Cryptonomicron

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Cryptonomicron

Posted on March 1, 2003 by Editor

By Jeffrey Barlow <barlowj@pacificu.edu>

Neil Stephenson is one of the most successful of writers who treat technical topics seriously within a fictional framework. When I once asked some students who work in our Berglund labs what their favorite Internet-related piece of fiction was, several suggested Stephenson’s Snow Crash. Others mention works by William Gibson. We review books by both writers in this issue of Interface.

Stephenson’s 1999 novel Cryptonomicron is initially appealing: it is set both in the code-breaking circles of World War II, and in the modern Philippines where post-war American, Japanese, and Chinese businessmen struggle to gain control of a valuable electronic service. To call the 1100+ page novel “huge” is an understatement.

Stephenson has been compared, in the many on-line reviews and fan sites that I scanned, to both Thomas Pynchon and Tom Clancy. To the first for his long, convoluted plots which seem very unlikely to ever come together until they do (some critics of both writers insist that in fact they never do—another similarity). He is compared to Clancy for the rapid pace, attention to technical detail (Cryptonomicron will teach you more than you are likely to want to know about the mathematics of creating and breaking codes, for example), and nearly superhuman characters. Some have also been unkind enough to note that his female characters, too, seem to have been created largely to serve the males.

The real question for us, however, is does Cryptonomicron reveal anything about the impact of the Internet? Fiction writers have an honored place as commentators upon periods of rapid change caused by technical developments—Jules Verne and H.G. Wells spring readily to mind. Is Stephenson worthy of being mentioned in the same e-mail or BBS posting as those worthies?

Judging solely from Cryptonomicron, the answer, regrettably, is no. While the plot is larded with technical detail, and electronic communication is both critical to the plot and pleasingly
commonplace, continually reaffirming our geekish inclinations, I can’t say that Stephenson gave me any particularly new or interesting slant on such things. He does take pains to work social observations and criticisms into the plot, as though he aspires to a Pynchonesque depth, but we usually end up back at the same old Tom Clancy stand, facing down the bad guys with some lovingly described weapon.

On the positive side, if you are trapped on what passes for airborne transportation in our degenerate age, then Cryptonomicron will probably keep you entertained and anesthetized at an intellectual level for many thousands of frequent traveler miles. And if you do enjoy Clancy, give Stephenson a try; he has some of the same appeal, but seems much more aware of the impact of electronic technology on our culture. (See also the review of William Gibson’s Pattern Recognition, this issue.)

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ONE THOUGHT ON “CRYPTONOMICRON”

lose weight fast
on February 3, 2014 at 2:59 PM said:

Normally I don’t learn post on blogs, but I would like to say that this write-up very pressured me to check out and do so! Your writing taste has been surprised me.
Thanks, quite great post.