Other Worlds

Beggars in Spain

The initial thread of discussion was the ethics of genetic engineering which forms the premise of the story. (Parents can select sleeplessness as a characteristic of their children.) Because genetic engineering is so much in the news today, it was a timely issue. The major question raised but not necessarily answered was how far such practices should go before they cross the line. People wondered if genetic carriers of diseases will be shunned and denied insurance.

Moving on to the topic of the Sleepless created by genetic engineering, one participant commented on the "fallacy of reason" -- that logic and rationality alone can lead to wrong conclusions -- and disastrous results. She pointed out that the characters in the book were all left-brained; one of the characters feels that something is missing in her. Eventually she discovers that it is the emotional and aesthetic dimension of human experience.

We spent some time talking about why the Sleepless generated so much jealousy among the Sleepers and compared it with racial prejudice and irrational fear of differences.

A prominent part of the book is a philosophy that promotes individualism at the expense of society -- very much in the tradition of Ayn Rand. The title of the book in fact refers to the question of whether one should give assistance to beggars, that is, what responsibility do the haves in a society bear toward the have-nots. The group decided that the author was interested in this idea and simply built the book and the characters around it. As a result, the consensus was, the book simply was did hold together well as a strong narrative.

One participant was puzzled by the fact that some characters introduced at the beginning of the book simply disappeared with no explanation and that storylines seemed to peter out. Another participant, who enjoyed the book, commented, "Oh, that's just like a soap opera. Characters appear and disappear." Although it seemed to be a flip remark, we all agreed that it showed that the author did not have good control over the story. The ending of the story was unsatisfactory to most of the members in the group -- in fact the author produced two more books as sequels to this one.

On the positive side, the group liked the fact that the story featured strong female characters although not all of them were likeable.

Finally, we spent a little time comparing Beggars in Spain with Ender's Game. The main point of comparison is that "the children save the world."

Interesting discussion again. It's amazing to me how these books can generate so much passion!

Barbara Bogart, Evanston

Ender's Game

People jumped right into the discussion when one member expressed surprise that an author with a strong Mormon background would write a book like this. In the ensuing conversation, we addressed Ender's parents' apparent lack of attachment to him, the manipulation of family and social relationships, and the implausibility of the children's behavior given their ages.

The core theme of the book, the group decided, was "does the end justify the means?" in relation to the adults using the children as pawns in the deadly game the adults are playing. In fact, there was game playing going on on all levels of the story; and the games are all about control.

At one point, there was lively discussion about the power of the government in the book over families and individuals, which led to the question of how much authority do we have over our own government.

With regard to the enemies in the book -- the buggers -- members recognized the portrayal of the buggers as aliens in order to forestall sympathy for them -- or even recognition that they were a life form

Toward the end of the discussion, we turned to Ender himself and how he retained his humanity in the face of the social isolation and training to violence that he endured. This led to the issue of "nature vs nurture" and the essence of human personality and character.

The idea that an individual's autonomy must be subjected to the larger need of humanity generated an intense burst of discussion on the relative roles of the individual vs. society.

Although half the group admitted that they didn't like the book, it generated a high level discussion that consistently dealt with humanistic questions in a contemporary context as well as the context of the book. I can only hope that the rest of the series does as well.

Barbara Allen Bogart
Evanston

We had a very successful discussion although the turnout was on the low side (possibly due to temperatures in the single digits in Cheyenne that day). Everyone who attended had finished the book, which is really unusual, in my experience. Initially we had 2 or 3 people with either negative or neutral reactions to the novel. All others in the group gave the book a positive review.

A couple of group members said that they don't usually read or like Science Fiction but were enthralled with this book and the exciting writing style of the author enough to read and enjoy it. Another older women said that she doesn't like "Harry Potter-like books" and thought that Ender was very much a character like Harry. We talked about this and explored the similarities (i.e. both Harry and Ender are 'special', both are away from home at boarding schools, both have parents that are either absent (dead) or uninvolved, in both novels the characters are tried by many horrible ordeals and eventually prevail, etc.). We also thought that the initial 'juvenile' impression of the book may come from the illustration on the front of the paperback version provided (young space-suited and helmeted boys floating about in various athletic looking poses) that was obviously aimed by the publisher at the male junior high schooler. I showed them the previous edition with a more adult 'star wars' looking cover.

Another older woman didn't like the book because it wasn't "realistic" which prompted a man who is a fan of science fiction to remark that this is the greatest strength of science fiction "the ability to explore topics and situations that you can't in a realistic novel". Others noted that their favorite part of the novel was Ender's moral transformation from trained killer to empathic "Speaker for the dead" at the end of the novel. Others mentioned the exploration of other moral issues such as whether genocide (or xenocide-the destruction of another intelligent species) is ever justified (even in self defense), or if someone who kills inadvertently (or innocently) such as Ender is responsible for the act.

Many other issues also came up in the discussion and the group talked about the book and the author for just a little over an hour. I then introduced them to the next 3 books in the "Other Worlds" series; Fahrenheit 451, Neuromancer and The Left Hand of Darkness. I believe that everyone left the discussion with a deeper appreciation of the book, the author and the genre of science fiction itself, definitely a successful afternoon's discussion.

Elaine Jones Hayes
Laramie County Library
Cheyenne, Wyoming

Fahrenheit 451

I started out the discussion by giving a brief biography of Ray Bradbury and some history of the book, it's use in high school classrooms, it's adaptations to the stage and movies, etc. I asked the group if, given that the novel was first published in 1953, did they feel that it still has

relevance more than fifty years later? We all agreed that it did and cited recent attempts at censorship, people turning away from books and towards visual media, etc. We had a lively discussion about the similarities between the propagandistic news reports on the "parlor walls" in the novel and the slanted and "spun" news we found on our own network television. We also compared the parlor walls in the book to big screen televisions and the content shown to reality television and soap operas. We discussed the total control of the government over people's minds in the book by making sure they never had time to think. Anything that encouraged individual thinking or quiet time such as reading, gardening or walking alone at night was discouraged or outlawed. We discussed the character Beatty and tried to guess why such an obviously well read man would despise knowledge and want to burn books. We also wondered at the deep dissatisfaction in the society that led Mildred, Beatty and others to want to commit suicide. We also discussed the theme of faith and the loss of faith in the novel, especially in the poem Montag reads to the women and in the bible passages he memorizes. We wondered if Montag and the others in the group from the railroad track really would have the chance to recreate a better world after the nuclear devastation at the end of the novel. After about an hour and 15 minutes of discussion I introduced the next book, "Neuromancer" by William Gibson. I gave them a quick overview of the "cyberpunk" genre of science fiction and warned them that "Neuromancer" was a bit tougher read than "Ender's Game" or "Fahrenheit 451" (the first two books in the series) due to the author's heavy use of his own invented cyberpunk terminology. But I recommended that they stick with it through the first chapter or two and it would become easier to understand and well worth the effort.

Elaine Jones Hayes
Cheyenne

The Left Hand of Darkness

Our final meeting was just as lively as all the others have been. I presented a brief introduction to the author and then the comments began to fly. One woman questioned whether the book was actually science fiction since it doesn't have the usual technological trappings. Speculative fiction didn't really seem to fit either even though the book is set on a distant world. We decided the book could better be described as sociological fiction.

There was the usual divergence of opinion -- one reader found the book tedious, while another thoroughly enjoyed it. One reader was especially struck with the premise of sending a single envoy from the home world to a distant planet. It allows for the establishment of individual, personal relationships, allowing trust and friendship to flower. This same reader was also struck by the fact that, although the Envoy's mission was to change the minds and hearts of the people on the mission planet, he himself was changed by the experience of coming to know the people on the planet.

Most of the discussion revolved around the various ideas that Le Guin introduced in the book but didn't seem to extend to their full potential. The much vaunted concept of a single gender population came up several times in the book but wasn't woven into the overall theme or plot of the book.

(All the participants -- all women -- wondered what male readers would think of the book, especially the gender roles.) The concept of "mindspeak" (telepathic communication) also was mentioned but not developed. It seemed to be a book of ideas rather than a fully developed novel with a unified plot.

One reader, however, said that she enjoyed many of those ideas, that she found herself latching onto one or another link of thinking and spinning it out in her head.

Another reader (an avid science fiction fan) wondered if we aren't spoiled as readers by simplistic storylines, especially those in genre fiction. A third one agreed. "We want a sandwich and when we eat it, we're full," she said. The implication was that Le Guin served up bread, lettuce, meat, cheese and condiments on a platter and expected readers to make their own sandwich.

The group agreed that when the book was published, it would have been different from the run-of-the-mill science fiction being written then -- what one participant called "cowboys in space" books. One reader saw a heavy influence on the book of Cold War thinking -- the planet in the book reminded her of Siberia , a place of always winter.

Ultimately the group decided that the book dealt with the issue of what it meant to be human and the nature of human relationships. The main character was easy to identify with; we could imagine traveling to a foreign place as a lone individual.

Since this was the last session of the series, we spent a few minutes reflecting back on all the books. Each was a difficult read in one way or another. The first two -- Ender's Game and Beggars in Spain -- were built around clear moral and ethical issues, while Neuromancer and Left Hand were not. But we all agreed that the books provoked more thoughtful and lively discussion than more conventional literature.

This was a challenging series but -- primarily because of the make-up of the group -- an extremely satisfying one.

We started out by discussing LeGuin's very intriguing introduction to the book. In this introduction the author reveals how she believes that writing science fiction frees her imagination to go beyond the bounds of earth, and the restrictions of earth physics and human anatomy. She calls the writing of science fiction a "thought experiment". In The Left Hand of Darkness she removes the influence of gender and gender expectations on human beings as the basis of her "thought experiment".

We then discussed the format and writing style of the novel. The point of view shifts every chapter between the Earth man Genly Ai (an alien envoy on the planet Gethen) and the androgynous human Estraven (a native of Gethen). Also interspersed among Estraven's point of view and Ai's point of view are ancient Gethen myths and legends which support and explain the action in the other chapters. The shift in perspective from one very different character to the other and then into a myth told in a third voice was confusing for many in the group.

The Gethen characters are both male and female and neither male nor female at the same time. When Gethens enter a sexually active period of time (like estrus in animals) they become either male or female at random. So our Earth expectations of gender and sex roles do not exist. Genly Ai finds it hard at first to communicate with a Gethen without automatically assigning either a designation of man or woman to them. This interesting premise brought up a lot of discussion about gender expectations, sex roles and the differences and perceived differences between men and women in our own culture. Among other issues we also discussed the lack of war on Gethen and discussed whether it was due to the absence of men or if it was due to the extreme cold on Gethen (the planet is also called Winter) which makes life too difficult for people to have time to start wars with their neighbors, etc. they are too busy trying to stay alive.

Elaine Hayes, Cheyenne

Neuromancer

This dark postmodern, cyber punk novel is something of a tough read. In fact, half of the participants did not finish the book -- but they showed up nevertheless to take part in the discussion. Their reasons for quitting the book all were related to the effects that the author tries to create in the reader -- disorientation and a sense of experiencing what the main characters are experiencing. One woman said, "I felt like someone had put something in my coffee while I was reading!" So actually what they had to say about their response to the book fed well into the ensuing discussion.

Although I provided some biographical and contextual information about the book, the real springboard for discussion came from a brief tape-recorded commentary on the book that a participant played. (She is taking a course on science fiction from the Teaching Company.)

One participant, an avid science fiction reader, characterized "cyberspace" (a term coined by William Gibson, author of this book) as "consensual reality." "More like mass hallucination," commented another participant. That prompted consideration of the nature of reality -- which of the characters in the book were actually humans and what ones weren't? How much humanity is there in a creature whose body parts and chemistry have been altered? What was the nature of the "construct" -- an entity derived from extracting the personality and knowledge from a dead man's brain -- with

whom the main character interacted throughout the book? Was the main character himself -- Case -- real or not? What was the point of creating a "construct"? We decided it was because it is possible to control a "construct" where a human being is unpredictable and impossible to completely control.

We spent some time also talking about the story itself. The plot is basically that of an adventure story -- a team is assembled to recover something of value. We all found it difficult to figure out what was going on in the story and weren't sure if the characters had achieved the goal at the end. We also considered whether or not any of the characters had changed by the end of the book -- and decided they had not. The implication was that their lives would continue as they always had in a bleak, drug-riddled underworld.

Finding a humanistic theme in the book was difficult although we tried our hardest. One participant thought the book was about personal isolation. In the world that Gibson has created, individuals find it impossible to form significant relationships with each other. There is no trust or no emotional connection. I thought that the book dealt with the impact of technology on humans -- how technology, especially in the form of artificial intelligence -- had pushed human beings into technology's service.

As the discussion built to its close, one participant laughed and said, "I guess we're all lost in cyberspace!" -- referring to the difficulty that people had reading the book and the ultimate message of the book.

Barbara Bogart, Evanston

I suspect the turnout was a little lower than normal because William Gibson's novel is a more challenging read than the other books in the Other Worlds series. But fortunately for us, part of the reason it's difficult to read is because it's packed with so many issues to discuss. We started discussing the book as soon as the first group members came into the room. Three of the ladies who attended did not finish the book and choose not to continue reading because they disliked it so much. A couple of them stated that the novel Neuromancer was a perfect example of what they didn't like about the science fiction genre. I agreed that the book was hard to "get into" due to the author's heavy use of his own made-up cyberpunk terminology.

About four group members really liked the book because of the intensely visual descriptions of the matrix, the intricate plot, and the focus on age old philosophical questions such as: what is real vs. what is unreal (virtual vs. actual) as in Case's exploits in cyberspace, are they real experiences? And what constitutes human life - if it's primarily intelligence than the artificial intelligences and personality constructs (housed in computers) in the book are alive, or is it merely the physical body (which seems to contradict the often held belief that a brain dead but still breathing person is really already dead)? We also discussed the question of whether the pursuit of immortality through technology as seen in the extreme in the novel is a good thing.

The group agreed that there were few (if any) likeable characters in the novel but they also agreed that the characters weren't supposed to be seen as sympathetic. It's a raw, dirty, nasty, violent world and the characters are criminals, drug users, and gangsters; not your average nice people. We also agreed the Gibson's vision of cyberspace is amazingly innovative considering that he wrote the novel in 1984, which was long before the emergence of the World Wide Web. Those who enjoyed the book thought it deserving of the many literary awards it had won.

I also introduced the next novel, The Left Hand of Darkness by Ursula K. LeGuin, by highlighting some of the more interesting elements from the author's biography and a brief summary of the premise of the book. I promised that the ladies who disliked cyberpunk would appreciate LeGuin's ecofeminist science fiction better. I hope I'm right.

Elaine Jones Hayes, Cheyenne