



The Drink Tank Sixth Annual Giant Sized Annual
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A Noise from the Wind

I first heard of Stephen Baxter from Jay Crasdan. It was a night like any other, sitting in a room with a mostly naked former ballerina who was in the middle of what was probably her fifth overdose in as many months. This was what we were dealing with on a daily basis back then. SaBean had been at it again, and this time, it was up to me and Jay to clean up the mess. Luckily, we were practiced by this point. Bottles of water, damp washcloths, the 9 and the first I dialed just in case things took a turn for the ugly. Most importantly, there we were, sitting in a room making sure SaBean kept breathing, that she could hear us talk.

We had taken her to Jay's apartment, put her down on the bed, took turns making sure the washcloth was cool, the fan was pointed on her, that the breathing still happened. At these sorts of times, you look for things to talk about that aren't the person who may well be dying on the bed in front of you. At the time, we were also very stupid.

This time, I focused on the bookshelves.

"What's that one?" I asked, motioning my hand towards a set of books with exciting-looking spines.

"Stephen Baxter. He writes the hard stuff." Jay answered. I pulled one down, *Ring*.

SaBean made it through the night, rather spectacularly really, and was starved when she woke up as I remember it. Jay, who hadn't slept from worry over the possibility of having to answer why we took her to his place instead of a hospital, made us all a batch of his famous waffles. I, useless for the last five hours of the ordeal, was about 1/3 through with the novel.

Stephen Baxter had got me through the night.

I remember reading *Ring* that next afternoon when I should have been at class. I finished it in less than 24 hours and it was such a blast. I wasn't the big fan at that moment, though I loved the novel. I had to reread it, and then grabbed a copy of *Anti-Ice* a couple of days later. Perhaps difficult times made *Ring* into an excellent escape from the moment, and something like a month later I got into it again, and then it hit.

Stephen Baxter was awesome.

Since that odd beginning, I've been a fan of Baxter's to various degrees. At one point, he was probably my favorite Hard SF writer. He's been on that particular list for most of the last decade, and on my favorite SF Authors list for almost as long though he briefly fell off a couple of years back. I read *Ark* and he quickly returned to the list along with Vonnegut, Farmer, Mieville and co.. It was rather strange to realize that a guy whose novels I had been constantly recommending to friends for more than a decade hadn't crossed my mind for a while. I'd read a couple of his novels and none of them rocked my thoughts like *Ark*, though even I think it's far from his best novel. It's one of those things where even though it's not the best of your favorite, it somehow connects and you're brought back to it all.

Well, not to Jay's apartment, but to the writing of Stephen Baxter.

This issue is dedicated to his work. I understand that Vector is also doing a Baxter issue, and knowing that Vector's editor Niall Harrison is probably the best Baxter scholar out there, I can only hope to give a few footnotes to

what he'll be doing.

So, this is the least Giant Giant Sized Annual of The Drink Tank, but still, I love it! Dedicated to Mr. Stephen Baxter. It won't cover everything, but it's a look at Baxter's oeuvre and the effect he's had on his readers. I want to thank Claire Brialey, M Crasdan, Jay Crasdan, Liam Proven, James Bacon, Rick and Elsa for everything! I had a blast with this one!





Manifest Destiny and Stephen Baxter's Ark

By
Christopher J Garcia

Sometimes, I read a novel and I find that I'm thinking about something else. Sometimes I read a novel and I know that I'm thinking of nothing else but what's on the page. Usually, I switch between the two, and that allows me to make connections. Reading *Ark*, I was so deeply sucked into the engine that I had chance to see anything outside of it. There was nothing that would have made me realize that there was a world outside of the Drowned Planet (which is what they should call the series!) and even a few days after, when I first tried to sit down and read it, I had no way to connect with anything, save for a germ of an idea that popped in and kept calling me to look at it.

The idea of Manifest Destiny.

A professor of mine back at Emerson gave us a lecture about some lame essay that somehow evoked the concept, which led some in the class to ask if the writer intended it to be there.

"No one ever wrote about Manifest Destiny by accident." He said.

Now, Stephen Baxter's *Ark* is a wonderful novel, and if you look into it, you can see the parallels, how the concepts overlap. The push of mankind to the stars; the desire to spread the American People across the continent. At

first, we are presented with the crew of cadets who are training to be among those who will fly off and keep the human race relatively high-and-dry as the Earth floods. The survival of the species is seen as being a pair of rockets to the stars. The crew starts training young, some as early as 5 years old. They are taught in a holistic form, much like an Open Classroom concept, perhaps more like a commune in the 60s which happened to have heavy science as a focus. It's an academy with focus, training young people to become the engines of the future, to go out to space and colonize a new planet which isn't flooding beyond all possible reason. They are taught in every aspect of science, plus ethics, sociology, philosophy and the squishy kinds of science. These are seen as required to teach the kids about what it will take to survive the world of the ships instead of just how to work it. If you learn the ethical concerns and study how people interact with each other, it can make it possible to deal with the limitations of the space and resources.

This is analogous to the attitude of many at the end of the 18th Century and the first decade or so of the 19th. Education, scholarship, the drive for discovery and the knowledge of the classics, at least among the

Upper classes, was going to make America into the greatest of all countries. This was possibly the most powerful when you look at the years that Thomas Jefferson was in the White House. When you look at the Lewis & Clark Expedition, it wasn't an expedition for settlement, it was a trip for science, discovery. It was a journey of enlightenment and not one of conquest. This is the kind of trip that these young trainees were being prepared for.

Ark changes. After a while, the President brings in a new commander who makes it into a serious academy. Gordon James Alonzo is an Air Force Colonel who is an Old Skool Air Force type. He sees no value in the training that they're getting.

"I looked over the records of the classes that were going on here just this morning. Sociology! Ethics! Jesus Christ. And I'll tell you one thing." He looked at the staff. "There'll be no more of this treasonous abider bullshit here. Is that clear? From now on things are going to change. Your training, those of you who survive the cull, will be wholly based on aspects of the actual project you're working on."

That right there is the change that also occurred after Jefferson left office. The idea that there was all that space, the places that had been explored were now ours to take and make our

own. We were meant, by God, to spread across the continent. This took a couple of different forms. There were many who wanted us to take over Canada and Mexico, and we tried, my how we tried, but alas, most were happy to take them.

The whole continent of North America appears to be destined by Divine Providence to be peopled by one nation, speaking one language, professing one general system of religious and political principles, and accustomed to one general tenor of social usages and customs. For the common happiness of them all, for their peace and prosperity, I believe it is indispensable that they should be associated in one federal Union. – John Quincy Adams

The term was popularized by John L. O'Sullivan, a popular journalist who first proposed the concept and then later came up with the term six years later. He was a big proponent of American Exceptionalism, the concept that Americans are special, are endowed by the Creator to serve as an example for the rest of the world. One of the first statements that can be read as in favor of American Exceptionalism was from Reverend John Winthrop - "*For we must consider that we shall be as a [city upon a hill](#). The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken... we shall be made a story and a by-word throughout the world.*"

In *Ark*, you can see American Exceptionalism in the attitudes of Colonel Alonzo. The president renames the trip out into space Project Nimrod, which the Colonel explains is because they're staring God in the face. Alonzo is religious, quotes scripture a

few times, and is one of those characters who changes the entire aspect of a novel while not particularly having much to do with the plot. He sends them into space without training them in ethics and sociology for a simple reason: because they're Americans! No matter what they do, it'll be what's right because they are Americans. It's a traditional thought, that Americans are superior, have been given superior powers and thought, and will thus behave more properly than any way that could be taught to them from books.

The entire story, America sending their best and brightest to the stars to save the species echoes a legendary quote from Abraham Lincoln. That America is "the last, best hope of Earth". In *Ark*, that's exactly what the folks they shoot off into space are. Colonel Alonzo doesn't actually say those words, but every action, every other statement he makes could have been put alongside that Lincoln quote.

The trip to the stars, after the near drowning of the last parts of America that were still above water, is the ultimate example of Manifest Destiny. The presence of Alonzo gives us the concept of 'This is God's Will!' that any tale of Manifest Destiny requires. His is the attitude that they must get into space, that the human race must survive and it is America that must lead the way. And just as America managed to spread across the continent via the addition of millions of immigrants, there are a few non-Americans among those that leave the Earth. This is a nice touch and the way America has adopted people who share the American attitude of stick-to-it-ivism and gumption has always been seen as one of the important components of American Exceptionalism.

Ark is a remarkable novel. A well done piece of fiction, but it seems to be saying several things that could easily be seen as an seriously pro-Conservative American attitude. It might be more likely that a writer like Jerry Pournell could have written it instead of a Scot like Stephen Baxter.

Of course, the flight doesn't go exactly the way they expect; there are tensions that develop between camps, much like in the expansion into the American West. There's an accidental leader who turns things dark. There are new generations, born on the trail, who don't quite understand the ways and traditions of those who were Earth-born. They are rougher, leaner, they've adapted to the situation. This is exactly how the first generation that headed into the frontier viewed their children. They make dumb choices, and if you read newspapers from the frontier (places like Lincoln, Nebraska had as many as 12 papers at one time) you'll see that the papers run by those originally from Back East (or over the seas) we're very conservative, staunch and save, while those run by the following generation were brash and often used individuals of great influence as the rock upon which they built their temple.

The thing is, *Ark* is a brilliant example of the concept of American Exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny, though I'm pretty sure that Baxter didn't have it in mind. If he had, it wouldn't have been so natural, so secure. It would have been busy revealing the flaws instead of simply showing it the light of day.

Then again, no one ever wrote about Manifest Destiny by accident.



VISIONS OF THE FAR FUTURE WORLD

Human constants and cosmic change in Stephen Baxter's Xeelee sequence

by Claire Brialey

The air of the Nebula was, as always, stained blood-red. A corner of his mind tried to measure that redness – was it deeper than last shift? – while his eyes flicked around the objects scattered through the Nebula above and below him. The clouds were like handfuls of greyish cloth sprinkled through miles of air. Stars fell among and through the clouds in a slow, endless rain that tumbled down to the Core. The light of the mile-wide spheres cast shifting shadows over the clouds, the scattered trees, the huge blurs that might be whales. Here and there he saw a tiny flash that marked the end of a star's brief existence.¹

Stephen Baxter's vision of the far future is built from imaginatively diverse scenarios in time and space where human life must adapt to survive. He sends a spaceship crew through a wormhole constructed from cosmic string to struggle for a semblance of normal life in a universe with vastly increased gravitational forces². He engineers a race of microscopic human analogues with which to seed the mantle of a neutron star³. He pilots spacecraft on century-long journeys through time and galaxy-

spanning treks lasting for days but covering light years in seconds, and enables human consciousness to exist at the heart of the Sun⁴. And his characters survive, and they remain intrinsically human. These are futures which we will never experience but which we can imagine and, at Baxter's insistence, comprehend – and we see it all through human eyes.

As a link to this, we also see the future of the Earth and the way in which humans come to seed the galaxy. *Timelike Infinity* (the second volume in the universe-spanning Xeelee saga, although the first in which we encounter direct reference to the Xeelee themselves) is set in one of the phases in human future history in which the human race is near the bottom of the pecking order. Competition in trade, the rule of pure economic law without empathy, has led to competition through war and conquest. Fifteen hundred years beforehand, the human race was flowering, growing outwards into the galaxy with a glorious prospect before it, and able to construct a wormhole through time; now this wormhole brings back only the crushing news that humanity's fate will be to attract the attention of a more powerful race and to be

enslaved, losing its own capacity for space travel. Yet, as we come to expect from Baxter, it does not lose its capacity for invention, persistence or survival.

Baxter's future human race cannot resist competing in the galaxy, nor discard attitudes towards its environment and towards other intelligent life which invites similar behaviour. Hence the occupation of Earth and other human colonies by first the Squeem and then the Qax, who are driven by economic imperatives and opportunities and look to Earth history to learn to speak the only language they believe humans to understand: oppression and the survival of the fittest⁵. Not for Baxter a future where human and alien share the same air and ecology and subsequently the same starships and mechanisms of government. Species survival is the bottom line for all the competing 'junior races', with fierce competition to determine the current and future pecking order. The way in which humans treat one another offers few lessons in tolerance; immediately after the ending of the Qax occupation, for instance, humanity once again turns inwards, punishing collaborators, skirmishing in civil wars for

control of human society and damaging it further in the name of rebuilding it. All sides are convinced that they are, and have been, doing what is best for the survival of human society.

The novelette *Reality Dust*, set in this period, offers a bleak picture of the human imperative to survive, opening the possibility of human life transcending time through shared survival with an ancient form of life in the moons of Jupiter. Even where personality, identity and pain have been forgotten, survival is paramount, but here the choice looms more starkly: it is life, it is escape, it is survival, but is that enough? It should be a glorious opportunity, a triumph of human scientific endeavour to stand in comparison to the limited focus of the struggle towards reconstruction after the Qax occupation, but it ultimately seems just as bleak. The survival option is a hollow victory both for the escaping humans and their human pursuers: no justice, no vengeance, no life as we recognise it.

It seems no wonder that the path of human history remains uneven in the future, despite its apparently inexorable direction onwards and outwards.

Yet Baxter's far future is arguably not a human future. It is the unknowable Xeelee who are frequently described as the lords of this universe, and the marvellous technological crumbs that fall from their table – or are found in their dustbins – stifle the incentive for alternative innovation. And this proves to be a populous universe. Even in our own solar system Baxter plants traces of ancient alien life, and first contacts with live aliens demonstrate

how human perceptions and world views would have to change in order to come to terms with life out in the galaxy⁶. Throughout the Xeelee sequence of short stories and novels, individual human characters struggle to come to terms with the ideas that human beings are neither alone nor unique and that they are far from being the masters of their world, while often demonstrating that there is still a great deal to celebrate about being human in a universe of other marvels.

But it becomes evident, as the stories of the sequence fit together and expand our future history, that in fact the whole of life as we know it – or can dare to imagine it – is not best adapted for this universe; dark matter will always have the numerical advantage, and dark matter doesn't understand us. *Ring* sets out the full horror of the premature dwindling of our universe, as dark matter life-forms, 'photino birds', manufacture the stable states of baryonic stars which best provide them with suitable living conditions. We see our own sun driven towards its helium flash and gradual collapse within a mere few million years; and then we realise that all across the galaxies, one by one the stars are going out as their energy decay is accelerated and the photino birds get the inevitable supernovas out of the way as quickly and tidily as possible. We will be left with a universe grown old before its time. As an alien menace the photino birds represent everything we should fear most: power, determination, and an almost total indifference to humans and our way of life. But, perhaps because of the lack of malice, there is something to admire in this conflict:

“...this is the greatest feat of cosmic engineering

our poor Universe will ever see – the most significant event since the Big Bang. ... I know we're going to have to fight for survival ... But that doesn't remove the *magnificence* of this cosmic engineering – any more than an ant-hill's destruction to make way for the building of a cathedral would despoil the grandeur of the result.”⁷

It's one of the ironies of the human condition that Baxter has humans grow in knowledge, strength and power, rising to meet the challenges to be found outside our island existence of community, planet, solar system and galaxy, until we ultimately challenge the Xeelee. Our destiny is thus to pursue the goal of human dominance and assured survival, in utter ignorance still of the fact that the Xeelee represent the only hope which human life (or any other baryonic matter) ultimately has of surviving anywhere. And in the end, the best the Xeelee can do is to construct an escape route out of this universe; and the best hope for the remnants of humanity is, once more, to follow their lead.

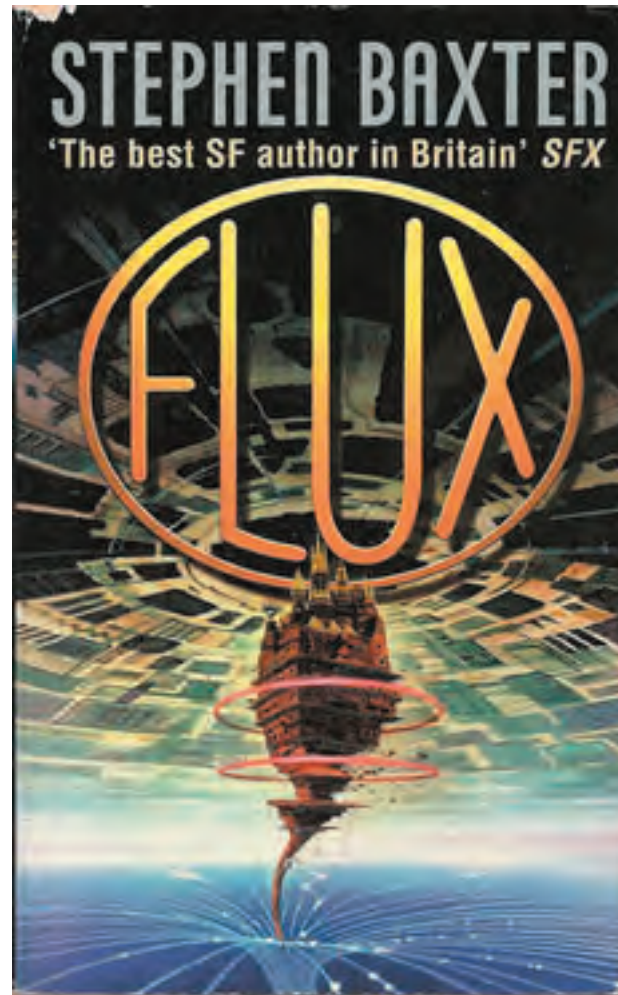
So what hope remains for human life in the far future? Baxter judges there are aspects to celebrate, to admire, to pity and to rue. *Raft* and *Flux* each present the familiar scenario of a society from which Earth is so distant that it has become mythic; indeed, some elements of society have forgotten their origins entirely or give no credence to the legends. In both novels, therefore, vital knowledge is virtually lost – confined to a small group largely distrusted by the majority – and needs to be relearned only at threat of a crisis so great that logical solutions

have failed and outlandish risks seem more likely, to a human way of thinking, to pay off. But Baxter stretches the science fictional limits of this narrative device in different directions: the distance of separation in *Raft* is one of universal dimensions rather than simple space or time, and the Human Beings of *Flux* are no mere lost colony but arguably a whole new race with human heritage.

It's a fascinating universe out there, whichever universe you're in. Science works differently in the world of the *Raft*, and native life there is in some ways even more exotic than the ultra-alien Xeelee or the photino birds whose forgotten threat has driven the *Raft* humans through the Ring. Yet when humans are introduced to these conditions it is still like humans that they behave and adapt, not merely as individuals but in overall sociological terms: they aim first to survive. Then their coping strategies, which make sense in the short term, unthinkingly become tradition and serve to stagnate society and undermine it from within. They lose the ability to understand one another and transmit their hatred inwards, fragmenting into smaller and more intense factions. The lesson of society in *Raft* is that humans are almost infinitely adaptable while still retaining all the qualities we celebrate as human; but they also retain their capacity for what we judge to be inhumanity and which is evidently just as innate.

The short stories collected in *Vacuum Diagrams* (which encompass the whole sequence and provide one ending for it) provide individual examples of what is both noble and petty about humanity itself – the brutishness of power

relationships between people⁸, set against the intrinsic resourcefulness and adaptability of humans faced with new puzzles and challenges as they move out into the wider world⁹ – as well as the surrounding wonders of the universe. *Flux* also offers this contrast, beginning by looking inward to demonstrate the literal adaptation of the human race, in this case through physiological engineering. Despite their size, despite the other physical changes necessary to equip these human analogues for life in the mantle of a neutron star,



and despite their consequent lifestyle, these people are human – because they know they are. After all, they call themselves Human Beings. Within the flux, individual lives and loves and acts of great humanity, as well as the equally typical low humanity, are commonplace; human memes are preserved, despite the tampering with their genetic structure. Gradually the focus of the novel broadens outwards, from communities through history to the stars. The mere existence of the human analogues reinforces the sense inherent in the Xeelee sequence both of human capacity for vision and achievement and of human pettiness; these marvels of science, these *individuals*, have been created as instruments of war and destruction in the hope of besting the Xeelee. Yet it is their own humanity which enables them to follow the best course for survival both in their world and, as they remember and realise the significance of their racial myths, for baryonic life in the universe – which in turn contributes to giving the human beings of *Ring* one last shot at survival.

One of the drivers of human survival in Baxter's future is a sustaining need for belief and for knowledge; thus the driving force of *Raft*'s protagonist Rees is a belief in knowledge and its power to save the universe. Lieserl in *Ring* has both a wealth of AI knowledge and a condensed focus of human experience and thus attains what most individual humans cannot possess: long-term cosmic perspective. Described as "one of the most *human* people I've ever met"¹⁰ she is arguably also the most post-human of Baxter's cast, a woman whose ideal home is at the heart of a star and who by the end of the novel is looking forward to meeting death for the third

time. She, too, questions but reaffirms her own humanity both in the long megayears cut off from human contact and when reunited with human companions. Despite acknowledging her AI debt to programming, what binds her most to the rest of humanity is her urge to communicate with it – to tell other people about the wonderful things she has seen and experienced, to make contact and derive some meaning from interaction, and to give a warning about the changing conditions of the world which humans need for the survival which provides such a species imperative.

In Stephen Baxter's later novels, where humankind as we identify it seems doomed to tear itself and its environment apart, again and again the consolation is that life itself, sentience and consciousness and physical interaction with the world, will go on. In a critically problematic conclusion, *Titan* sees life established again in the solar system centuries after humans have ensured that all life on Earth itself has gone; Baxter's retention, or resurrection, of two solitary human characters to participate in this scenario seems designed more to bear witness – and thus hope – than to predict that humanity itself has an inevitable role in the future. Baxter's later work celebrates all life in the universe.

Yet for the humans of the further future depicted in the Xeelee sequence, it is an overriding goal than human survival should be inevitable. Garry Uvarov in *Ring* provokes a breakdown in society by using the long centuries of the journey to the future to indulge his own plans for society's ultimate survival: a eugenics experiment which would greatly extend human lifespans without dependence on technology.

Near-immortality is almost commonplace in the far future but true immortality, whether for individuals or the species, seems all the more desirable for being closer to our grasp. The Holy Superet Light Church is an organisation founded as an investment in the survival of both the genes and the memes of the human species. After the turmoil of their personal fight for survival, however, some of the survivors of *Ring* feel satisfied by the assurance of a memorial both more permanent and less dominant than Superet, their original sponsors, had intended: the comfort of knowing that faint traces of human existence will persist in the microwave spectrum of their new universe, and thus enrich the formation of future galaxies.

The Friends of Wigner – named obliquely for a quantum paradox – transform Stonehenge into a spaceship and hurl themselves into the wormhole and the past of *Timelike Infinity* in order to save humanity. The humans of the past, the ancestors of the Friends, see the comparatively short-term opportunity to save the day by sending a task force to their future to overthrow the alien oppressors and preserve their own vision of their destiny. The humans of the future, however, are focused not on winning the battle nor even the war, but on writing the peace treaty and the history books. They seek to preserve the memes of humankind through a very final judgment.

As far forward as the end of human history in this universe, unlike the eventually hopeful vision of *Titan*, Michael Poole's fate in *Timelike Infinity* is to be the last human in a world almost beyond life. The post-human consciousness Paul – perhaps also to be read as

Poole – has similar experiences of the universe deserted by almost all baryonic life, with only the remnants of the ancient Qax/human rivalry and an overarching Xeelee care for the junior races set against the conflicting species imperative of the photino birds¹¹. Although the objective of these remnants of human consciousness has been to shepherd the last humans through the Ring into another universe, as they themselves are left behind they experience a loss of companionship, and of the universe they once knew, which is also all too human.

In the first of the 'Manifold' novels, *Time*, Baxter presents a breathtaking vision of the changing galaxy across millennia in the far future. In scenes reminiscent of the end of *The Time Machine* (and Baxter's own *The Time Ships*) where the time traveller jumps forward and forward and forward to see the Earth change and all life die, *Time*'s maverick human astronauts go exploring in the futures of the universe, investigating a bewilderingly magnificent array of futures for suns, galaxies, nebulae and the whole shape of the cosmos as we know it. The universe moves and reshapes so many times that it seems to the witnessing characters – caught between the huge canvas long-term wonder of it all and the tiny human short-term drama of their need to get home – that they are trapped forever in a journey through further futures than they ever hoped to reach out to. And black holes dance before their eyes and galaxies swirl and fade and reform, and it is humans, or post-humans, who have done all this. The future still holds tremendous potential.

The Xeelee stories contain comparable

visions of epic leaps across the space of the universe's future, in the Xeelee ships of *Timelike Infinity*, *Ring*, 'Blue Shift', 'The Baryonic Lords'; here the human observers move rather than watching from a fixed point, but a similar cosmic panorama opens out before them:

I hit the red button –

– and gasped as the hyperdrive jump made the Qax sun leap to nothingness. Below my feet appeared a compact yellow star, set in a sky crowded with stars and dust.

...The yellow sun had disappeared; now I hovered below a dumbbell-shaped binary pair. Great tongues of golden starstuff arced between the twin stars. The sky was darker; I must be passing through the Galaxy and out the other side –

– jump –

– and now I was suspended below the plane of the Galaxy itself; it was a Sistine ceiling of orange and blue, its colours surprisingly sharp –

– jump –

– and these jumps were coming faster; I watched a dwarf star scour its way over the surface of its huge red parent and that dim disc over there must be my Galaxy –

– jump –

– and now I was inside a massive star, actually within its pinkish flesh, but before I could cry out there was another –

– jump –

– and –

– jump – jump – jumpjumpjump –

I closed my eyes. There was no inward sensation of motion; only a flickering outside my eyelids that told me of skies being ripped aside like veils.¹²

It has almost become a truism to identify

Baxter's vision of space with a nostalgic sense of wonder for the SF reader. Yet he also internalises wonder, celebrating humanity – in its totality, including all our flaws – amidst his vision of the marvels which we can only see through science fiction. The scale of his picture of the Xeelee universe is breathtaking, but human beings are central to Baxter's far future, reflected in the distorted mirror of his characters who aim to make humans remembered for ever. For Stephen Baxter, perhaps it's enough that humans will want to be there.

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ENDNOTES

¹ *Raft*, p.10.

² *Raft*.

³ *Flux*.

⁴ *Timelike Infinity*, *Ring*.

⁵ 'The Quagma Datum', 'Blue Shift'.

⁶ 'The Sun-People', 'The Logic Pool', 'Gossamer', 'Cilia-of-Gold'.

⁷ *Ring*, p.348.

⁸ 'The Switch'.

⁹ 'Pilot', 'The Xeelee Flower'. 'More Than Time or Distance'.

¹⁰ *Ring*, p.390.

¹¹ 'Vacuum Diagrams', 'Secret History', 'The Baryonic Lords'.

¹² 'Blue Shift'; *Vacuum Diagrams*, p180-1.





Evolution Diary by Chris Garcia

I bought *Evolution* at Recycle Bookstore in San Jose. I got there an hour too early, but luckily ran into two old friends who I hadn't seen for a while, and thus a breakfast with them and their year-and-a-half year old was met. That made me happy. After a bagel and cream cheese with a Coke, I headed back, bought the book and headed out to get some lunch and start with my tradition of reading the first few pages over terrible fast food.

Prologue: January 8th, 2011

Started off reading at Yoshinoya, Japanese fast food. Prologue, ten pages. Baxter apparently loves to give us exposition while characters fly places. I think there's a bit like that in every Baxter I've read except for *Anti-Ice*. Set-up is good, but I expect this to be a swerve before actually entering into the actual meat of the matter.

Chapter One – January 8th, 2011

I went home, pre-paring to do some work on CorFlu programming and writing a bit more of the Baxter article on Titan, I started reading because hey, there's still a bit of time.

I was right about the swerve. This chapter was about a little mammal in a world of dinosaurs and it was one of those Baxter chapters that just throws you right into action that's supposed to get you running full-force into the story. It worked.

And then there's a comet. There's life and death and water and violence and all the stuff that Baxter specializes in... well, except for well-placed sex. That's not in this one yet. It did make my drinking of a delightful adult Scotch-based beverage more entertaining.

While reading at Sizzler, I realize that it's not a Baxter opening chapter unless people/things die and something blows up.

Chapter Two- January 8th, 2011

We're going backwards? Sometimes I'd like to know a linear path to storytelling, as much as I am loathe to use one myself.

Is this alternate history? Has Baxter gone for the Hard SF version of *Turtledoving*? Dinosaurs that used tools and hunted in social structures?

No, wait, it's *Secret History*. Objection withdrawn.

Chapter 3 – January 9th, 2011

Only Stephen Baxter would have Ground Zero for a comet strike be a character in his novel.

Chapter 4 – January 9th, 2011

Well, that was depressing. The story where the strong one dies, the weak one lives and the parent can't handle the loss. I saw a documentary about Lemurs with exactly this same scenario, which had me and my girlfriend at the time bawling.

Maybe I shouldn't have read this right before going to sleep.

Chapter 5 – January 9th, 2011

The Denny's Test: Does the book I'm reading draw me in enough that the check for my Denny's breakfast comes before I put the book down. This test is made more impressive by the slow, languous service at the Denny's by my house.

This chapter started with the story of Noth, a lemur-y thing, and Solo, a more evolved Lemur-y thing. I get that this section of the book

is supposed to feel kind Animal Planet-like, but at least it's good Animal Planet-like.

At some point, the check had arrived.

Chapter 6 – January 9th, 2011

It seems that every hominid character has a mate, and that hominid's mate somehow gets eaten. Was Baxter going through a messy divorce?

This chapter is kinda like an SF version of *Horse With No Name*, only without the Lalalas.

Chapter 7 – January 9th, 2011

Can't sleep. I was uber-exhausted, work on the exhibit was finally ending, and with one more day, I couldn't sleep. I read. And I read. And I read. This novel is so painful, in a way. Baxter introduces characters, gives us a glimpse, then kills them. I get it, I understand, I know that that's the story of *Evolution*, but just once, I wanna feel like there's a win.

Then again, I love this book, and it's keeping me awake for another hour while I wait until I can get back to sleep and perhaps dream of days of better restfulness.

Chapter 8 - January 10th, 2011

Sometimes, you gotta give it to the guy who has the balls to call a five million year old monkey-ish ape *Capo*. I mean seriously, *Capo*? Was there another proto-primate named *Fat Clemenza*? *Tesio*? Was *Barzini* working with *The Turk* to supply heroine to the other monkey-like beings? It's ballsy to go to that level! Good chapter though.

Interlude – January 11th, 2011

Alison Scott is a pretty typical name. It could have been anyone. I knew an Alison Scott in High School. I wasn't shocked to see an English author using the name Alison Scott. I gave it no thought.

When you factor in the name Gregory Pickersgill, I'm pretty sure that some Fan Fund made some money off a couple of Baxter Tuckerizations!

Chapter 9 – January 11th, 2011

We're up to something human-like! It's a young woman runner. And they're located in Kenya. Why am I not shocked?

Chapter 10 – January 12th, 2011

Well, there's a story about an eight year old, and we're introduced to his father. That makes it obvious what's going to happen.

And a paragraph later, he's dead.

I also didn't know that Neanderthals were emo kids. Baxter spent much time explaining how they'd cut themselves like Cure-listening high school sophomores. While he presents it as a mark of manhood, I totally know it's because the ancients weren't able to write angst-ridden poetry.

Chapter 11 – January 13th, 2011

This was a terrible day. I started the new gig and I was down, way down. I headed off to Togo's for a delicious Hot Roast Beef sandwich and a Dr. Pepper and forty-five minutes away from the museum to do some reading about a human that I would recognize if I saw her walking across the savannah.

And for the first time in reading *Evolution*, I found myself stuck in the middle of the story, deeply involved with the comings and goings of this woman who was struck by migraines, stuck in a body in a life that knew no joy as she went through the motions of being a genius, a creature who lived in simple times and while she was not what we would recognize as intelligent at first, she was a quantum leap ahead of the rest of her society.

Of course, this is where it all starts. Modern society is formed, created in this chapter. Religion, mysticism, lying, serial killing, tattooing, pottery, charismatic politicians, art, they all start in this chapter.

I was three minutes late getting back to work, and no one cared.

Chapter 12 – January 14th, 2011

There was a moment where the humans living in Indonesia had to move a log to build a sea-going canoe, but it was a long way into the forest from the camp and the river. I was hoping for an Ice Age Fitzcaraldo, but alas, it was not meant to be. Instead, we got a joyous landing on the continent of Australia.

Chapter 13 – January 14th, 2011

One should never cry in a bowling alley.

I took great care not to while reading the end of this chapter about two young French humans who were separated from their tribe and taken in by a hermit Neanderthal. This story was all about the kids running off and finding one of the last Neanderthals in all of France and they become friends and then... well, I wouldn't have

been choking back tears if it ended well now, would I?

Chapter 14 – January 14th-15th, 2011

Beer.

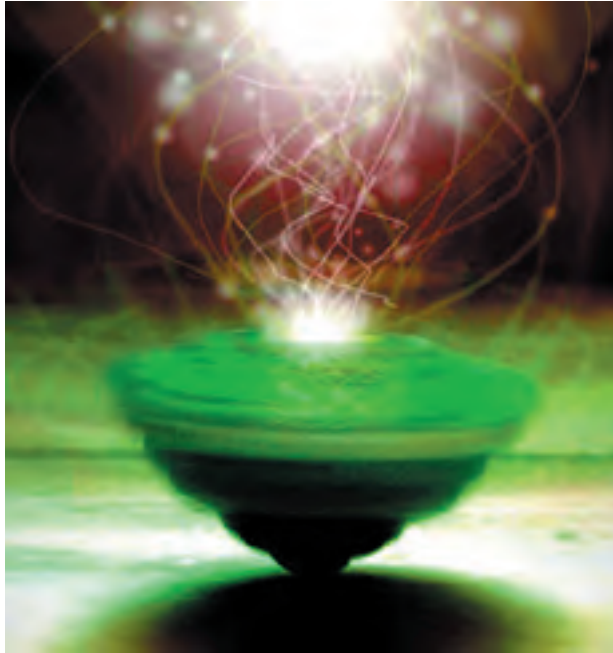
That's the definer of greater v. lesser in this chapter. It makes sense, there's real chemistry involved in beer-making. This chapter, of all of them so far, feels like a station in modernity. These are people dealing with problems of emotion more than problems of environment. And, of course, the dude from the beer-making group is a bastard who has a thing for humping pregnant women. That's creepy.

Juna, the girl who left her hunter-gatherer village so that her child would survive, turned into a sell-out in a positively Heather Grahamian way. First to the beer-maker pregnancy fetishist, then to the son of a King and on and on, turning her back, literally, on her former way of life, her former family. It's the oldest story ever told... or one of them, I guess.

Chapter 15 – January 16th, 2011

Rome. Baxter loves Rome. This is a Rome after its expiration date, really, in the day when the power was in the East. Still, he does Rome right.

This was a road picture: a young man and his mentor, a Persian and a Scythian on the road to Rome, to Gaul, to the site of the tear-jerker. It was a fun ride and a total Hollywood in the 1960s analog. These were travelers with a mission like those mouldering old producers with that one script they want to make and every studio they come across wanting them to make another. And the outlanders are the hits of



every party.

This was my favorite chapter so far.

Chapter 16 – January 17th, 2011

No one blows stuff up nearly as well as Stephen Baxter.

Chapter 17 – January 17th, 2011

Coming soon: the grand extensive novella *The Sleepers Come To* by Mr. S.B. Wells.

Seriously, the guy is so obviously influenced by the works of HG Wells in chapters like this one, you can see it so thoroughly. A group of militaryists awaken after an indeterminate amount of time. It's interesting to see that this was a per-Life After Humans approach to the exact same concept.

It's good stuff.

Chapter 18 – January 18, 2011

The best part of any wide-ranging science fiction novel is when things start to look ahead in the far misty future. This could have been the start of an entire other novel, a powerful one that traced the path of potential evolution.

Also, Elephant-sized pigs and goats will replace the white whale that haunts my darkest dreams...

Chapter 19 – January 19, 2011

I've said it before, I'll say it again: only Stephen Baxter can kill all life on a planet and have it not feel like a complete bummer. This chapter, a bit of a posthuman story of *Leaving Eden*, was rich, a story stronger than I'd have expected. I expected the end to be some punch from above, some dark calamity, but the ending was far more personal. It was raw. I like raw.

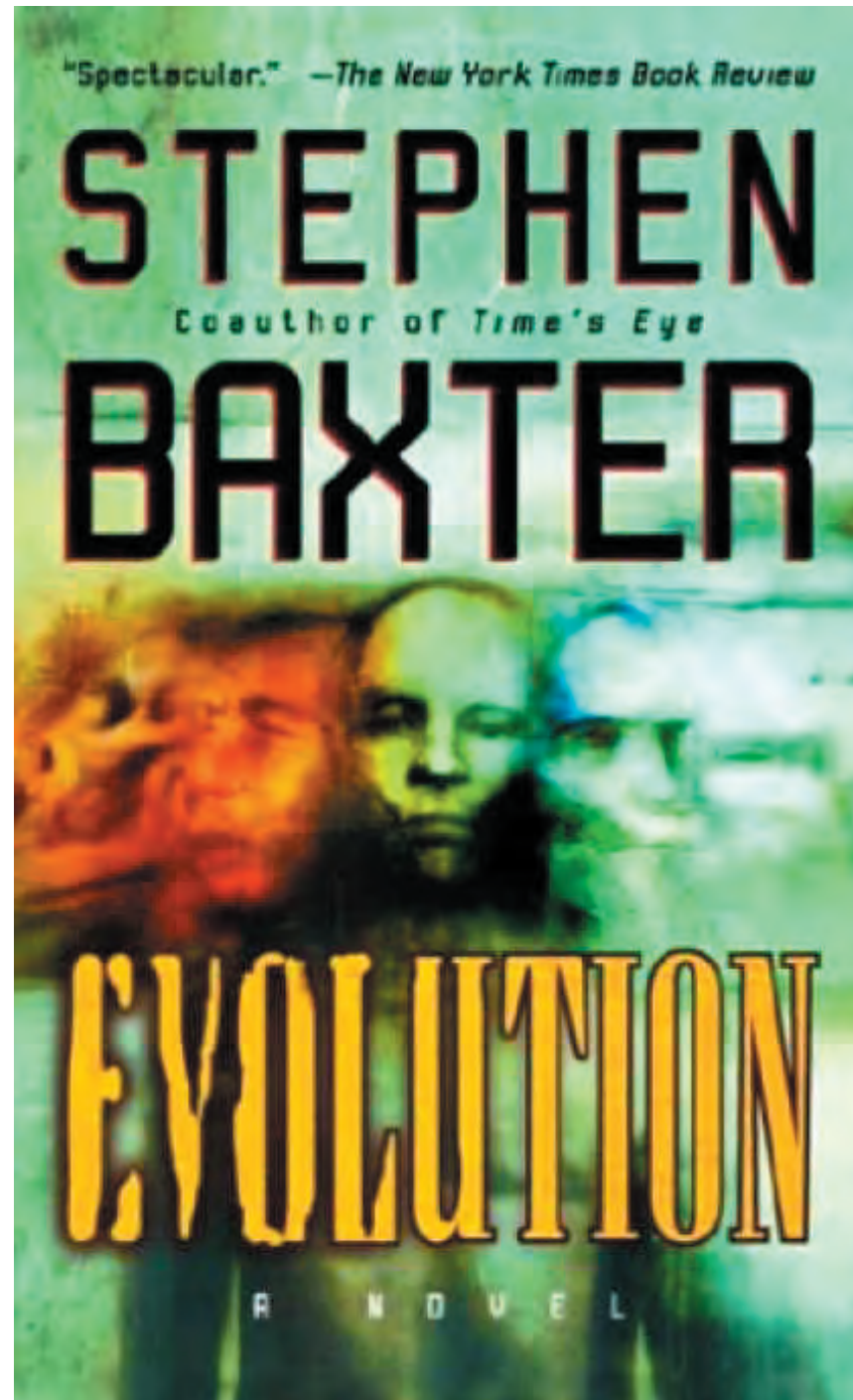
Epilogue – January 19th, 2011

Sometimes, it feels like Baxter tacks on endings to cut the feeling that he'd just kicked down all joy there could ever have been. I thought this one was thin, a view of a mother and daughter in a time between the start of everything and the dark ending we'd just passed through. While I was reading it, the sounds of *Chopped* on Food Network working in the background, the light from my MacBook shining along with the weird gooseneck lamp I have attached to my headboard. I was in my apartment, the fan on, me in my pajamas, beneath my John Cena and Undertaker WWE blanket, watched over by Evelyn's painting of mother and daughter winger horses in a clouded glade, in the city of Sunnyvale where CorFlu will happen

in just a few weeks, drawing people from around the world via planes to San Jose, which will fly across oceans, across a continent, into the valley where they invented the microprocessor, the vacuum tube, the personal computer. Above us, satellites that were once controlled by giant dishes, controlled and tracked from the Blue Cube, less than three blocks from my bed, the objects that Man had made to fly high above once taking their commands from a building that I could see if I stood on the fence around my front area.

If I could look at the world through the lens that Baxter has presented us, none of that would matter, not a piece of it would see that far-off moment when the sun will expand and either throw the Earth far off to an eventual collision or light us aflame. None of it would matter.

And yet, I'm not thinking that. I'm thinking more about what to say about this novel, this near-masterpiece of connective literature that played with the ridiculous and the raw. I can only think of one thing: go back over my notes.



Titan: or How to Kill The Human Race and Still Have A Good Time

BY
Christopher J Garcia

Titan is a massive novel. It's not the longest novel I've ever read, but it's long, it's tough, it's well-paced and it's strong medicine. The fact is, *Titan* is a three-sided story: one side is the politics of spaceflight, the second is about human exploration and what it takes for people to find what they are looking for. The final side is the inevitability of all our plans leading solidly, and beautifully, to death and nothing more.

We'll leave that last one off for a minute and see where the other two take us.

Politics is fun to write about. Why do you think I spend all that time working on those long articles about the various political bits of Fandom? Space is a place that the young see as free of all Earthly concerns. There's nothing out there but a great vacuum, and vacuums breed no politics, but that is far from the truth. Access to space, and the money that makes it possible, is far more interesting than the science they use to make it happen. There are personal politics, views of American superiority, the needs of the rest of the nation and our identity as a nation of exploration that have to be considered. Watching these fights first hand is apparently terrifying, as I've had a few folks who have

been in those discussions tell me, and Baxter makes every individual consideration seem so black-and-white, every talking point seem so calculated. There are portions of *Titan* that feel like the best of all possible political writing. It's great stuff.

The second part, and what I think might be the most painful part of the novel, is the section that looks at what it takes for people to feel like they're people. I don't think anyone would deny that we as a species have a wanderlust that is nigh insatiable. We're always trying to find The New, The Undiscovered. In the old days, it was pretty easy (relatively); you just point a boat towards the coast of Africa, walk towards the middle, slaughter or enslave whoever you found there and say that you discovered it. Easy-peasy. After we got most of the world mapped, and ensured cell coverage, we had to start looking up-wards and those bright spots of light were pretty enticing.

Titan explores that need for exploration, and Paula Benacerraf is the ultimate vessel for that need. She was a survivor of a famous shuttle crash and she leads a push to send humans to Titan, the most famous of Saturn's moons. She

has a need to go out, to fly into space, to see what no one else has seen. She's good at it, and despite ties to Earth that are so very very strong (a daughter and grandkids), she still feels the desire to make her way to space so much stronger than any obligation to Earth.

This is, in fact, a very real thing. Astronauts are famous for their belief that once you're set for space, that is your first responsibility; to be the one who goes and discovers what's out there. The Earthly matters don't concern them anymore. Instead, it is space, discovery, that must be served. That's why Earth-bound, returned astronauts have high rates of alcoholism and divorce. They're a lot like ex-athletes, they can't perform at the one thing they feel like they must be doing. Of course, the fact that so many of that famous generation of astronauts were test-pilots didn't help in that matter either. Discovery is what NASA has come to symbolize, even though there's so much more to discover in the sea than in space.

The push to make the Titan trip happens uses the Discovery theme as a way to trip up the group that is trying to stop them. They

are instantly the villains, even though they're making arguments that would have staved off the failures that occur later in the novel. Trying to keep humanity in a globe-shaped box is the most villainous thing that anyone could do, and we instantly recognize that.

We are introduced to another problem: China. They are shown as the great challenge, still trying to establish themselves as the great power that they certainly are. They are not so much interested in the world of discovery. They're interested in respect, in being recognized as the master of the known world. The Known World. The world that requires no adventure, no discovery. There's saber-rattling, there's awesome rhetoric, there's China as the Bad Guy.

And that brings us to the Destruction stuff. Here there be spoilers. Everybody dies. EVERYBODY. The Chinese find a way to divert a large space-rock and kill everybody. EVERYBODY. The only surviving humans, or so we are to believe, are the folks who are on their way to Titan. The team reaches the rock, a purple slime-covered moon that has danger at every turn, and they do some science, eat some stuff. A bunch of their team die in various

fun ways, from crashing to space rays to plain old-fashioned getting squarshed. It's almost more entertaining to guess how each member's gonna go. Eventually, they discover that there's no chance to survive, they go and walk into a puddle and die.

Like I said, how'd you expect this all to end? Discovery must come with a body count. If nobody dies, it ain't an adventure. Paula Benacerraf knew that she was on a one-way trip, even if folks were kidding themselves at times during the lead-up to the trip. This was a suicide mission, and they went into it. The way the politics were played by both the US and China were equally as suicidal. You could see what all of it would lead to if you were paying attention.

And yet, it feels right and not at all depressing.

There was the 2009 film *Up In The Air*. It starred Mr. George Clooney and the lovely Anna Kendrick and the absolutely stunningly sexy Vera Farmiga. I love her! The film tells the story of a guy who goes through a series of changes, sees that he wants something more, but ends up exactly where he was, and unhappy about it. We root for him, we hope that he gets his win.

He doesn't.

He ends up exactly where he started off, others have gone on, but he is still out there like he was, and the message is so obvious: you can't change your life. Others can change your life for you, but no matter what YOU do, you're doomed to the whims of the outside.

And still, it's an up story, it's a story that makes you feel good.

Titan is a science fictional version of that feeling.

They make it. They die, but they make it to Titan. The World of Humans ends, but what did we manage? We got our kind out into space, we got to Titan! That's awesome! We did it, no matter what the outcome, and we were masters of the Universe! Baxter does tack on an ending where aliens arrive and bring back Paula and her companion, but that's not necessary, the story had been told, we had won. We lost out to poor planning on Titan, to human arrogance on Earth, but we won: we got there. We put ourselves further into the Universe than we ever expected.

And there's the reason why I could finish the book and not feel like clutching at my chest like a stricken heroine in a silent film..





The Titanic Voyages of Stephen Baxter by Liam Proven

I find Stephen Baxter rather confusing. On the one hand, he writes enjoyable hard-SF books about realistic space travel; then again, the same man writes weird alternate-universe stuff with organisms made of dark matter that I just can't quite fathom. (I am reminded of a terribly inopportune choice of words of mine in the 1990s: "I've been struggling to get through Stephen Baxter's *Ring* recently...")

And then there are what I am given to understand are sentient, talking-mammoth books. I have not even tried those.

It's not just me, either. I cherish the memory of watching a lovely Baxter soundbite when the International Space Station was launched. The BBC got a few words from various British luminaries in the fields of space and astronomy. Representing science fiction was Mr Baxter. His comment on the wondrous new human bridgehead in low-Earth orbit, to the great consternation of the presenter, was that it was a complete waste of money and effort and that we ought to be spending the money and effort and *materiel* on either getting back to the Moon or going to Mars. I was nearly as scandalised myself – it was in shocking contrast to the mood of jubilation and celebration that the BBC was, justifiably,

presenting.

On later, more sober consideration, of course, he was absolutely right.

But it is fair to say that I don't get on with all Baxter's books. After having to really work to finish some of the more way-out ones such as *Time* and *Flux* – not to mention the dangerously many-meaning title I have already alluded to – I stopped reading the Xeelee or Manifold books and have not (yet) gone back to him again.

Which makes it doubly odd that I particularly enjoyed a couple of his slightly closer-to-home works: *Voyage* and *Titan*, which Wikipedia informs me forms part of "the NASA trilogy" along with *Moonseed*, another one I did not personally rate. Although it was a well-paced adventure, *Moonseed* for me seemed to suffer from the extreme and gross implausibility of its concepts: that a form of rock could suffer from an infectious disease, that the Moon could be protected from it by a giant alien artefact deep within it, and that the Moon could be terraformed. (Really quickly, at that.) Maybe the fault is mine: I'm not strong

enough to take the weight of quite that much suspended disbelief.

The other "NASA books," though, I have returned to several times. Both tell of alternate histories of human spaceflight, one in the Apollo era and the other in the near future.

Voyage is a brave story, a story of our recent history not as it was but as it *should have been*. This is relatively uncharted territory for alternate-history novels, which often concern themselves either with unpleasant "way it might have been" – what if Hitler won, what if time-travelling tourists actually killed Jesus, and so on. Baxter takes a different tack: that the real universe that we live in is the sad, misshapen one where Things Went Badly Wrong. In *Voyage*, whoever-it-was-that-actually-shot JFK fails to kill him. They severely injure him and, it is hinted, kill his wife Jackie – Cape Canaveral becomes not the Kennedy Space Centre but the *Jacqueline B. Kennedy* Space Centre in the Baxterverse, a nice touch.

But with JFK still exerting his influence, the Apollo program goes from strength to strength. Apollo 14 does in fact get to the Moon, but after that, NASA puts its efforts into (real-world) nuclear-rocket technology and by the 1980s, sends a manned mission to Mars.

Don't get me wrong – the Apollo project was a magnificent achievement. As I write, the 25th anniversary of the Challenger disaster has just passed – the most memorable date in my young life at the time. The sacrifice of the crews of the Challenger, the Columbia and Apollo 1 are not to be forgotten. Apollo 17 shouldn't have been the end, though. Perhaps NASA was right to cut it then – but maybe Baxter has a point and it should, in fact, have cut it earlier. I wasn't paying much attention, being preoccupied with learning to walk and eat at the time, but I have read that public interest in the later moon missions massively declined – and above all, they were Cold War PR exercises. If there'd been more science in the Apollo 15 and 16 – maybe sending Jack Schmitt earlier, for instance – then perhaps NASA should have stopped, satisfied with the achievement, and gone for the Next Big Thing.

I don't want to give massive spoilers and describe the plot of *Voyage* in any real detail, but the pervading sense that one takes away from the book is that “we *could* have done it”. That if the USA had gone for it – perhaps not wasted billions and thousands of lives in Vietnam but spent them on NASA instead – then maybe we'd have that tenuous foothold on Mars by now. We'd no longer be doing what Kim Stanley Robinson's character Anne Clayborne contemptuously calls “sky areology” – we'd be down there with rock hammers.

Voyage is a hopeful book, a feel-good book for me.

Then comes the flipside: *Titan*, in some ways one of the bleakest and most pessimistic

near-future SF novels of relatively recent times. And yet, it's wonderful. In *Titan*, things have not only all gone wrong just as they are doing for us today, they're going far, far worse. The Fundies have got into power in America, so it's going to dumb-as-a-brick hell in a superstitious handbasket and so is everywhere else. *Titan* is remarkably predictive in a couple of places – not only does Baxter get the eponymous Saturnian moon pretty much bang on, but he even predicts the terrible demise of the Space Shuttle *Columbia*. OK, the time and the details are wrong, but it does indeed bring about the end of the Shuttle programme and indeed of America's efforts in LEO.

So, unexpectedly, perhaps implausibly, a one-shot manned mission to the only other vaguely terrestrial body in the Solar System is launched, using scraps of every NASA toolkit from the Saturn V to the ISS. It's a one-way trip: the plan is that a second mission will bring the crew home, but accurately reflecting the allegedly-Christian mindset of the American happy-clappy, they decide it's too expensive and leave them to die. It rings true for me – it's the same sort of “logic” that has a “pro-life” campaigner killing abortion-clinic workers. Not only would poor old Yeshweh Carpenter from Beit Lehem be spinning in his grave, you'd get a decent current if you wire-wrapped the corpse of that evil misogynistic old bastard Saul of Tarsus, too.

In a novel that can fairly be described as less than sunnily optimistic, while the doomed survivors of the Titan mission's crew struggle to the Saturnian system, a badly-aimed giant meteorite destroys most of the life on Earth

and kills off those pesky humans. When Steve is in a bad mood, baby, *nobody* gets out alive.

Except, oddly, in a remarkable bolted-on coda at the very end of the book, with a positively Stapledonian leap of time and setting and an astonishing second ending. It's a very bold and striking move – although on consideration, that in itself is very Baxterian – and whereas it does not fit, for me, with the tone and feel of the rest of the novel, it lifts it into a totally different place.

Both are novels of journey, not arrival. One is hopeful, one is predominantly less so. Both make you believe that we can do very much better than we are doing, and that we should and it would be worth the cost, however high in lives or money.

Neither feels anything like the same writer who wrote the other solo Baxter stuff I have tried. Nor, come to that, does *The Light of Other Days*, my favourite other Baxter novel, co-written with an elderly Arthur C Clarke and, bizarrely, with a title by the late great Bob Shaw which he attached to a completely different, unrelated short story. It is all about one of my personal half-dozen greatest SFnal gadgets of all time, and that's about all I will say about it for now. (To be fair, Bob Shaw's gadget is pretty damned cool, too, and would certainly make the Top Ten.) If you have been suspicious of the handful of novels Sir Arthur wrote in his declining years, don't be – this is the pick of the crop and well worth it.



Coalescent: A Disjointed, Rambling, Strange Conversation With M Crasdan, Jay Crasdan, Rick Blair, Elsa Lund and Chris Garcia

The following is a record of a chat that we did as a way of group-responding to Baxter Coalescent. As you'll see, this was probably not a great way of doing it.

Chris: OK, we've all read Coalescent, right?

Rick: Sure.

M: Yes.

Jay: I started it again, but I read it before.

Elsa: I did.

Chris: Then let's start with the general question: what did you think of Coalescent?

Jay: I'm reading it again, aren't I?

Rick: It's long. Really long.

M: Baxter's theory – If you can do the story in less than 400 pages, add another storyline to pad it to at least 500

Rick: LOL. Sounds right.

Jay: but it's so good.

M: I didn't say it wasn't, but every book is so long.

Elsa: It took me three weeks to finish it.

Jay: All his stuff is so long. Voyager even took me almost two weeks.

Rick: Titan went on forever.

Chris: I think it took me a couple of weeks.

Jay: five days the first time but I read faster than you guys.

M: I thought that it was the best novel I've ever read about the deep Catholic conspiracy.

Chris: Better than The Di Vinci Code?

M: Maybe a little.

Elsa: It was really hard to read.

Chris: I liked the Roman part better than the modern stuff. I thought there was way more movement and it felt more complete.

Elsa: I wish he had just chosen one story and told it all the way through.

Chris: I think the structure of it was great, that bouncing between the two allowed for a lot of call-and-response, but the Roman story was way more compelling. The fall of Roman influence in England and the shuddering death throes are very dramatic. The modern story had a Dan Brown feel to it.

Rick: Agreed.

Elsa: Chris: You love Dan Brown.

Chris: I do, and I love Baxter, but I don't think you can argue that the search for his lost sister was less awesome than the Rome story. I mean, it even had the classic 'Let's meet at the races'

scene that mob movies have.

Rick: I was always reading a little ahead to see how long it was until we got back to the Roman story.

M: You'd rather read about some old Roman broad than a sect of underground Catholic hotties?

Rick: Hotties who turn into Naked Mole Rats in Space.

Elsa: ->snarf<-

Chris: nice.

Jay: I thought that the novel flowed without stopping. You had one scene folding into another no matter what timeframe we were in. Read as individual stories, neither one holds up, but if you read them in the order that Baxter presented them, the chapters feedback on themselves and amplify. It's a story that told any other way would leave you without an understanding of the Butterfly Effect.

M: The chicks were going Butterfly?

Chris: I loved that movie.

Elsa: I think you mean the Venus Butterfly, Jay.

Rick: I loved LA Law.

M: Get a couple of the Sisters down in their cellar, oiled-up and flapping their wings. Yum!

Elsa: <-wants to see that.

Chris: Same here.

Rick: Regina vs. George. George is a put-upon middle-aged white dude with little taste. Regina is a tough survivor who comes from soft stock.

M: Yeah, George is kinda a little bitch.

Elsa: I liked Regina, but Lucia was all sorts of depressing.

Rick: All the girls of the Hive were depressing. That's the point.

Chris: After all the stuff that Regina went through and still made it, it's kinda sad to see how they turned all the girls into mindless drones.

Jay: They're not mindless. They're thinking drones, which is scarier if you think about it.

M: They're asexual, but they're always touching and rubbing up against each other. It's like a camp at Celebrate Burning Man.

Jay: Yes, far less shirt-cocking in Coalescent.

Rick: And the whole Order thing is weird. If you look at it, the entire 'sisters are more important than daughters' thing is ridiculous. In every way daughters have to be more important than sisters. Fewer older members would consume less in resources and supply more output with those resources. It makes sense that you'd want a younger mass of members leaving the fold.

Jay: Emotionally though, he's dead-on. Dedication from sisters is far more important than the strength of a daughter's dedication. You're right about the resource-use though.

M: But come on. How could you have a community of women, especially young women, underground that doesn't go all lezbones?

You ever been to an all-girls boarding school? Nothing but scissordancing going on in there when the lights go out.

Rick: There is something to be said for sexual connections enforcing togetherness in communities.

Chris: But in sisterly communities?

Rick: it worked for the Greeks.

Jay: And the Romans and the Persians.

M: Yeah, fuckin' around promotes unity.

Chris: In a religious order?

M: Like that's ever stopped them before.

Chris: Let's move to characters.

Elsa: Regina ruled. She was hard, way hard. Hella hard. She saw it all, knew that it wasn't enough to break her and that the future was more important than the present.

Rick: No, I think she thought that the present was more important than the future. That whole 'sisters matter more than daughters' idea is basically saying it.

Elsa: But she was always putting together systems to last through the ages. She had long-view and perseverance.

Jay: She also held on to that stupid belief that things would go back to normal. She had no idea that the world had changed, that it had moved on until it was beyond obvious. She was blind.

Chris: Or at least trained. She believed that Rome was such a great power that it could never fail. She was wrong, but anyone would have been. Think about it: could the US no longer be the dominant force in the world? Would you believe if we lost control of Montana that we wouldn't eventually get it back?

M: Would we want it back?



Jay: Whoa girl, Big Sky Country's pretty awesome.

Chris: Americans are in that place right now. We can't see ourselves as the second-place anything.

M: Yeah, nicely obvious, no?

Rick: The thing about an ancient order that stays so far below the radar of most people would evolve a much greater secrecy format. They also wouldn't come out when technology makes the info they've got valuable.

Chris: Why not?

Rick: The need for secrecy would increase because they would have a resource. They would have to defend more. Put a hole in a barrier to hold back a flood and you've doomed yourself, and that's exactly what you do when you let groups come to you for information. They'd need to powerdown instead of expanding outward.

M: Let me point out that the Order sent a bunch of girls out to the barbarians when they were attacking to get raped. Sacrificing members to the horde, great concept. It was insulting that they didn't take up real arms. You see this same story about a Chinese monastery or cloister and they're fucking shit up with kicks and fury.

Chris: You've got a point.

Jay: That's an important piece of the puzzle. That's the hive concept, the basis for the rest of the series, really.

Chris: There was also Artorius.

M: And is it possible for a fucking British writer to not include King Arthur?

Elsa: The timing was right and it makes the book more magical.

Jay: When you try to make reality out of the Arthurian mythos, you end up draining it of all its power. Fuqua did that with his King Arthur and even the Richard Gere one lacked the magic. Baxter's Artorius is not a magic Arthur, he's flat, meager.

Elsa: But at least he's romantic.

M: He kind of gets made to look like a middle manager.

Rick: I think the Arthur that is presented has all the emotional intelligence of the Arthur of the White's Arthur.

M: That's not true. He's far less complete.

Jay: It's a narrow view of him.

Chris: Well, certainly, but isn't he also the ultimate sign of the loss of Rome's power?

Rick: Of course he is, and that's why Baxter put him in there.

Jay: Can I mention the 'Ignorance is Strength' thing? It's so 1984.

Chris: But it's not because it's a specific ignorance that she was promoting.

Elsa: Not only that, but it is more like 'you've got a duty and reason can not stop you.'

M: Which is idiotic, right?

Chris: Why? Because faith and duty are stupid?

Jay: In the course of the operation of an underground cult, it's essential.

Rick: I'm not sure about that. If you make it a group that is held to logical progression, to an evolution of thought, then you're dooming your cult to eventual death by the changing of the situation. Inevitably, all institutions must fall away to the logic of a new time.

Jay: That's true, and if you strip away the outer shell of the Order, you'll discover that it's as old at its core as possible. Thought had evolved so much in that timeframe as to make any such operation impossible to survive if the logic of the time were applied.

Chris: It's what the Catholic Church has been doing for the last century, fiddling with dogma to make it possible to survive, though losing much of the basis of the original church.

M: Spoken like a true believer, Chris.

Jay: Yeah, where'd the Mexican Jew come up with that one?

Chris: Well, we Mexicans have that whole Old Timey Religion thing down pat. A lot of the old Aztec stuff still mixes in with the rest of the smells and bells.

Jay: True, but that can't happen in the Order or there's a serious problem. Collapse would be imminent.

M: What's the word on the psycho Peter?

Rick: The only sensible one in the entire book.

M: He's psycho. Maybe you noticed that I called him 'the psycho Peter.'

Jay: He was an interesting character in the way that he was a terrorist and a lot of his messages to George sound like those emails the guy from Virginia Tech sent.

M: He couldn't be a terrorist. He was a white guy.

Chris: That had to be on purpose too. We're supposed to think of him as a terrorist.

M: That bombing of the lab in San Jose was a nice touch.

Elsa: I was totally freaked by him. He had a

concept and pulled it off.

Jay: It's like Anonymous: a group that's right, but seriously misguided.

Elsa: They're the kind of believers that make me shiver.

M: They all are.

Chris: I used to hang out on 4Chan and stuff, and yeah, those are the kinds of things you'd see. The ones that really freaked me were the guys who had a planned response before the messages came out. They'd have minimal connection to whatever the initial message, but the guy who was responding had a point all along and wasn't gonna deviate from that. It was exactly what Peter's emails sounded like.

Elsa: That's scary. Did you watch those YouTube videos from the guy who shot the

Congresswoman in Arizona?

M: Yeah, scary shit.

Rick: Totally incomprehensible.

Jay: But oddly amusing.

Rick: Quite true.

Chris: Let's wrap this up. Overall, what'd you think about Coalescent?

Rick: It was a good story, a smart one, but the general flaws in it came from a total misunderstanding of the role that right thought plays in everyday human existence when weighed against human sexuality.

Elsa: I didn't love it, it was freaky, but I liked the Roman stuff a lot. I wish the entire thing were Roman.

Rick: You should read his Alternate History

stuff, baby.

M: I wasn't thrilled. He messed up on the Order, could have made it so sexy, and the nerdy middle-aged men saga wasn't very good.

Jay: It's a sign post story. It's a start and a finish, so it's kinda like A New Hope.

Chris: It's Star Wars, dude.

Jay: Fine, but it holds together with nothing else supporting it. The problem is that Baxter obviously had way more fun writing the Roman chapters than he did the modern parts, and that makes it a much weaker novel overall.

Chris: I loved it, especially the Roman parts, but I wish we got so much more.

