

## Book Review: Anathem

Written by Pete Kloppenburg  
Saturday, 20 September 2008 02:52 -

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If you have never read a Neal Stephenson novel and you find that one has somehow thumped its way to your bedside table, you may be forgiven for being intimidated. In fact, intimidation is a natural and healthy response at every stage of confronting a Stephenson novel.

At first blush, you can only widen your eyes to accommodate its naked bulk: since the publication of his 1999 doorstopper *Cryptonomicon*, his books have tended to weigh in at roughly a thousand pages per. As you sink into the first few hundred pages, you can be intimidated by its scope: his *Baroque Cycle*, comprising three individual doorstoppers of a thousand pages each, managed to span the entire world and was populated by a cast of real life figures that would make the British Museum wheeze. But your jaw may not truly drop until you get a sense of his novels' raw ambition. Stephenson likes to grapple with ideas, the bigger the better, and generally from as many parts of the bookshelf as he can manage. And finally, it is what he can manage that is so profoundly intimidating.

If I have made Stephenson's books sound about as much fun as a bookcase full of graduate theses, then I must apologize. Stephenson writes novels that are frequently swashbuckling, fascinating and hysterically funny, and often all three at the same breathless instant. Certainly there are stretches of heavy sledding in his body of work, but these tend to be tugged along by that most pleasurable of readerly questions: what's gonna happen next? And he can also be a wonderful and engaging stylist, each book yielding memorable moments to savour and reflect "ah, that was well done."

You will not be surprised that I was looking forward to the publication of Stephenson's latest novel, *Anathem*. After the historical exertions of *Cryptonomicon* and *The Baroque Cycle*, *Anathem* marks a return to speculative fiction, where Stephenson found his first successes in the cyberpunk ghettos. Not that he has ever deprecated genre fiction; it seems his four novel departure from SF to historical fiction was more a matter of chasing whatever ideas pleased him most wherever - and whenever - they would lead.

In fact, *Anathem* is perhaps the most distinctively speculative of all his fictions, complete with rocket ships, aliens, and intriguing new technologies to be explained. The novel opens, much like *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, in a kind of monastery dedicated to the retention and pursuit of science, founded after a world-wide holocaust of a nature that is never revealed.

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The opening chapters are among the slowest, as the novel covers the obligatory background and explanatory material. At times, it can be frustratingly slow; a description of an octagonal cathedral-like structure tempts the reader to go grab a pencil and some graph paper to keep from getting lost. When he has finished the edifice, we are left wondering if all that was really necessary.

This is a problem, of course, endemic to SF, which relies on forcibly shifting the reader outside the known and the comfortable in order to make a few telling observations about our own world. For an SF author like Stephenson, the challenge is formidable. He can clear up any unnecessary confusion on the reader's part by bringing the story to a screeching halt with awkwardly pasted explanations from his background material. He can introduce new names, terms and ideas without explicit definition and trust the readers to hold their patience long enough to piece it together for themselves. Or he can contrive situations and conversations wherein key ideas are discussed, most unnaturally, among the main characters. These are familiar obstacles to SF achieving more compelling characterizations and a wider readership.

*Anthem* judiciously leans on each of these techniques, and also adds some dictionary definitions at the beginning of each chapter. None of it prevents us from feeling a bit confused, frustrated, or impatient in the early going. Indeed, it takes a good while before anything of real consequence actually happens, as Stephenson reveals the world of Arbore, a planet much like Earth but with significant differences in history and culture.

The novel centers around Erasmus, a twenty year old "fraa" in what appears to be a co-ed monastery, where the inhabitants study "theorics", pure sciences and maths, without the aid of computers or technology of any kind. While not religious, they live ascetic existences while observing a "discipline" that keeps them carefully isolated from the "extramuros", the world outside the walls of their "concent", where "extras" live their lives and pursue "praxis", or technologies. If you are becoming a bit weary of quotation marks, you are getting the feel for how the opening chapters of *Anthem* progress.

Nevertheless, Stephenson is quite skillful at his work, rather quickly introducing many of the themes and ideas he will knit together. For the average Stephenson reader, the concent of Saunt Edhar will sound rather paradisiacal: a place that gathers only the smartest people and offers them all the books and time to pursue whatever ideas seem the most interesting. There are also authorities to be careful of, lest they dole out punishments. It is a bit like graduate school crossed with a Benedictine monastery crossed with Hogwarts.

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Once Stephenson has his pieces in position, the story accelerates as the characters learn more about their world, their world learns more about their universe, and the aliens begin to make their presence known. This is where *Anathem* begins to sing, rather than chant. And amazingly, as the action gains pace, the ideas begin to connect and gain strength and take shape.

Since *Anathem* is a rather instructive novel, it would be unsporting to reveal exactly what shape these ideas take. Whereas a plot driven novel might rely on a surprise twist to deliver a satisfying read, an idea driven book like *Anathem* depends on the orderly development and interaction of new concepts and fascinating hypotheses to build to a mind-blowing crescendo. In fact, the boggling complexity of the notions presented in *Anathem*

- taken from Plato, quantum mechanics, string theory and phenomenology, to scratch the surface - would be impossible to present here. Which is pretty much the point.

There are so many grounds on which to criticize Stephenson when he undertakes such an ambitious project. We can certainly criticize the resulting fiction. There are many passages where the story slows to a crawl while various notions are dilated upon, and the narrator's romantic adventures are unconvincing at best. No doubt cosmologists or theoretical physicists could pick nits with the science in his fiction. Philosophers may well be able to fill libraries with quibbles and critiques. Personally I wondered how a society could progress by sterilizing its smartest members without quickly become very stupid indeed.

But all of this would be to deny ourselves of a crackling good read. *Anathem* fascinates, entertains, illuminates, and mystifies. Like the very best of science fiction, works like

*Dune*

and

*A Canticle for Leibowitz*

, it offers a glimpse of worlds bigger than ours, with far greater possibilities. Which for me is a fine way to pass a pleasant thousand pages or so.