival on Earth. So God doesn’t answer, He shrugs or is busy doing something else. I don’t know. It doesn’t matter anymore.

I shouldn’t have braked that day: then now I’d be 13 forever too. I’d look at the people who love me from a photo on the desk. Everyone would only remember my good qualities. And it wouldn’t be so bad. It wouldn’t be so sore. In truth, I started to die too, on that white-hot asphalt of summer, it’s just that I’m taking longer. The rest of my life.

In the end my mother went for baked lasagne and grilled trout for the second course: she was certain she wouldn’t go wrong with fish. My father pulled her leg, saying that she should make Angel Cake for pudding. My sister even went to the hairdresser: unbelievable.

I didn’t care in the slightest, I was just hoping that the evening ended as soon as possible, so I could join my friends at the 5-a-side soccer match.

If mother hadn’t made me, I wouldn’t even have been there.

“What will I say when He asks where you are? That I’m not my son’s guardian?”

Emotional blackmail: she was always a professional in that field.

“He’s here!” my sister shouted as she looked out the window.

“God,” asked my father, fixing his tie for the umpteenth time.

“No, Gabriel!”

Then she pulled down her sweater with her finger to show off as much as possible the breasts that she didn’t have. That really would have been a massive miracle. No, two miracles.

God brought a miniature burning bush as a gift: it burned, but didn’t go out, giving a welcoming touch to the evening; then He insisted that my mother sat at the head of the table. Being as she was serving dinner, the top honour went to her. He sat opposite my father, my sister and me. Gabriel was beside Him as well as another angel,

arguably even more attractive, but of few words and with a worried look. He was the only one to look at the photo of Patrick, staring at it for a long time, but he didn't say anything. When our eyes crossed, I had the impression that he knew me better than anyone else.

God was funny. He told a load of jokes and He seemed to really like my mother's cooking; when He confessed that He supported Hellas Verona during the 1984-85 season, I think my father would have had himself circumcised, there on the spot, if it had made Him happy. As for my sister Anna, every time that Gabriel looked up, she turned as red as a supernova about to collapse on itself: the funny thing was that that archangel seemed just as embarrassed. At a certain point, when no one was looking, his tenebrous colleague winked at me and pretended to stick his finger down his throat. I almost sprayed the Coke I was swallowing and risked getting decapitated by my mother's cake slice. It was the only enjoyable moment of the night for me, but the rebel angel reminded me so much of Patrick in that moment that an intolerable sense of melancholy enveloped me immediately after.

"I've got to go," I said, more abruptly than I intended, noisily getting up from the table. "They're waiting for me for the match."

There was a brief moment of silence; I didn't dare look at my mother, but I could still feel her waves of disapproval break over me... and pain. I felt the pain too.

God ended the discomfort.

"Of course son. Score one for me."

I went out the back way, thinking that I could sneak off by climbing over the fence. Even though I could see Him behind me through the living room window, consumed by explaining to my mother how many ways you can cook manna, he was also there waiting for me in the garden.

Damned ubiquity.

"You don't like me much, do you?"

I didn't answer. There was no need. He was God, right? He knew everything.

"Do you want to sit down for a minute, here with Me?"

"I prefer to stand".

"All right."

"He was my friend."

"I know".

He seemed absorbed, lost in distant thoughts. I gripped my football bag hard, so hard my nails sank into my palm. And then I said it, before I could stop myself.

"Why didn't You do anything? Would it have been so much trouble for You? Didn't I pray enough?"

I was shaking, there, standing before God.

"Why do good people die? Friends... if You really can do everything, why did You make things like this... so shit?"

There you go: I let my concentration slip, and the nasty black dog, bruised and swollen with anger that was all mine, had got off the lead and was running wild, ready to bite. Anger that I had kept hungry for almost a year. He looked at me, perhaps embarrassed. I couldn't see properly through the tears that I had started to cry.

"I only had six days," He said.

I stayed silent, trying, and failing, to suffocate the hiccups, like one of my sister's stupid friends would have done.

"I'm sorry, it's not funny," God acknowledged, lowering His shoulders.

He sighed again, but not out of impatience.

"I'll try but I'm not very good at explanations. The Commandments are easier: do this, don't do that..."

When He looked at me again, I felt something in my stomach.

"Have you ever had an idea that, once you start toying with it, it doesn't let you sleep?"

He asked. "Like that time when they told you the story of Icarus and you and Patrick were convinced that you'd be able to make some wings of your own and try them out by jumping from the fourth floor of his apartment building?"

I blushed. We were just snotty kids in the third year of school at the time; I should have complained; but I realised that this was not the point.

"Or the Wright brothers, to stay on the same subject. Imagine conceiving something heavier than air that flies, in spite of every preconception. Something that leaves you breathless for the beauty of its passion. You can't free yourself from an obsession like that once you've dreamt it. Something remains inside you..."

At that point, He turned serious, despite His enthusiasm. Sombre.

“Even if someone will transform that dream into the bombers that will unleash a sea of flames on Dresden... even if, behind grey rectangles, other men, a million of them, will burn in the same wind that you dreamed of flying in...

“I was there and believe me, not even God can stand so much pain...”

He nodded towards the living room behind us.

“Did you see Eosphorus at dinner before, my handsome troubled angel? Even he accuses Me, he thinks that I have allowed too much: that I got everything wrong. Like you. If only you'd seen the enthusiasm with which he lit the stars, at the dawn of Creation, you wouldn't recognise him now. Pain causes blinding wounds.

“And yet, despite the doubts, all the accusations and this inextricable mess, I still see a disarming beauty in life.

“After a night of casual sex, a girl gives birth to a boy who becomes a murderer, who in his cell will write a poem before dying and being forgotten, which will be read by a man who will whisper it to his sweetheart, who will leave him two years later, drunk and with a child to look after, who will become an artist, who cut his ear off and paint masterpieces capable of igniting emotions... where does the right end and the wrong begin? Is it possible to separate the wheat from the chaff without spoiling everything?” God shook His head, right in front of me.

“Do you really think I give a damn about making judgements? There's no design, I'm not so narrow-minded to decide for others or to use them like puppets.

“I don't go around with wire making bonsais out of your lives... One night, before everything existed, I simply had a dream, full of contradictions, yes, but also of enormous beauty that I still have not fallen out of love with... and I let myself go.”

At that point God got up and I realised that He was not much taller than me. He put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed slowly. I noticed how rough it was and, who knows why, I thought it reminded me of the hand of a carpenter, someone capable of doing good things, with patient passion.

“The truth is that sometimes you just can't pull the brakes,” He told me. “Just hurl yourself over the crossroads. It will be your making or your downfall. All the rest is life that happens.”

He left us a few months later.

My sister cried a little when Gabriel told us they were leaving, promising to write often. My mother, on the other hand, gave a sigh of relief: she never accepted her going out with someone a few billion years older than her.

"It's been nice. I'll be back. Be good," God said before boarding the tetrahedron, which was still parked in the same field it landed in. Then he tore up some parking fines, a dazzling light appeared and the space ship took off without noise, quickly mingling into the sky, among the other stars, like the tail of a comet.

It left behind a strange sensation, I admit it, like when you feel you've forgotten something and you can't remember what it is. Or when a tooth falls out and your tongue keeps going to check the hole left behind. Less than a month passed when a rumour went around that we'd witnessed a con, that God did not exist and, if He did exist, the real one could not have been so short.

In short, everything went back to normal, more or less. Even the pope stepped back into Saint Peter's but now, during his much shorter and concise homilies, he often quoted Yoda from Star Wars, as God once said that He was a fan of Lucas's original trilogy.

This enabled me to learn one or two truths: that we would never change and that – because of this – a lot of love was needed.

For my part, I never had any doubts about the fact that God had visited us.

Not because of the dinner at our house, or because of the words He said that night, but because now, when I look at the photo on the desk, Patrick smiles at me again.

And I have started smiling again too.

Davide Camparsi was born in 1970 in Verona (Italy), where he works as an architect. A passionate reader, he started writing on a regular basis in 2012.

"Perché Nulla Vada Perduto" (So That Nothing is Lost), winner of the XIX RiLL Trophy in 2013, was his first story to be published. Since then he has had success in many important Italian literary awards devoted to science-fiction and speculative fiction. His stories and novellas have been published in many magazines and anthologies by various Italian publishers over the last three years.


In 2015 “Not by Bread Alone” won the 21th Trophy RiLL (2015), placing first among 297 entrants.

The Trofeo RiLL is an Italian literary award for budding writers of speculative fiction. The contest has been organized since 1994 by RiLL - Riflessi di Luce Lunare, a non-profit club based in Rome. Each edition of the Trofeo RiLL has around 250-300 short-story participants, from Italy and other countries. Winning entries are annually published in MONDI INCANTATI anthologies, which are directly edited by RiLL.

The final ceremony of Trofeo RiLL is hosted by Lucca Comics & Games, the most important Italian festival concerning the fantastic imagination (more than 250.000 visitors in 2016).

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR: SFFSA PROBE MAGAZINE James Dryja

I really enjoyed your review of THE GATEWAY TO SPACE EXHIBITION! What really intrigued at the Exhibition was the story of how Werner von Braun, the German scientist of the 2nd World War, got involved.

As a school boy, ok, school teenager! I read up avidly all I could find on NASA particularly the early history; No mean feat then as no internet in those days (however did we survive?!). Von Braun got my interest: Rocket propulsion fascinated him: It was him who at the tender age of 12, rocketed down the main street in his firework-propelled child's wagon!

With the rise of Nazism he became not just a member of the Party but also the SS in his early 20's! However, according to the exhibition, it was only to further his obsession with rocket science but he has admitted that he got swept up in the Fatherland Fervour. It all culminated in the English-named Doodle-bugs (trust them to apply such a euphemism to a Death Rocket!) These were the V1 and V2 Rockets which, launched from the Baltic Sea village Peenemunde, rained down on London in the latter part of the war. These were von Braun's brainchild for his personal purpose of perfecting rocket engineering rather than the war effort (don't tell Hitler!). A satirist mocked him with the phrase "I aim at the stars but sometimes I hit London"! (We humans are weird: most advances are through warfare not peacetime attempts – even the internet started as a military project; wonder how it is with aliens?)

As WW2 ended the US and the USSR suddenly remembered that they were sworn enemies (oops) and no matter what atrocities the Nazis had committed the scientists were snapped up by each side, though the exhibition explained that von Braun made a choice and worked at getting accepted by the US. Once he was in, he sold his space exploration ideas to them, and President Eisenhower formed NASA, and the rest, as they say, is history.

AND THUS WAS BORN THE SPACE RACE.

ESA Sends a Digital Message to a Possible Extraterrestrial Civilization --"If We are In Danger of an Alien Invasion, It's Too Late" from "The Daily Galaxy"

Today's 14-minute digital transmission of 3,000 messages beamed toward Polaris, the North Star, by the European Space Agency's Cebreros deep-space tracking station in Spain ends a year-long effort known as "A Simple Response to an Elemental Message," spearheaded by Irish-born artist Paul Quast, who solicited 3,775 text-only messages from around the world in response to this question: "How will our present environmental interactions shape the future? "The challenge of constructing any interstellar message is trying to anticipate what you and your recipient have in common," said psychologist Douglas Vakoch, president of METI International, an organization dedicated to detecting alien intelligence.

"One thing we can guarantee is they won't be native speakers of English or Swahili or Chinese." And the same problem applies to any incoming message to Earth. "It's very reasonable to think that we will know there's an extra-terrestrial out there, that we will have a message that is distinctly artificial, but that we won't be able to decipher it," Vakoch added. The ESA is ignoring Stephen Hawking's stark warning has been among those warning that communicating with aliens could be a threat to Earth: "If aliens visit us, the outcome would be much as when Columbus landed in America, which didn't turn out well for the Native Americans. We only have to look at ourselves to see how intelligent life might develop into something we wouldn't want to meet" "We don't know when earthlings will discover ET. It could be 1,000 years from now, or in our lifetimes. It could be next year, when China's new FAST radio telescope, now the world's largest, gets going on the sky surveys," said Dan Werthimer, co-founder and chief scientist of the SETI@home project. "China's latest telescope will be able to look further than past searches for extra-terrestrial intelligence," says Vakoch. With no clues of extra-terrestrial life over the past five decades, questions are constantly asked as whether the search methods are appropriately. Cixin, a Chinese science fiction writer and winner of the Hugo Award for his novel The Three Body Problem, points out the current method assumes that aliens also communicate in radio waves. "But if it's a truly advanced civilization, it is possible to use other more advanced forms of communication, such as gravitational waves." But Shude Mao, a research professor at China's National Astronomical

Observatories (NAOC), and Chair of the Division of Galaxy and Cosmology, believes many methods deserve a try: "Who knows what they are and how they think? "When we study the origin of life, we risk going down a blind alley if we only have one sample from Earth," Mao says. "If we could find more samples in the universe, we could look at the puzzle more comprehensively and solve it more easily. "Mao gives an example in astronomy to explain the limitations of a single sample. "When scientists started to look for planets around Sun-like stars, they thought it must be difficult as their period might be as long as a year. However, the first such planet discovered outside our solar system takes only four days to orbit its host star - much faster than astronomers expected. At that time, some people doubted it, showing how the example of our solar system narrowed their thinking. "If we really discover extra-terrestrial life, I'd like to know how life spreads in the universe. Is it distributed uniformly in space, or clustered?" Mao wonders. *The Three Body Problem* by Liu Cixin depicted the universe as a jungle with every civilization as a hidden hunter. Those who are exposed will be eliminated. But Han Song, another leading Chinese science fiction writer, believes humans naturally want to connect, citing the Internet as proof. "I think aliens might think similarly. It is a biological instinct to connect with each other. Everyone wants to prove that they are not alone in the universe. Loneliness is intolerable to humans," he says. He also points out that the contact will be driven by curiosity and real requirements. "Humans will ultimately go to space to find resources and expand their living area, so it will be hard to avoid aliens. Contact with them, especially those with more advanced intelligence, may help us leap forward in civilization. "Regardless of the theoretical debate, scientists have never wavered in the search."I think we shall call out. As a matter of fact, we have been yelling for years, and our radios and televisions are broadcasting in space all the time," Mao says, "Aren't you curious what our counterparts would look like? "If they are inferior or equal to us in terms of civilization, we won't be easily destroyed. If they are much more intelligent than us, they wouldn't be so narrow-minded as to compete with us. Some worry they will come to rob us of our natural resources, but they likely have the power to transform the entire globe already. What's the point of eliminating a much lower civilization? "Mao believes the result will be significant. "If we find other life, it will undoubtedly be the most important scientific discovery in our history; if not,

it shows that life on Earth is unique and we should respect life and cherish each other. “No matter the outcome, we shall never stop searching, and I hope to hear more voices and contributions from Chinese scientists.” But, even if Polaris harbours a habitable planet, its inhabitants won’t get the message until around the year 2450. But they’ll already know that a Beatles song was sent by NASA in 2008. Physicist Mark Buchanan argued in *Nature Physics* that earthlings should resist the temptation to broadcast powerful signals to the stars. “At worst the consequences could be catastrophic. ... At the very least, the idea seems morally questionable,” he wrote. This month, Vakoch provided a not-so-simple response in *Nature Physics*. On one hand, he noted that we’ve already been broadcasting our existence for decades. “If we are in danger of an alien invasion, it’s too late,” he wrote. On the other hand, Vakoch argued that there’s a potential cost to staying silent – “for example, missing guidance that could enhance our own civilization’s sustainability, or averting attacks from aliens who would otherwise annihilate us for not reaching out.” Scientists already have a process for judging the merit of METI projects: peer review,” Vakoch said. “Decisions about allocating time for METI at publicly funded observatories should rely on the same procedure used for competing experiments.”

“I don’t think this is a matter to be settled by scientific peer review,” said Washington State University astrobiologist Dirk Schulze-Makuch. “The repercussions of sending a message and possibly getting a response — or even an alien visit — are just too great for this to be decided by a small group of scientists alone.” Schulze-Makuch suggested that international protocols, presumably established by the United Nations, and which procedures we follow if we get a reply. “We have a lot of problems as a species that we’re struggling with,” Vakoch said. “We’re not sure if we’re even going to survive as a species on our planet. I think a more informative message would be actually to talk about some of the challenges we face because I think that’s one of the defining characteristics of our civilization. “Or perhaps people shouldn’t bother composing a message at all. Another SETI scientist, astronomer Seth Shostak, has proposed that we just broadcast everything on the Google servers out to aliens.” Instead of trying to think of what’s fundamental, just send them a lot of data and let them sort through and find the pattern,” Vakoch said.

From “The Daily Galaxy”



Arecibo Radio Telescope, Puerto Rico



China's latest telescope

