

# PROMETHEUS

## Libertarianism and science fiction

By Ilya Somin

Libertarianism is better represented in science fiction and fantasy than in any other literary genre. From Robert Heinlein to the present day, libertarian writers have been among the leaders in the field. Even many genre writers who are not self-consciously libertarian have often made use of libertarian themes in their work.

While there is no definitive survey data on the subject, libertarian readers also seem more likely to be attracted to science fiction and fantasy than other genres. Historians of the movement routinely emphasize the role of science fiction works in helping to inspire it. Ayn Rand, probably the most widely read libertarian writer of modern times, included science fictional elements in her most famous novels, including *Atlas Shrugged*.

Why is science fiction so much more libertarian than other genres? The answer matters both to people interested in the genre and students of political ideology. I will try to explain both the reasons why science fiction is unusually libertarian and the reasons why it matters.

Analysis of the connection between libertarianism and science fiction is more difficult than it should be because both libertarianism and science fiction are contested concepts. Self-described libertarians disagree among themselves over many matters. Most favor strictly limited government, but some would abolish the state entirely. Libertarians are also divided between those who base their views on natural rights and those who emphasize utilitarian consequentialism. For present purposes, I define libertarianism broadly as the ideology that seeks to impose very tight limits on government power on both economic and social issues. Anarchists, advocates of the minimal state, natural rights libertarians, and utilitarian ones all agree on that much.

Similarly, barrels of ink and huge numbers of computer pixels have been devoured by the debate over the proper definition of science fiction. Here, too, I opt for a broad, inclusive definition. Science fiction includes any story set in a world that is vastly different from our present-day reality and any past historical society. This covers fiction set in low-tech fantasy

worlds as well as high-tech futures, though at times I will consider fantasy literature as a separate category of its own.

### Why the Politics of Science Fiction Matters

Why should we care if there is an unusually high concentration of libertarian writers and readers in the science fiction genre? It turns out that the politics of science fiction has implications that go beyond the genre itself.

Most people pay little attention to politics, but spend much more time and energy following popular culture. And science fiction is an important part of that culture. A 2010 Harris poll found that about 26% of American adults read science fiction novels, thereby making science fiction one of the most popular literary genres (trailing only mysteries and thriller novels). That is a much larger proportion than read nonfiction books about politics (17%) and “current affairs” (14%). And the figure does not include the many people who watch science fiction movies and TV shows. Given its popularity, science fiction may well influence the political views of a large number of people.

Moreover, science fiction may have an especially great political influence because it affects our perception of what the future will be like. That includes ideas about the political institutions that we are likely to need in that future. Far more people read or watch science fiction than read serious nonfiction studies

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# PROMETHEUS

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## Democracy Society

By John Christmas

Reviewed by John Enright

Imagine an America where people still vote to elect their government, but where the government has abandoned the Constitution and embraced redistribution of wealth and rule by rioting mobs. Do you think you have already caught glimpses of such an America? Well, you haven't seen anything yet. That, at least, is the message of *Democracy Society*, the scary but funny new novel by John Christmas.

The novel opens with a historical prologue featuring secret plotting by some of the American Founders. But that goes by quickly, and we are plunged abruptly into a society where democracy has degenerated into a nightmare of seized assets and enslaved entrepreneurs.

Just to get an idea of how scary this society is, here is an excerpt from a scene in which the President of the United States, Roberto Rojo, campaigns for re-election:

“The Great Deal Party gave you a new human right. Free cash!

“These hundred-dollar bills have a picture of me instead of Benjamin Franklin since you don't know who he was anyway!”

Rojo paused and made a mental note to ask an aide to figure out who Benjamin Franklin was, just in case the question ever came up.

This level of thinking may remind you of the 2006 film *Idiocracy*, in which society has become incredibly and comically “dumbed down.”

Fortunately, all is not lost. There are intelligent and virtuous people fighting to restore the system of governance envisioned by the Founders, heroes who understand that the protection of property rights is one of the keys to the establishment of liberty and prosperity.

One such hero is David Goldstein, a free market economist, who is running a last ditch campaign for the Presidency, doing his best to explain the need for property rights to a citizenry low on economic literacy.

Leading the heroic charge for action, adventure, and romance are Jack Cannon and Valentina Zaiceva, an international pair who seem prepared for any physical challenge that life can throw at them. They have been recruited for a dangerous mission by a secret society—a secret society which traces its roots back to the time of the American Founders.

The story is quite fast paced and often very funny; at least, it was very suited to my sense of humor. As befits a political thriller, the story is a roller coaster of twists and turns, with a big final twist, which I did not see coming.

As befits a political thriller, the story is a roller coaster of

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## Captain America

Distributor, July 2011

Directed by Gary Chartier

Starring

*Reviewed by William H. Stoddard*

As a preliminary note, this film has some neat bits for serious comics fans. I recognized one of the American soldiers whom Steve Rogers rescues on his first real mission as obviously being “Dum Dum” Dugan of the Howling Commandoes, and later Rogers puts together a multinational and multiethnic combat team that’s obviously a parallel world version of the Howling Commandoes, though without Sergeant Fury to lead them—Fury might not have been born yet in the forties in this continuity. Howard Stark is an important supporting character. There’s a brief scene with Rogers and his friend Sergeant James Barnes at the New York World’s Fair where I think I saw a blond man clad in skintight red standing immobile inside a transparent cylinder.

The World’s Fair scene wasn’t the only period reference that was done right. The villain of the story, a version of the Red Skull, heads a Nazi organization devoted to the military use of advanced science; naturally, he has very high-end vehicles. Now, some years back, I did two chapters for a GURPS supplement on fantastic variants of World War II, in which I wrote up GURPS versions of a lot of experimental German aircraft—so I recognized the Focke-Wulf Triebflügel and a saucerlike craft that might have been inspired by the BMW Flügelrad V-3 Dora, though its performance was more like what was hoped for from the Silbervogel SB-2. That actually struck me as cooler than the pure comic book technology; it showed that the designers had done some serious research.

This is a period film in larger ways, too. It’s as much a war movie as a superhero movie—but not in the spirit of a modern grim or cynical treatment of war; it has more the feel of a war movie of the time it’s set in, portraying Allied soldiers in a straightforwardly positive way. The commando force Rogers recruits fits the cinematic image of “men from diverse backgrounds brought together by a common struggle”—possibly a bit more than a 1940s film would have, with a black and a Nisei soldier, but the Howling Commandoes of the 1960s comic series included a black soldier and a white southerner fighting side by side. Howard Stark’s portrayal is partly an allusion to Howard Hughes, but partly the classic American inventor hero of popular fiction, modeled for example on the original Tom Swift. The love interest, Peggy Carter, fits the “independent woman” image of the 1930s magazine fiction Betty Friedan wrote about. She’s clearly attracted to Rogers, but just as clearly isn’t going to make the first move; he has to gain the confidence to approach her (and we see that he’s put off, not attracted, by another young woman who’s more aggressive). She only kisses him once, just before he jumps onto the landing gear of the Red Skull’s saucer plane (which leads to one of the best humorous lines in the film, Colonel Chester Phillips saying, “What are you waiting for? I’m not going to kiss you!”)—and that’s as physical as things get, which I also liked; a scene of hot sex would have been really out of

place in a film actually set in the period.

What really made *Captain America* work for me is how straight everything is played. A lot of superhero films try to humanize their central characters, or make them more realistic. Some forms of that work; the contrast between the classic superhero outfit Rogers wears when he’s being sent out to sell war bonds, and the more functional garb he wears for actual fighting, makes a good dramatic point. But what makes a superheroic character work is that they embody a moral concept. Batman is vengeance; Wonder Woman is the utopian ideal of early feminism—and Captain America is American patriotism, in the sense not of tribal loyalty but of belief in constitutional government and the sense of independence. The film makes a point of this, with a scrawny 4F Steve Rogers getting beaten up because he won’t knuckle under to bullying, and being picked for the supersoldier program because he puts fellow soldiers’ lives ahead of his own. It’s possible to add realism, or even humor, to this ethical focus, but undercutting the focus, or a camp exaggeration of it, breaks the central structural element of the story. *Captain America* impressed me because it resisted that temptation.

I think the scene that worked best for me was of Rogers’ returning from his first serious mission, an unauthorized rescue of American prisoners of the Red Skull. He leads a couple of hundred men into an American base, and says two things to Colonel Phillips: First, that there are men with him who need medical attention; second, that he’s reporting for disciplinary action. At that point I felt that the character worked for me, because those were the right priorities for someone who believed in the moral concepts this character is supposed to represent.

In summary: A very good treatment of the character, done by taking the concept seriously, and a good use of history.

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## Children of the Sky

By Vernor Vinge

Tor Books, 2011

*Reviewed by William H. Stoddard*

Vernor Vinge won his first Hugo award in 1993 for *A Fire upon the Deep*, a novel that combined the sweeping action of space opera with the sophisticated speculative ideas of hard science fiction, in the style now called “new space opera.” In important ways, Vinge’s work was ancestral to much of the work of writers such as Ken MacLeod and Charles Stross. It also marked Vinge’s emergence as a creator of alien intelligences and cultures in the manner of such earlier writers as Poul Anderson and Hal Clement, with his portrayal of the Skroderiders and especially of the Tines, an ingeniously designed species of group mentalities.

Nearly two decades later, *The Children of the Sky* returns to the world of the Tines, and to the humans cast away there by the galactic catastrophe of *A Fire upon the Deep*. That catastrophe remains in the background, as a potential source of

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# “Every Crowd is Crazy”: Kipling’s Political Theme in “As Easy as A.B.C.”

By William H. Stoddard

Rudyard Kipling’s story “As Easy as A.B.C.,” set in the year 2065 A.D. in his “airship utopia” future history (which also includes “With the Night Mail”), has been a recurring nominee for the Libertarian Futurist Society’s Hall of Fame award since short fiction was made eligible. But understanding its political themes can be challenging. Kipling’s political thought is complex and not always libertarian; the political landscape before the Great War was profoundly different from ours. Kipling combines a sympathetic view of individualism, privacy, property, and entrepreneurship with devotion to the British Empire and a belief in the virtues of royalty and aristocracy alien to American ideas of freedom. In his poetry these attitudes often find expression in slogans; in his best fiction they are often submerged in the narrative, sometimes to the point where it’s hard to puzzle them out—as it is in “As Easy as A.B.C.”

Two misunderstandings of Kipling are worth clearing up at the outset. The first is the idea that he is a simple authoritarian. I have heard “As Easy as A.B.C.” read, for example, as a story about a world dictatorship crushing a revolt against its power. But the Aerial Board of Control would be an unusual sort of “dictatorship.” His biggest concern when Chicago falls into civil disorder is to do its best to *avoid* having to take control of the city; one of their members complains to Chicago’s mayor, “You talk as if executive capacity could be snatched out of the air like so much horse-power. Can’t you manage yourselves on any terms?” The fleet of airships comes to Chicago armed not with bombs or guns or rays, but with lights and sirens that do no permanent harm. Earlier in the story, when a farm girl paralyzes the Board members with an electric field and nearly runs a tractor over them, they do no worse than blow out her fuses and warn her to take refuge in the cellar before they reach Chicago. Even so mild a despot as Napoleon, let alone Hitler or Stalin, would have strewn the scene with corpses and had the young woman in prison.

Kipling is also thought of, thanks to such phrases as “the white man’s burden,” as a racist—and by the standards of the early 21st century, there’s much truth in that. But by the standards of his own time, he was unusually respectful of other races and religions. And one of the key themes of “As Easy as A.B.C.” is a bitter condemnation of racism, through the voices of people in a future that has abandoned it and remembers it with horror. A central symbol in the story is a statue in the Chicago town square, “The Nigger in Flames,” showing a lynching victim, and inscribed “To the Eternal Memory of the Justice of the People”; and one of Kipling’s

characters, Takahira, says that Chicago still unveils it once a year, on Thanksgiving Day.

This image is one of Kipling’s strongest fictional condemnations of democracy—a recurrent theme found in such varied stories as “Kaa’s Hunting” (where the monkey folk, the Bandar-Log, are Kipling’s portrait of democratic politics) and “The Village That Voted the Earth Was Flat,” and in a number of his poems, such as “The Gods of the Copy-Book Headings” or “MacDonough’s Song” (which accompanies “As Easy as A.B.C.”). Kipling’s narrator in this story can scarcely believe what he hears from one of Chicago’s advocates of democracy:

“Next he demanded that every matter of daily life, including most of the physical functions, should

be submitted for decision at any time of the week, month, or year to, I gathered, anybody who happened to be passing by or residing within a certain radius, and that everybody should forthwith abandon his concerns to settle the matter, first by crowd-making, next by talking to the crowds made, and lastly by describing crosses on pieces of paper, which rubbish should later be counted with certain mystic ceremonies and oaths. Out of this amazing play, he assured us, would automatically arise a higher, nobler, and kinder world, based—he demonstrated this with the awful lucidity of the insane—based on the sanctity of the Crowd and the villainy of the single person.”

In Kipling’s view, the truest manifestation of democracy, of the principle of majority rule, is the lynch mob, in which a majority agrees to the use of deadly force against an unpopular minority. And the story’s central irony is that the potential victims of Chicago’s incipient mob are its small population of democrats, or “Serviles,” and that the people who want them dead fear the return of lynching and the mob mentality, so passionately that they embody it.

But what are the positive political values that Kipling wants, in place of democracy? Our time is so accustomed to the idea that democracy and dictatorship are polar opposites, that when Kipling condemns democracy, it’s natural to suppose that he must favor dictatorship, and difficult to envision what else he could want, or to judge how desirable it might be.

Help in this can be found, though, in another of Kipling’s stories, written years later, and not science fiction, but historical fiction: “The Church That Was at Antioch.” Its starting point is an incident in the early Christian church, recorded in the New Testament. But Kipling adds a great deal of detail,

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based on his knowledge of Roman history. And while “The Church That Was at Antioch” is memorable for far more than its political content, it has surprising parallels to “As Easy as A.B.C.” that allow a kind of parallax in which certain things jump out into the reader’s perspective.

In the first place, both stories focus on official representatives of a large and powerful organization with military capabilities. Obviously this is true of the Roman Empire, personified by the Prefect of Police for Syria and his nephew, a Roman officer. But the Board members of the A.B.C. represent “all that remains to the planet of that odd old word authority”; and they are accompanied by an aerial fleet of 250 keels. The A.B.C. is officially simply an administrative body charged with keeping the traffic going, but its charter adds “and all that that implies,” and Kipling’s plot shows that local communities can always demand A.B.C. intervention by shutting down traffic. So in a sense the A.B.C. is an empire, the farthest reaching ever created. And it should be remembered that keeping the traffic flowing, and all that that implies, was one of the main concerns of the Roman Empire as well, and that Romans were among history’s great road builders.

In the second place, both stories place their officials in remote and somewhat backward communities: Antioch, in the Eastern Mediterranean, and Chicago, in North America. (After his humiliating departure from Vermont in 1896, Kipling must have enjoyed writing about the provincial Americans of 2065!)

In the third place, each community has a minority who are seen as peculiar by the people around them. In Antioch it’s the Christians, described by the Prefect as “a College here of stiff-necked Hebrews”; in Chicago it’s the Serviles, “a few men and women who can’t live without listening to themselves, and who prefer drinking out of pipes they don’t own both ends of. They inhabit flats and hotels all the year round. They say it saves ‘em trouble. Anyway, it gives ‘em more time to make trouble for their neighbours.” The Christians, of course, are destined to become the rulers of the Empire, though to the Romans this seems an obvious absurdity; but the democracy that the Serviles advocate has been swept aside, and by 2065 is scarcely even remembered.

In the fourth place, both communities are under a threat of mob violence against their dissident minorities. The hostility in Antioch has multiple sources: disputes among Christians over clean and unclean food, pagan temple butchers not wanting to lose sales of altar scraps, kosher butchers wanting the business of Hebrew Christians, and Jewish fears of losing their special legal status in the Empire, played on by agitators from Jerusalem. The Serviles, in contrast, bring the mob down on themselves, by holding a meeting in the public market, advocating the return of democracy in a world that has turned against “The People” as a political idea—that is, return to the rule of exactly the sort of crowd that is ready to

murder them, as a member of the A.B.C. points out to their leaders. In both stories, the threat that has to be guarded against is the spirit of the mob.

The actual plots of the stories are different: Similar situations lead to different conclusions that resolve the conflicts in different ways. And the conflicts themselves, though parallel, are not identical. Each story has a single (unnamed) female character, whose voice makes its key emotional point, but the two points, and the two characters, are utterly different. “The Church That Was at Antioch” puts that point at the very end, but “As Easy as A.B.C.” ends with its fading into irony.

But the underlying conceptual structure is strikingly parallel: the opposition between a civilized, cosmopolitan power whose goal is to ensure that conflicts are resolved by law rather than violence, and a local population divided into factions that are all too ready to set law aside. Civilization, for Kipling, is on the side of the empires, whether Rome in the Near East, Britain in India, or the Aerial Board of Control (seemingly also based on London) in North America. Given

the record of past empires, that estimate may seem optimistic! But in his imagined future, Kipling has envisioned an “empire” that is strikingly less murderous and more libertarian than its precursors, one for which, “as a matter of policy, any complaint of invasion of privacy needs immediate investigation, lest worse follow.” If we should ever have a world government, one with the values of the A.B.C. would have its attractions for libertarians.

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## Prometheus Submission Guidelines

Without content no publication can survive. In order to continue publishing future issues, *Prometheus* seeks reviews, interview, essays, articles, and columns of interest to libertarian science fiction fans. Any individual may submit material — membership in the LFS is not required.

As the newsletter of the Libertarian Futurist Society, *Prometheus* focuses on Prometheus Award-nominated works, but also publishes reviews and articles beyond the Prometheus Award candidates.

Letters of comment also are welcome, whether about the reviews, or any questions about LFS, the nominating and voting process. In this digital age the printed press continues to matter, but we need your help to sustain this newsletter.

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about future political and economic trends. Science fiction also has political impact because a disproportionate fraction of its readers are young. According to the Harris poll, 31% of people in the 18-33 age group read the genre, compared to 20% of those over 45. Numerous studies show that people's political views are most susceptible to change when they are young. Other things equal, a genre read primarily by young people is more likely to affect the distribution of political opinion than one read by the middle aged or the elderly.

The genre also tends to attract readers with higher than average levels of education. Such people are also more likely to be politically active and influential.

For these reasons, the politics of science fiction is worthy of inquiry even for those who have little interest in the genre for its own sake. It is equally important to try to understand *why* science fiction and fantasy are so much more libertarian than other literary genres. Several factors are at work, some having to do with the nature of the genre itself, and others with the nature of people likely to be attracted to libertarian ideas.

Politics is far from the only important aspect of a literary genre. Good literature can advocate bad political ideas and vice versa. But although politics is far from the only noteworthy aspect of science fiction, it is important enough to try to understand better.

### The Prevalence of Libertarian Ideas in the Genre

Science fiction and fantasy have long had a much greater libertarian presence than any other literary genres. Robert Heinlein, one of the founding fathers of modern science fiction, was self-consciously libertarian. Several of his books incorporate libertarian, antigovernment themes. Other prominent, explicitly libertarian science fiction writers include Larry Niven, David Brin, and Vernor Vinge. There is also a much larger number of writers who do not think of themselves as libertarian, but nonetheless have strong libertarian overtones to their work, especially in taking a skeptical view of government power. Ursula LeGuin, one of the most influential science writers of the last forty years, is a left-wing anarchist whose antigovernment views are reflected in her work. The same can be said, to a lesser extent, for many other nonlibertarian science fiction writers.

Similar patterns are also prevalent in fantasy literature, where recent work by George R.R. Martin, Joe Abercrombie, Daniel Abraham, and many others has taken a highly critical view of state power. In both Martin's popular *Song of Ice and Fire* series and Abercrombie's *First Law* series, nearly all of the contending governments and rulers seem to be repressive in nature, and all are portrayed as structurally flawed. That contrasts with some, more traditional heroic fantasy, which ascribes the flaws of government to individual bad rulers and implies that government would function well if only the right people were in power. Obviously, the former approach is much more libertarian than the latter.

Over the last decade, the two science fiction or fantasy series that have had the greatest cultural impact have been J.R.R. Tolkien's classic *Lord of the Rings* (which was made into a highly

successful series of movies), and J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series. Both series have very strong libertarian elements.

In the *Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien deliberately incorporated his strong suspicion of government. The Ring of Power after which the book is named allows the wielder to control the will of others and eventually corrupts himself as well. It is, in some ways, a metaphor for political power. Significantly, not even good people like the wizard Gandalf can be trusted with the Ring. If they try to use it, they will inevitably be corrupted by it. The only way to eliminate the threat posed by the Ring is to destroy it. It cannot be used for good. This, of course, is very similar to the libertarian attitude towards political power, of which the Ring is a symbol.

More subtly, the few favorably portrayed governments in the *Lord of the Rings* are all very minimalistic in nature. The Shire, the society where the Hobbits live, has almost no government to speak of other than a small security force. When the Ring is destroyed and Aragorn is established as High King at the end of the story, the book hints that he will wield very little power and leave the different regions to make their own decisions in most matters.

More explicitly antigovernment is the symbolism inherent in the chapter on "The Scouring of the Shire." When the secondary villain Saruman temporarily takes over the Shire, he and his henchmen institute a system of "gathering and sharing" under which the state expropriates the wealth of the population and transfers it to politically favored groups. The episode was likely inspired by the wartime rationing system that the left-wing Labor Party government continued even after World War II. More broadly, it represents Tolkien's critique of socialism.

Tolkien himself was not a libertarian. He was more of a traditionalist conservative. But he did have a libertarian-like suspicion of government that is very much reflected in his work. In a personal letter, he wrote that his "political opinions lean more and more to anarchy (philosophically understood, meaning abolition of control, not whiskered men with bombs)." He went on to say that "[t]he most improper job of any man, even saints . . . is bossing around other men. Not one in a million is fit for it, and least of all those who seek the opportunity." Most libertarians would agree. Tolkien differed from many libertarians on some issues, especially in his distaste for industrialization and modern technology. But he was very libertarian in his attitude towards government power.

Like the *Lord of the Rings*, J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series also includes strong libertarian themes. The main enemies facing Harry Potter and his friends Ron and Hermione are the Dark Lord Voldemort and his "Death Eaters." But they also constantly find themselves at odds with the Ministry of Magic, the government of the wizard world. In his article "Harry Potter and the Half-Crazed Bureaucracy," law professor Benjamin Barton points out that the Ministry exemplifies the worst nightmares of libertarian public choice economists. It is a government that consists almost entirely of unaccountable bureaucrats who pursue their narrow self-interest at the expense of the public good. Ministry officials routinely abuse

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their powers with little or no effective constraint imposed by the press, public opinion, or the democratic process. They violate civil rights, imprison the innocent, and engage in crude propaganda. When pompous Ministry bureaucrat Dolores Umbridge temporarily takes over as headmistress of the heroes' Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, she institutes a virtual reign of terror.

The Ministry also signally fails to carry what even most libertarians agree is a core function of government: defense against attack. Despite repeated warnings from Harry, his mentor Albus Dumbledore, and others, the Ministry remains oblivious to the threat of Voldemort until it is far too late. The only genuinely effective opposition to Voldemort is provided by the Order of the Phoenix, a private organization.

Ultimately, the Ministry is defeated by Voldemort, who then takes it over and uses its accumulated power to enact a reign of terror of his own. The abuses of the Death Eater-controlled Ministry, however, are merely more extreme extensions of the practices of the "normal" Ministry that preceded it. Both imprison innocent people without trial, both persecute their political opponents, and both are unaccountable and self-seeking.

Throughout the series, Rowling implies that the Ministry's flaws are structural, not merely a result of the wrong people being in power. Even after the ineffectual Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge is replaced in the sixth book by a more decisive leader, the Ministry's performance does not improve. There are some well-intentioned and competent officials in the Ministry, such as Ron's father Arthur Weasley. But they are unable to effectively oppose the more ruthless bureaucrats who dominate the organization. The idea that the flaws of government are inherent and can only be alleviated by limiting the state's powers is, of course, central to libertarian thought.

Obviously, the Ministry's ineffectiveness against Voldemort is to some extent necessitated by the plot. If the Ministry had defeated Voldemort early on, there would have been little for the heroes to do. However, Rowling did not have to make the Ministry oppressive as well as ineffective, and she did not have to devote such a large part of the plot to its flaws.

Unlike Tolkien, Rowling may not have consciously intended

to include antigovernment themes in her work. By all accounts, her political views are, for the most part, conventionally left-liberal.

Nevertheless, the Harry Potter series reflects a suspicion of government almost as great as that of libertarians. Barton speculates that Rowling's negative portrayal of the wizard government stems from her own unpleasant experiences with British welfare bureaucrats during her years as a poor single mother. Be that as it may, the series certainly incorporates some strongly libertarian themes, whether or not that was the author's conscious intention.

Libertarian ideas are less common in science fiction TV shows and movies than in written novels, possibly as a result of Hollywood's strongly liberal orientation. Unlike science fiction novel writers, most of whom specialize in the genre, Hollywood producers and writers tend to be generalists. That includes those who work on science fiction movies and TV shows. They thereby reflect the political attitudes prevalent in their profession as a whole rather than those among science fiction writers specifically.

Even so, libertarianism does seem to have influenced the work of Joss Whedon, probably the most successful science fiction and fantasy TV producer of the last twenty years. Whedon has said that he deliberately incorporated libertarian themes in his 2002 science fiction series *Firefly*. They are also evident in his far more famous series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, where government institutions are consistently portrayed negatively.

Although Buffy and her friends attend an affluent public school that does not lack for funding, most of the school officials are incompetent or worse. Later in the series, the US government's efforts to use vampires and demons for its own benefit are viewed extremely negatively. The government's intervention nearly leads to disaster. By contrast, Buffy and her friends, "the Scoobies," are much more successful in their private efforts to combat the underworld. As in the Harry Potter series, government turns out to be inferior to the private sector even in its core defensive function. To drive the point home, the colonel leading the government Initiative even denounces Buffy and the Scoobies, as "anarchists," an epithet the latter embrace.

Obviously, the vast majority of modern science fiction is not libertarian. Much of it is largely apolitical, and many other works promote conventional left-wing or conservative ideas. There is even a long tradition of socialist science fiction, dating back to the nineteenth century efforts of Edward Bellamy and H.G. Wells. The Star Trek movies and TV shows, perhaps the most popular science fiction series ever, portrays a socialist future favorably.

Even so, the incidence of libertarian themes in science fiction is far greater than in any other literary or pop cultural genre. No other genre boasts so many libertarians among its

## The Complete Carl Barks Disney Library

In *Prometheus*, Volume 29, Number 2, Winter 2011, Phillip Salin wrote an appreciation of Carl Barks' Disney cartoons, especially ones about Scrooge McDuck. Salin wrote that article several years ago, and luckily for other fans of Barks's work, in an unexpected coincidence, the entire Carl Barks Disney Library is in the process of being released. The collection will span 37 volumes, and already the first of these, *Walt Disney's Donald Duck: "Lost in the Andes"*, is available for the retail price of \$24.99, and the second book, *Walt Disney's Uncle Scrooge: "Only a Poor Old Man"* is due in June 2012.

—Continued on page 8

—*Libertarianism & SF*, continued from page 7

most prominent authors, and none has been so effective in conveying libertarian ideas so often.

### Why Science Fiction is so Libertarian

The relative prevalence of libertarian themes in science fiction has both supply and demand elements. On the supply side, libertarian writers are more likely to work in this genre than others. From the demand perspective, libertarian readers are also more likely to be attracted to it.

There are several reasons why libertarian writers are unusually common in the genre. Unlike traditional literary fiction, which is mostly set in the present-day world or in the historical past, science fiction works are usually set in worlds vastly different from our own. This makes it easier for authors to explore ideologies that differ radically from those dominant in the real world, including libertarianism.

Utopian and dystopian stories have been a staple of science fiction since the origins of the genre. The works of Edward Bellamy, Wells, Yevgeny Zamyatin, and George Orwell are all well-known early examples. So too are some of Ayn Rand's famous novels promoting libertarianism, especially *Atlas Shrugged*, which might be considered near-future science fiction.

This factor doesn't necessarily differentiate libertarianism from other ideologies that advocate a radical break with the political status quo. And it is indeed the case that other radical ideologies are also overrepresented in the genre, notably socialism and left-wing anarchism. It does, however, help explain why libertarianism is overrepresented in the genre relative to more mainstream ideologies.

A second connection between science fiction and libertarianism is technological optimism. With rare exceptions, libertarians tend to be optimistic about the possibility of new technologies improving our lives. Relative to adherents of most other ideologies, they are more likely to welcome such technological advances as genetic engineering, cloning, and nuclear power. Although there are important examples of technopessimist science fiction, the genre as a whole also tends towards technological optimism, creating an affinity with libertarianism.

Libertarianism is not, of course, the only ideology compatible with technological optimism. Early twentieth century Communists and Fascists were also bullish on modern technology, as were many left-liberals. Since the rise of the environmental movement and the threat of nuclear weapons, however, much of the political left has tended towards technological pessimism. And traditionalist conservatism has always had a certain suspicion of new technology. Thus, libertarianism is more compatible with science fiction's dominant attitude towards new technology than the two other ideologies most prevalent in the Western world today.

A common attitude towards tradition also unites libertarians

and many science fiction writers. The genre has a long history of challenging traditional attitudes on political and moral issues. Although libertarian scholars such as F.A. Hayek have emphasized the importance of freely chosen traditions that have developed in free markets and civil society, libertarianism as a whole tends to be skeptical of tradition. After all, statist control of the economy and society is a longstanding tradition in most of the world.

What is true of science fiction writers is also true of genre readers. They too tend to be more open to radical new ideas, more technologically optimistic, and less deferential towards tradition than readers of most other genres. As a result, they are also more likely to be libertarian.

There is also a personality factor that might incline libertarians to become science fiction fans and vice versa. In a recent study, political psychologist Jonathan Haidt finds that, relative to liberals and conservatives, libertarians tend to be

more logically oriented but less empathetic towards other people. In other words, they are likely to favor logic over emotion as the basis for their political views.

That doesn't necessarily prove that libertarianism is correct. Attempts at logical reasoning can sometimes mislead us, and emotion is occasionally a useful guide to reality. Regardless, valuing logic

over empathetic identification is also a characteristic of the science fiction genre, one that helps explain why libertarian readers are disproportionately attracted to it.

Traditional literary fiction is primarily character-focused. What grabs the reader's attention is an empathetic identification with one or more characters and their emotional development over the course of the plot. By contrast, science fiction stories are relatively more focused on world-building. The real star of the show is often not the main character but the imaginary world created by the author. Think of Tolkien's Middle Earth, Larry Niven's Ringworld, George R.R. Martin's Westeros, or Ursula LeGuin's Earthsea. Genre fans love to consider the pros and cons of these imaginary worlds and whether or not they are logically consistent. A person who is attracted to logic more than emotion is more likely to enjoy a literary genre focused more on world-building than character development. And such a person is also more likely to be libertarian than one who is less logic-oriented and more empathetic.

Obviously, the best science fiction stories also have good characters, and some traditional literary novels also have world-building elements. The two are not mutually exclusive. Nonetheless, as a general rule, science fiction tends to emphasize world-building over character development, whereas most other literary genres tend towards the opposite.

The combination of receptiveness to radical ideas, technological optimism, skepticism about tradition and valuing of reason over emotion helps explain the relative prevalence of libertarianism in science fiction. No other genre combines all

—Continued next page



—*Libertarianism & SF*, continued from previous page

of these attributes, and few have more than one or two.

## Conclusion

Libertarianism and science fiction have a longstanding affinity. It is no accident that science fiction works by authors such as Ayn Rand and Robert Heinlein have played an important role in introducing libertarian ideas to new audiences. The disproportionate presence of libertarian ideas in the genre is likely to continue, as will its role in spreading the ideology.

This is critical because science fiction plays an important role in popular culture and in forming many people's conceptions of future politics. The genre also has an audience that is disproportionately likely to be politically influential.

At the same time, there are important limits to the genre's reach. While almost one third of men read science fiction novels, only 20 percent of women do. Science fiction also still lacks the intellectual prestige of traditional literary fiction, which makes it less appealing to some highbrow audiences. Finally, science fiction has less appeal to people with low levels of education.

—*Democracy Society review*, continued from page 2

twists and turns, with a big final twist which I did not see coming.

The author is focused upon a political theme. He is raising the alarm about what he calls "universal-suffrage democracy," a term he uses to describe a political system where the many are allowed to oppress and loot from the few, a political system where all constitutional protections for individuals have been cast by the wayside, and in a nation where economic ignorance is widespread.

He goes so far as to contemplate the question of whether a wise hereditary monarchy might sometimes provide a freer system of governance. The huge problem of how a monarchy could be kept on a wise path, however, is not explored. Granted that contemporary democracies show many institutional and philosophical weaknesses, it seems obvious to me that historical monarchies showed a grim tendency to sink into tyranny. But it's also true that monarchy was a dominant form of government for much of human history, and speculative fiction has repeatedly imagined its return. See, for example, Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle's classic *The Mote in God's Eye*.

As an aside, it is worth noting that the authors of *The Federalist Papers* tended not to use the word "democracy" to describe the form of representative government they were endorsing. They tended to see the word as having negative connotations of the dangers of mob rule. But over time connotations often shift, and de Tocqueville's Nineteenth Century study *Democracy in America* is devoted to explaining how well democracy worked out in the U.S.

While our author is critical of trends in American democracy, there is another country whose democratic trends he finds even scarier. His fictional Russian president declares: "I decided to go for the presidency instead of just a seat in the

The question then arises whether libertarian successes in science fiction can be replicated in other genres. For example, according to the Harris poll, the most popular literary genre in the United States today is mystery and crime, read by 48% of Americans. This genre creates some obvious opportunities for libertarian writers, such as works focused on the iniquities of the War on Drugs. Yet there is little if any libertarian presence within the field.

The same can be said for traditional highbrow literary fiction, where there are also very few libertarians in the field. The most notable exception is Peruvian libertarian Mario Vargas Llosa, winner of the 2010 Nobel Prize in Literature. It remains to be seen whether Vargas' success can be replicated in the English-speaking world.

Other genres have fewer affinities with libertarianism than science fiction does. But that does not mean that they are totally inimical either. There is plenty of room for progress.

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Duma because my supporters told me that I was extremely popular because of my corruption."

The story line veers around the United States and around the world, and while the descriptions are not lengthy, they were very particular, giving the sense that the author had been to most of these places himself and taken note of their distinctive features.

While a number of the characters exhibit interesting personal outlooks and intriguing value conflicts, the pace of the story necessarily keeps us from getting into a great deal of psychological depth. This is not a book to take up if you insist on multidimensional character studies, or if literal believability is high on your list of literary virtues.

It's more of a high-speed trip through a Looking-Glass dystopia, with the illogical villains showing off thinking processes reminiscent of Lewis Carroll's Alice stories. Fortunately, the heroes demonstrate the common sense logic which Alice herself displays, and you have the sense, from the beginning, that the heroes will emerge triumphant.

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*This review originally appeared online at The Atlas Sphere <<http://www.theatlasphere.com/columns/110830-eright-democracy-society.php>> and is reprinted here with permission of the author.*

—*Vernor Vinge review, continued from page 3*

further threats, and many of the key characters are motivated by their understanding of it. But the focus of *The Children of the Sky* is almost entirely on events on its single world. On one hand, it's a further exploration of the nature of the Tines themselves, and of their efforts to create a technologically advanced society based on human library records. On the other, it's an exploration of human generational politics. As the latter, it sometimes seems to be making little jokes about political and cultural clashes on present-day Earth, but that's a very minor element in the story.

In a sense, this novel is akin to time travel novels such as [L. Sprague de Camp's] *Lest Darkness Fall* and the [S. M. Stirling's] Nantucket Island trilogy: It portrays the efforts of technologically advanced castaways to survive, sustain part of their advanced technology, and uplift the civilizations of a more primitive world. But the castaways come not from the future, but from the High Beyond, a spatial region where space operatic technologies such as FTL and true AI are possible. Much of their knowledge is inapplicable in the Slow Zone where the Tines now live. But parts of it create economic and political disequilibria—and, as a result, conflicts: are Tines equal partners or inferiors? Should human efforts focus on general technological advance or on improved medical care and life extension? How should the Tines create an industrial economy? Out of these conflicts emerge both political schemes and open violence.

A central theme of the novel is stated explicitly at the start of Chapter 14, where the human protagonist, Ravna Bergsndot, reflects on her efforts to regain the leadership she has lost to a younger man—for whom one of the “Children” the novel is named—through “sneakiness.” She contrasts the positive-sum expectations of the High Beyond, where “sneakiness” means driving the best bargain possible by knowing customers well, and the negative-sum expectations of bad parts of the Slow Zone, where “only a saint could believe in return business, and all advancement depended on diminishing others.” She concludes that a middle ground is called for, based on nonviolent maneuvering and politics. The plot soon takes a long detour into negative-sum games—but in the end, Ravna's preference for mutually profitable exchange over coercion pays off, and leads to some unexpected alliances.

In other words, the spirit of Vinge's story is that of a comedy, which ends not with deaths (though there are some!) but with reconciliations and revelations. Its victories are attained not by overwhelming force but by clever trickery. It also gives an important role to a Tine singleton, as a kind of Shakespearean fool. And a number of scenes are quite funny in a more

ordinary sense, from a mixed party of humans and Tines pretending to be a travelling circus to a Tinish mathematical genius discussing his species' romance novels, and then going on to attempted matchmaking for two of his human friends. In fact, part of the ending involves the emergence of new romantic relationships, some expected and some surprising.

Despite this frequent lightness of tone, *The Children of the Sky* has some serious and even grim events, and some substantial speculative themes. Its outlook is clearly libertarian, informed by sympathy for voluntary trade and by reluctance to turn to force. And above all, it gives us a fuller look at the Tines, one of Vinge's most imaginative creations. I think any member of the Libertarian Futurist Society will find it well worth reading.

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### The Restoration Game

By Ken Macleod

Pyr Books, 2011

Reviewed by William H. Stoddard

The breakup of the Soviet Union, like the breakup of Rome, left behind a complex hinterland where people are enduring the proverbial “interesting times.” It's hardly to be wondered at, that novelists, including some who write in English, are turning to the Russian periphery as a setting rich in conflict and intrigue. *The Restoration Game* represents Ken MacLeod's exploration of this territory. At the same time, it's a look backward to the Soviet Union, to what might be called the Matter of Russia (in the spirit in which the Matter of Britain refers to stories about the ethic of chivalry): an attempt to make sense of the catastrophe of Soviet communism through its imaginative transformation into fictional terms. The Matter of Russia is a natural subject for a writer whose ideas grew out of Trotskyism, which was always focused on the betrayal of the Russian Revolution.

MacLeod's particular vehicle for this is his own addition to the roster of fictional geographies: The tiny autonomous republic of Krassnia, sandwiched in between Russia, Abkhazia, and Georgia as Sinclair Lewis's Winnemac was between Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio. Krassnia's native language seems to be a peculiar variant of Russian, distinguished by being written in the Roman alphabet, as a result of its long-ago rule by the Vrai, a military/landholding elite descended from a Roman legion that somehow made its way to the Caucasus. “Vrai,” of course, is French for “true,” and the pun is probably deliberate. This history, in the course of the novel, becomes the basis for an online fantasy roleplaying game, with a storyline contributed by the central character, Lucy Stone.

Most of Lucy's story, for all the setting's imaginary geography, has no more overtly fantastic content than Sinclair Lewis's novels. It reads partly like a historical novel about life in the Soviet Union under “actually existing socialism,”

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## Moving?

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—*Restoration Game review, continued from previous page*

and partly like a spy thriller. Lucy herself turns out to be the product of a long family heritage of spying, in the course of which they became entangled in Krassnian affairs, resulting in Lucy's being born there, and spending much of her childhood there. Much later, her gaming company is hired to do a version of their new fantasy game set in Krassnia, which results in Lucy going back there. All of this is tangled up with a plotline—worthy of a Victorian novel—centered around which of several different men is Lucy's father.

Krassnia, of course, doesn't exist. *The Restoration Game* edges up toward the realm of metafiction when Lucy herself, early on, says in so many words that Krassnia doesn't exist, and can't be found on any maps. The explanation for this turns out to take the reader into the genre of Borges' "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," or perhaps of Heinlein's "The Unpleasant Profession of Jonathan Hoag"—but in a form that, if no less metaphysical, is at the same time science fictional, in a very hard-sf way. The novel's climax confronts Lucy with a mysterious artifact hidden at the heart of Krassnia, which is the focus of the peculiar heresies of the Vrai, but which makes sense in quite different terms than theirs—terms that make the whole novel into science fiction. At the same time, this novel is a peculiar reversal of the themes of Lovecraftian cosmic horror. It ends by affirming that there are indeed cosmic anomalies that have not been discovered because of the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents—but that correlation is not to be feared but to be looked forward to.

This science fictional theme is tightly bound up with the novel's political theme: the catastrophic failure of Marxism. MacLeod may have come up with one of the most ingenious explanations ever conceived for why the Russian Revolution turned out so badly. This is not a novel about the destructive effects of an imaginary collectivist society, but of a real one. MacLeod clearly knows the whole history intimately; for example, he gives a brilliant summary of Stalin's successive attacks on Trotsky, Bukharin, Zinoviev, and Kamenev—in the words of the forced confession of one of Stalin's victims. We don't actually get much in the way of a vision of something better, but we get a very clear literary statement of how badly things went wrong.

## Classifieds

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

## Snuff

By Terry Pratchett

Harper, 2011

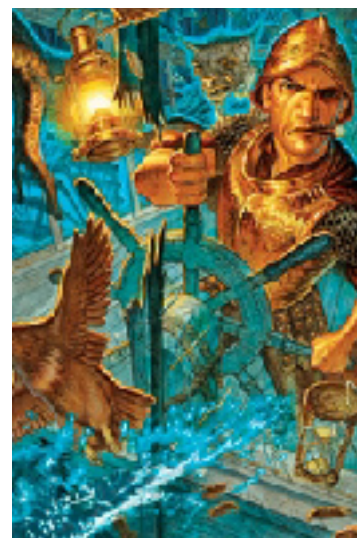
Reviewed by William H. Stoddard

Terry Pratchett's latest Discworld novel brings back one of his recurrent characters, Sam Vimes, Duke of Ankh and Commander of the City Watch, in a new setting: his country estate, two days' coach ride from Ankh-Morpork. But, naturally, he isn't there for long before he acquires a crime to deal with. This is classic "cozy" mystery terrain, the sort associated with Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers, with a houseful of servants and surrounding houses full of gentlefolk, a natural environment for Vimes's wife Sybil, who is the very personification of Old Money. But Vimes himself is barely even New Money, and his usual sort of mystery plot is hardboiled, noir, or police procedural. The conflict between the two is one of the big drivers of the comedy in this story.

But there's more going on here than comedy. The country gentlefolk turn out to be every bit as capable of corruption and wickedness as any noir villain. Sam Vimes doesn't just face elegant drawing-room conversational sparring, but physical threats to his life.

And the source of these plots? Here's where the libertarian theme emerges: Like some of the wealthy rural families Jane Austen wrote about, these prosperous gentry are making money off the the enslavement and abuse of one of the Disc's minority races. Since this is a fantasy novel, the race in question is Pratchett's version of goblins. Pratchett gives them a detailed and peculiar culture focused on beliefs that seem religious to other races, though goblins themselves don't regard them that way. He also makes a point of their distinctive cognitive modalities and language, in a fashion that makes me think of John W. Campbell's classic definition of an alien as "a being that thinks as well as a human being, but not like a human being." None of this is noticed by other races, which drive them onto marginal land (or under it!), murder them, or enslave them—in an ironic reversal of history, shipping them off to work on plantations in the Disc's analog of Africa.

Vimes gets drawn into this when agents of the slavers try to frame him for murder, using a goblin woman as a convenient source of blood. At this point he turns back into a policeman with a crime to investigate, or a whole series of crimes—indeed, in Vimes's view, slavery as such is a crime, and he sets out to bring the rich and powerful people who commit it to



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—*Terry Pratchett review, continued from page 11*

justice, whatever the price. In the process, he recruits a goblin as a police officer, setting goblins on the same path to equality as trolls, dwarfs, werewolves, golems, and a long list of other Discworld races. The action this leads to is some of the most dramatic Pratchett has written, including a terrifying river-boat journey barely ahead of a catastrophic flood. Vimes is abetted, in proper “cozy” style, by his butler, Willikins, who turns out to have various skills and talents that aren’t usually required of butlers.

At the same time, Pratchett shows the role of cultural and intellectual change in bringing an end to slavery. Roles in this are played by Pastor Mightily Oats (first seen in one of the Lancre novels) and by Miss Beedle, an author of popular children’s books (including many of Young Sam Vimes’s favorites) and a classic socially marginal figure. But, above all, Sybil Vimes emerges as a key figure on this side of the story, changing the minds of many of Ankh-Morpork’s elite, and making it possible to change the law.

In other words, this novel continues Pratchett’s recent use of the Discworld to reexplore the emergence of modernity as a theme. And, like Neal Stephenson’s Baroque Cycle, Pratchett’s novels view modernity as including not merely technological change, but changing values and institutions—changing in a direction libertarians will want to cheer for. I think this novel is one of our best candidates for this year’s Prometheus Award, and I encourage members of the LFS to read it.

## 2011 Prometheus Awards Winners

*Darkship Thieves*, by Sarah Hoyt won the 2011 Prometheus Award for Best Novel, while *Animal Farm*, by George Orwell, received the Hall of Fame Award. Full coverage of the awards presentation will appear in the next issue. In the meantime, view a video of the presentation at <http://www.lfs.org/>

Sarah Hoyt will receive a plaque and a one-ounce gold coin, while a smaller gold coin and a plaque will be presented to Orwell’s estate. *Darkship Thieves* features an exciting, coming-of-age saga in which a heroic woman fights for her freedom and identity against a tyrannical Earth. Hoyt’s novel, dedicated to Robert A. Heinlein, depicts a plausible anarchist society among the asteroids. Hoyt is a prolific writer of novels and short fiction, though this is her first time as Prometheus finalist.

Orwell won the Hall of Fame award for his novel *1984*, fittingly, in *1984*, the second year the award was given. *Animal Farm* has been a finalist for the Hall of Fame award multiple times. *Animal Farm*, a short novel, retells the story of the Russian Revolution in the literary form of a beast fable, reflecting the post-World War II disillusionment of many communists. The story introduced the phrase “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others,” which has been borrowed innumerable times to pillory many political movements that claimed to be fighting for equality. Orwell’s story is widely considered both a classic work, and a devastating critique of Stalinism.




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