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Jeffrey Barlow
Pacific University

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Description

Review of *eastern standard tribe* / Doctorow, Cory. eastern standard tribe. New York: Tor Books, 2004.

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Eastern Standard Tribe

Posted on **September 1, 2005** by **Editor**



Review by Jeffrey Barlow <barlowj@pacificu.edu>

Doctorow, Cory. eastern standard tribe. New York: Tor Books, 2004.

This work might be classified as “speculative fiction,” or using a broader category, “Science Fiction.” We review it as we believe that fiction writers, freed from the bounds of contemporary reality, often have much to suggest about the impact of the Internet, and its possible futures.

We are not alone in thus assessing the current author under review, Cory Doctorow. Among other activities, Doctorow has lectured to an audience on Digital Rights Management at Microsoft in Seattle. [1] He is also the European Affairs Coordinator for the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), and a frequent contributor to Wired magazine. [2] He has a great deal to say, and says it widely and often.

Doctorow is widely regarded as one of the most thoughtful contemporary writers who deals directly with the impact of electronic communication. One of the weaknesses of most speculative fiction is plotting; creating a coherent alternative universe often overwhelms both plot and character development. This is true for this short work as well.

Nonetheless, the work is well worth reading because of the reach of Doctorow’s mind. This piece is not set in the safely distant future where the writer can imply that major changes have occurred from the reader’s present, thus justifying discontinuous developments. eastern standard tribe (the title is set in lower case characters.) however might be said to be set the day after tomorrow. The author extends, then, a current context and just carries it a bit further, showing us a highly possible future rather than the fantastic universe of a Dune or Star Wars.

The essence of this universe is that globalism has progressed so rapidly, enabled by electronic communications, that the time zone in which one works, and those colleagues who also work within it, has become the focus of loyalties: hence, the protagonist belongs not so much to a nation state but to the eastern standard tribe.

The plot of the story is essentially irrelevant, simply a vehicle for character development, in this case a literally loony protagonist who is desperately balancing a very complex job, a new lover, and friends who may or may not have his best interest at heart. His life and work depends on his skillful use of electronic communications, particularly a sort of uber-cellphone. The two-page long scene in which he has a traffic accident (meeting the lover), secures a lawyer by searching huge databases, and signs a contract with him while the attorney then opens negotiations with insurance companies with one phone call is astonishing.

Doctorow is certainly not for everybody. But if you enjoy speculative fiction and can read eastern standard tribes for what it is, a brief glimpse into a possible future that frequently startles the reader with Doctorow's version of "what if..." you will find this work enjoyable and thought provoking.

Footnotes:

[1] See transcript at: <http://www.craphound.com/msftdrm.txt>

[2] Doctorow's home page can be found at: <http://www.craphound.com/>

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