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Stanley Lieber

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10CT1993

by Stanley Lieber

ISBN-13: 978-1722186661

332pgs



Stanley Lieber's first novel began life as a short story hacked out over a weekend in the fifth grade, an overdue assignment for the Young Author's Conference in his fifth grade year. The piece ran to sixty single-spaced pages, and it required a team of three eleven year olds, working in shifts, to complete the task of reading the story aloud to the group. This exhausted the conference's allotted time, and no other authors were able to share their work. One fragment of this early short story survives as an early chapter in 10CT1993. Some sentences were reportedly left unchanged.

SL prefaces each chapter with its own separate title and list of folk taxonomies -- labels, or tags -- which provide context both temporal and geographical that is often missing from the narrative proper. I'll have to get Microchip to run an analysis on the tags, to see how consistently and

accurately they were applied. It's likely that an electronic version of the book could be navigated using this built-in indexing system.

Chapter content itself breaks down into three essential themes: philosophy of science, the relationship between human beings and information technology, and clandestine (as opposed to covert) operations. The tensions between them are mostly implied. As SL himself might say, the story's situatedness, its ultimate point of view, is imminently deniable. Haha.

Sanguine about the effects of secrecy upon the nuclear family, the first chapter opens on a young father saddled with caring for his three year old son, even though he has to work that day. Naturally, the boy is not capable of understanding what he's seeing at his father's job, in and out of secure facilities, back into the truck, back into the driving snow. That's how the father justifies exposing his child to state secrets. Assumption: all families have secrets.

From chapter to chapter, the narrative jumps around in such a way that the aforementioned tags are sometimes necessary just to get a solid fix on where the action is taking place. It's not until later on in the book that the reader becomes aware of the critical importance of two major families, Bright and Mold, whose geneologies intertwine through-

out the four thousand some odd years of this (it turns out) first installment of the ACTRON saga. As I say, the built-in index is rather helpful.

I'm not sure how to feel about the Bright father's casual approach to child rearing. Taking the boy into harm's way, taking him into an area where he isn't cleared to be, even if there is no plausible way he could comprehend his surroundings, is problematic at best. For example, what if, years down the road, the boy somehow recalls details of what he's seen that are at that time still classified? How to ensure (or even predict) that his sense of patriotism will withstand the onslaught of teenage hormones? Or that his manifestation of patriotism will embrace obedience to his clearly neglectful father? Lives could very well be at stake.

Space travel -- time travel, to be precise -- is touched upon with maddeningly vague nonchalance, and precise details of how it is accomplished are never revealed. (SL elevates such non-disclosures to an art-form.) A novel method of propulsion is introduced, the so-called "percept drive," but it is not elaborated upon except for a few offhand, silly allusions to a supposed inverse proportion between the size of a group (in this case, the "percept team") and its aggregate ability to focus on a destination. Micro assures me this is funny.

Whatever, principal characters throughout the novel travel backward and forward through time as if geography, and time's arrow, were no object.

Another of SL's technologicisms is a wearable augmented reality interface he imaginatively dubs the "visor." Taking the form of a thin strip of translucent (sometimes opaque) plastic worn stretched across the eyes, it is accompanied by a small, jeweled emblem resting centered above the wearer's third eye, serving as combination camera, microphone, microwave transceiver, humidity sensor, and solar panel. The contraption won't be winning any design awards, but its evident utility makes up for what it lacks in style or stealth. Several of the characters rely on them for basic situational awareness.

Weapons are described in terms more vague than the space travel, and are hardly worth mentioning here, save for the laughable proposition of firearms that require a live, over the air network login in order to function. Glad we didn't have those in Vietnam. For that matter, glad we don't have them now. Sometimes one is obliged to confront the enemy with his own weapon. And if the network were down? This notion, while mildly and subtly amusing, simply doesn't work for me.

Most of SL's political musings strike me the same way. Hard opinions forged in the sheltering

kiln of inexperience. These... Mold characters behave nothing like the movers and shakers I've had occasion to move and shake. Admittedly, I'm the last person who should indict anyone's arguments for lacking nuance, but in this case I feel comfortable pointing out that powerful families rarely store their legal documents on wax cylinders. Even the superpowered variety. Plinth Mold's rise is left mostly to the imagination, which is the most charitable thing I can say about a sentient slime mold that spends the first few years of its life molesting its employer in a flooded basement.

More satisfying is the depiction of the writer's life, especially in the final chapters, as Pennis Mold (another sentient slime mold) is interviewed for a puff piece in a men's magazine. One presumes the author is more confident negotiating this material, even if he's never sat for a real interview with a national magazine. As something of a writer myself, I can certainly identify with the dilemma of trying to write authoritatively about a subject with which the author is wholly unfamiliar. For example, most of my characters have living relatives.

The end of the world stuff I can take or leave. I've never been much for tying up reality with a bow. If we really are all living inside a computer simulation, I might like to have a word with the lead

programmer. Failing some sort of concrete evidence otherwise, I can't even see how it would make any difference, one way or the other. Therefore, I reason, the whole thing cancels itself out. After years of recapitulating this same debate at every single holiday dinner, I finally got Micro to admit my approach (to this question, at least) is correct. Or in any case more efficient.

And yes, I do think in English.

I want to find some way to shrug off this book. It's really not very good, is it? But now that I've set down some of my own thoughts on paper I realize it may not be so easy to dismiss. Some of the questions it intonates are still rebounding inside my head, calling into question many conclusions I've long considered to be rock solid. There are implications here that must needs be considered.

Maybe I shouldn't be writing this down.

You may want  
a war over,  
you may even  
declare it over,  
but the enemy  
gets a vote.



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