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Proposed Milieu Anthology Anthology Project

Creating New Worlds: Exploring the Milieu

Table of Contents

1. Introduction, by Christopher Vera
2. The Hobbit, by J.R.R. Tolkien
3. The Integral Trees, by Larry Niven
4. Ringworld, by Larry Niven
5. Seed Stock, by Frank Herbert
6. DragonFlight, by Anne McCaffery
7. Without A Thought, Berserker, by Fred Saberhagen
8. Museum Beetles, by Simon Kewin
9. The Time Machine, by H.G. Wells
10. Dune, by Frank Herbert
11. Lord of Light, by Roger Zelazny

Introduction

“In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.” (Tolkien, 9). When I was just out of elementary school these immortal words began for me an amazing adventure that took me from the pleasant hills of the Shire, home of the hobbits, through the spider-infested forests of Mirkwood, inhabited by the Wood Elves, past the shores of Laketown where Men live, and finally to the dank caverns of Smaug the dragon, bane of the last dwarven King Under the Mountain.

When we read stories, we all expect our protagonist to meet great challenges and to hopefully overcome them in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. Readers of the milieu have an additional expectation: We expect to be taken to new places unlike those in which we live. Not merely to other cities, or continents, but to other worlds, alternate universes, even other planes of existence. Worlds

that we imagine existed long ago, or may yet one day exist. We want to see problems we can relate to in ways we never imagined.

Such stories help us to realize that the possibilities of the universe are truly infinite and that humankind's ability to grow is limited only by its imagination. And readers of milieu have hungry imaginations.

Location, Location, Location

With the idea of travel to Mars and other planets in our solar system, it is not so difficult to imagine a time when humans might seek to colonize other worlds. Frank Herbert tells the hopeful story of one such colony in “Seed Stock”. The small band of humans, now landed on a distant world completely and forever out of touch with Earth, must survive or perish. The water, the air, even the one of the few edible life form on the planet—shrimp-like creatures known as trodi—contain a slow poison that kills the crops and animals the colony brought with them. When their children are born sickly and stunted, it is feared the colony won't last long. “Here was the thing the scientists would not admit. They were trying to make this place into another Earth. But it was not and could never be.” (Herbert, 74). Only through great determination would the children of man survive in such an unkind place.

Planets can be so passé. What would life be like in a place with no land? Where beings lived on kilometers-long trees that drifted through a gaseous atmosphere like so many green clouds in the sky? Whose primary source of gravity was caused not by a planet underfoot, like the Earth, but by the rotation of these giant trees through the air? Larry Niven imagines such a place in *The Integral Trees*. He describes such a tree thus: “The trunk went straight up...It seemed to go up forever, a vast brown wall that narrowed to a cylinder, to a dark line with a gentle westward curve to it, to a point in infinity-- and the point was tipped with green. The far tuft.” (7). Of course the people that live on these trees have problems, just like any society of people living together. But their tree—their world— is

dying and they are faced with the impossible question of how to survive.

Niven astounds us again in Ringworld by showing us yet another world without a planet. Instead, an ancient race has constructed a gargantuan ring around a distant sun. They populated the inside of this ring with land, oceans, and colonized it with strange creatures. As the protagonist of the story approaches it in a spaceship for the first time, he is awed by its sheer size. “The rim of the Ringworld grew from a dim line occluding a few stars, to a black wall. A wall a thousand miles high, featureless, though any features would have been blurred by speed...Its edges converged to vanishing points, to points at infinity on either end of the universe...” (109). What is the purpose of such a construction and what beings could possibly exist on a fabricated world whose total land mass is thousands of times that of the Earth?

Flora and Fauna

While Earth creatures unknown and yet unknowable may yet lie in wait to be found by explorers or archaeologists in real-life, our imaginations are better kindled when we turn our eyes to the heavens. What life waits for us beyond the Earth's atmosphere?

On a distant planet settles a colony of humans and they name it Pern. They fail to realize the significance of a small red planet in an erratic orbit around their new home. Years pass. As the red planet comes close, its indigenous inhabitants of worm-like lifeforms called the Thread travel through space to Pern, “...destroying anything they touched. The initial losses the colonists suffered were staggering.” (McCaffery, ix). The only hope of the colonists is an unusual breeding program of a large flying reptile with the ability to breathe fire after chewing on phosphine rock. The dragons, as they are named after the mythical creatures of Earth, are flown by riders trained to be telepathically and empathetically attached to them. The colonists are spared only by the heroic efforts of dragon and rider to burn the Thread while still high in the air over towns and villages. And that's all before page one.

In some cases, strange species lie in wait for humankind in the vacuum of space as we search out new places to live. “The machine was a vast fortress, containing no life, set by its long-dead masters to destroy anything that lived,” (Saberhagen, 1) leaving humankind to face and destroy an intelligent “race” of robotic moon-sized death stars determined to eliminate all life in the universe.

However, curious creatures are not merely reserved for discovery on new planets after light-years of travel. One only need wait for enough time to pass.

Simon Kewin imagines a post-apocalyptic Earth where generations of humans led by their Curator dwell entirely within the walls of a massive museum, and have no understanding of the outside world. “As a young boy [the Curator] had ventured far, far down [The Mammal Wing]. Had explored perhaps halfway along, glimpsing new rooms, new wonders all the way, before his nerve had given way in the echoing dark.” (Kewin). Each generation faces a new threat in the Museum Beetles. At first the bugs are a simple nuisance, over time eating the documented history of mankind, growing in number and in size. Each generation of humans loses more of this collected knowledge, reverting slowly over time back to hunter-gatherers. Finally, their human tribe dwindling, the last Curator is sure the beetles were “...larger than they used to be. Sure that in the past, they didn't fight back.” (Kewin). Ironically, Kewin's characters are forced to imagine what life might be like outside the confined world their kind had long ago adapted to as they are slowly pushed out by their enemy.

H.G. Wells, one of the early masters of science-fiction describes one the inhabitants of Earth in the year 802,701 A.D.: “He was a slight creature—perhaps four feet high—clad in a purple tunic, girdled at the waist with a leather belt...He struck me as being a very beautiful and graceful creature, but indescribably frail.” (Wells, 17). Contrasting with this fair race dwells an underground people of whom a representative looked like “...a queer little ape-like figure...[with] large greyish-red eyes; also here was flaxen hair on its head and down its back.” (34) Wells imagines the relationship between these gentle surface dwellers and the mysterious subterranean people as “...a gradual widening of the...social

difference between the Capitalist and the Labourer” (36) and readers find ourselves wondering what would politics look like in places other than our own and how does the writer's chosen milieu affect them?

Society and Politics

What world populated with sentient beings would be complete without a study of the cultures and interactions of its many “peoples”? For example, the milieu lets the reader imagine how colossal governments and cultures borne of necessity from their harsh surroundings might function.

A royal family beset by a vindictive Emperor and his legions, inter-planetary corporations, guilds, smugglers, spies, assassins, and a mysterious desert people known as the Fremen converge on the waste planet known as Arrakis, or Dune, in order to secure its only appreciable export: The spice, an addictive drug required to heighten the mental state of beings that use this power to fold space—making it possible travel vast distances very quickly. Without the spice, the entire intergalactic economy would collapse and billions of addicts would die. Meanwhile, an ancient prophesy tells of a messiah who will come to Dune to lead the Fremen. “And that day dawned when Arrakis lay at the hub of the universe with the wheel poised to spin.” (Herbert, 447). Could the fate of an entire galactic society depend on a single planet? Likewise, in real-life, could the whole of Earth depend on a single fragile system: A sea? A rain forest? A city? A building? A milieu story allows us to see what happens after a single cog of a incalculably vast machine breaks down.

Humankind transported far from Earth and forced to survive without support is a common theme in milieu stories as this gives us the opportunity to discover fantastic places and problems in a perspective we can understand and identify with. But the old problems of human civilization, including greed and power, follow along with us. Imagine the captain and crew of a space-faring ship arriving at their new world with a large berth of passengers. The passengers don't understand navigation,

gravitational forces, or the mechanics of driving a spaceship. Now imagine on arrival, the captain and crew, who incidentally own all the weapons, decide they will rule this colony. Roger Zelazny presents such a scenario in Lord of Light with an additional twist: The rulers have the ability to make themselves immortal by transferring their psyches into new bodies. As generations of passengers forced into a new Dark Ages live and die and breed on the planet below, from their ship the captain and crew control all technology, effectively making themselves gods. Crew that disagree with this are not allowed to transfer their psyche, and through attrition, are eliminated. One crew member, neither acknowledging nor disavowing claims of godhood, rebels: "...we of the crew should be assisting them, granting them the benefits of the technology we had preserved, rather than building ourselves an impregnable paradise and treating the world as a combination game preserve and whorehouse." (Zelazny, 78). How does one man fight against the gods themselves?

What Milieu Tells Us

Milieu stories often subtly—and not so subtly—hold the most significant of dramas: Life as we know it. As we read stories written for the milieu, we realize, this is it. The threat against our characters is not merely against their persons, or their way of life, but against the entire race of humankind. As our characters go, so goes our entire race. Therefore, we read not only with great interest, but with great caution. This is the essence of why we read milieu. We may sense in our own lives our own dying Integral Tree; have our own Thread to burn; our own gods to challenge; our own dragon to slay.

The milieu lets us see that somewhere, somehow it has been done before. It ignites a spark of hope in our imagination that we human beings may yet accomplish that which we once knew to be impossible.

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