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## BOOK REVIEW

**Ed Finn and Kathryn Cramer (Eds) 2014 *Hieroglyph: Stories & Visions for a Better Future*, New York NY: William Morrow (an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers) ISBN 978 0 06 220469 1**

The seventeen short fictional narratives in *Hieroglyph: Stories & Visions for a Better Future* are written in response to a call from Neal Stephenson (of *Snow Crash* fame) for optimistic visions of preferred futures for humanity. Under the banner **Project Hieroglyph**, this enterprise seeks to energise the genre of science fiction short stories, encouraging scientists who write and writers who employ scientific principles to stimulate the traditional feedback loop where the novel ideas of a story inspire actualised scientific innovation. This execution in turn fosters further imaginings for evolving human existence. The project's progenitors at the Center for Science and the Imagination (Arizona State

University) believe that humans, mired as we are in geopolitical tensions and marketplace cultural drivers, have limited scope for 'getting big things done' through collaborative global networks. *Hieroglyph* is conceived as a creative crucible where authors can introduce provocative extrapolations of technological and societal advancements in the hope of opening and intensifying civilisational transitions. Each story is accompanied by Story Notes and links to further sites of interaction encouraging participatory readership.

In most cases, the narratives fulfil the project's ambitions providing some spectacular conceptions of future directions for humanity grounded in plausible extensions of the known into a logical construction of the unknown. In *Atmosfera Incognita*, Neal Stephenson's amiable protagonist oversees a scheme conceived by an eccentric billionaire (and old school chum) to build a 20 km tower up into Earth's stratosphere. *The Man Who Sold the Moon* by Cory Doctorow also employs a likeable protagonist to guide us through multiple Burning Man festivals in the Nevada desert and through the workings of the 'Gadget' built by his newfound friend Pug to 3D print the desert playa into building tiles using solar power. Pug becomes a billionaire entrepreneur (another one) before descending into cancerous twilight and death, but not before achieving his bucket list item, sending Gadgets to the moon anticipating the day humankind comes to stay. The plots and social implications progress credibly and the science is balanced well with the relational development of the characters but what begin to emerge as more stories unfold are some similarities that appear to be obstacles inherent to the genre.

The billionaire entrepreneur device is deployed once again in Gregory Benford's *The Man Who Stole the Stars* exposing a structural liability in the exo-Earth narratives. The projected technological innovations necessary for astronomical expansion into the cosmos require astronomical amounts of money. Through necessity, the short story warrants an expedient device such as the entrepreneurial billionaire to facilitate a realistic financial expression of the production costs within a constrained word count. But is it the limitation of the form or the imagination of the writer/thinkers that produces this repetition? Seldom do authors conceive of a future that is not entirely inured in profit-driven capitalism and rarely is there any acknowledgement of the downtrodden masses who will not attain the stars, but for a billionaire's fleeting pang of conscience—'what with all the suffering in the world'—which is soon forgotten. Paul Hawken's identification in *Blessed Unrest* of the burgeoning acephalous congregations of people dedicated to coherent, organic, collaborative change have not penetrated the imaginations of some of these futurists. In contrast, however, stories such as *Girl in Wave: Wave in Girl* by Kathleen Ann Goonan do evoke structural

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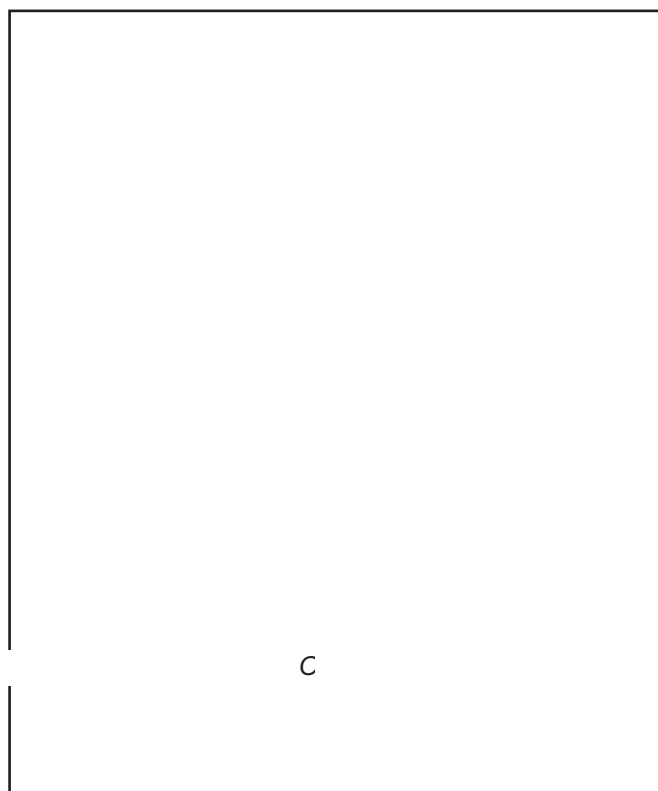
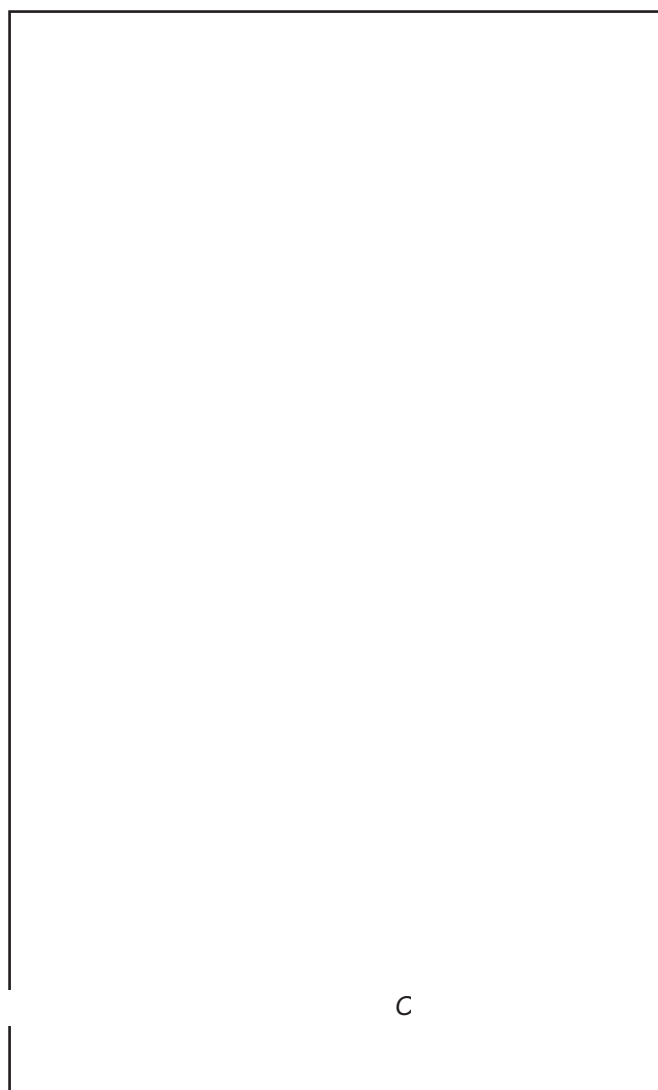
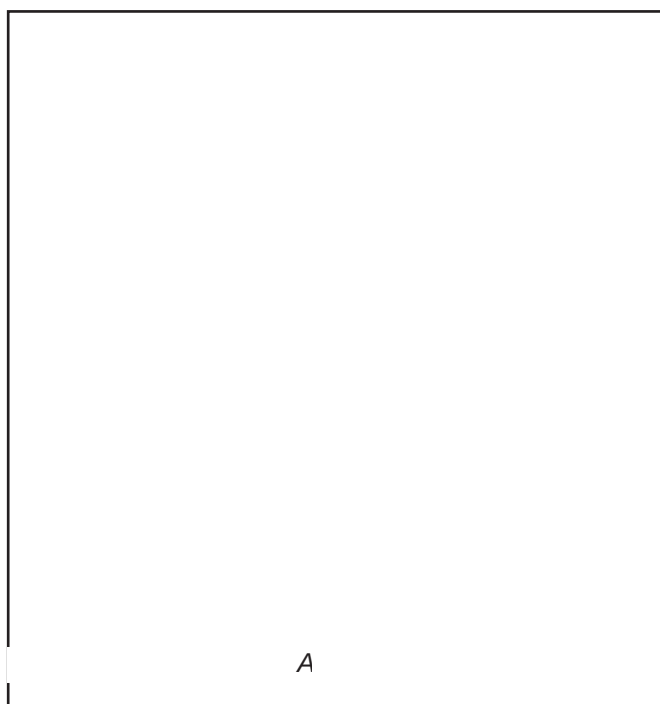
alternatives for society with the expected communality of digitised consciousness implicit in posthuman augmentations of existence. Similarly, Vandana Singh weaves a global networked butterfly effect of interlacing narratives into *Entanglement*.

Another pitfall for some authors is the overuse of imagined techno jargon of tomorrow. The reader is bombarded with futured colloquialisms in *Quantum Telepathy* as Rudy Ricker offers us: qwet rat, gnat cameras, qrude dude, quantum wetware, denurbalizer stick, Idi Did gallery and Roller nurb chow fortune, within the first few pages. When applied prudently, this tactic can enhance verisimilitude but when the density outweighs the comprehensibility, the reader is left wondering for too long what on Jupiter is going on. Fortunately, many writers in *Hieroglyph* judiciously pepper their text with shorthand familiarisms, usually providing an explanation in the context.

Many of the innovations proposed in the varied scenarios are already in their emergent stages as the Story Notes attest, reminding us of the promise in our augmented present. With such a wealth of possibility contained within its covers, *Hieroglyph* cannot be consumed all at once—the scientifically accurate elaborations conceived encourage leisurely contemplation of human potentials suitable for all who still find the time and cause to wonder.

**AUTHOR**

Gil Douglas is a creative director, producer and choreographer who has devised, designed and implemented multifaceted entertainment, large scale events and theatrical experiences for audiences in Australia and New Zealand. He has completed a Bachelor of Arts and Honours at the University of the Sunshine Coast and currently lectures and tutors in Communication and History.



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