

sf works featuring spectrum of alien bio-chemistries

The Urth list — 4 messages, 4 voices, 27 Mar 2002

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/3099>

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Michael Andre-Driussi — 27 Mar 2002, 16:49

The latest recurrence of the thread on human/alien DNA compatibility has brought to my mind what I consider to be the strongest cases.

The "Sector General" works of Ted White; galactic melting-pot milieus like T. Jackson King's RETREAD SHOP; the struggling human colony in David J. Lake's THE RIGHT HAND OF DEXTRA and sequel.

Ted White's universe is the most developed: every alien species is described by a cryptic alphanumeric (? maybe just "alphabetical") code which includes the life-form's required atmosphere composition, etc. I don't recall if White uses right-handed DNA or not.

King's RETREAD SHOP definitely uses DNA handedness, as do Lake's books.

White's more developed system is there for a reason: the stories are "hospital in space" stories, and these details all flow in that direction. Alien biochemistry really is a central, if not the central, building block. King's use of DNA handedness is mainly a background detail with little or no direct bearing on the main story--for this I applaud him as being able to touch on the topic convincingly without it dominating the work. Lake's novels are all about the hardships of trying to keep a colony going on a world with alien DNA, and the (rather fantastical) way of solving the problem (somewhat similar in tone to the solution to Le Guin's PLANET OF EXILE, but much less feasible imho).

With White and King, this spectrum of life forms is a result of two things: the assumption of widely varying life forms in the galaxy as a whole, and the presence of interstellar societies ("galactic empire") that can meet and mingle so that these different life-chemistries can be known and explored. Lake's series of diaspora novels have colony worlds out of contact with each other: rather than "galactic empire" stories they are colony world planetary romances. Lake's Dextra novels begin from the premise of a one-way colony ship that had the bad luck to reach such a difficult planet.

So it seems to me that such stuff fits well with galactic milieu stories (which is why the lack was missed in Vinge's FIRE UPON THE DEEP) or bad-luck colonists. Like many other specialized notions, it can dominate the story (White's space hospital, Lake's struggling colonists), but it need not (King's space adventure).

Galactic Empires are not required to have such varied aliens, of course. Asimov's Foundation series famously features an all-human galaxy, which seems quite fitting considering that the intent of Foundation was to explore human historical cycles (mainly drawn from Gibbon, iirc) on a vast scale. (The "science" would be thrown off if there were alien historical cycles to deal with: the point is that "psychohistory" can plot the future because all the factors are known--they are human factors, they are humans.)

But a "hospital in space" story, where exotic aliens are brought into the ER room, or come down with mysterious symptoms in the hospital cafeteria . . . well, this really needs a large variety of intricately detailed aliens.

Bad-luck colonist stories obviously do not need alien DNA as their obstacle. The list is long, from Brunner's BEDLAM PLANET through McCaffrey's Pern to Vance's "The Devil on Salvation Bluff."

Our own Earth has plenty of locations where life thrives and humans do not--we might as well be on separate planets for all that we interact with creatures in the ocean depths, for example. Even today, right now, we
=could= have bubble colonies beneath the waves . . . but why would we choose that inhospitable habitat when there are more suitable places? An sf story about such a bubble city would have to explain why it was there: eco-death, research base, mining exploration, etc., but the fact remains we do not have one right now (our current situation does not match the sfnal rationale for doing such a thing). So given the choice between New England and the Sahara Desert, colonists will chose New England; between the Sahara and Antarctica, the Sahara would be favored; between Antarctica and the Moon, Antarctica would be easier.

=mantis=

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Jason Ingram — 27 Mar 2002, 19:13 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

Jack Chalker's Web World seemed to present an interesting treatment of this issue, from what I remember (I read those books back in the early eighties, and would not recommend the author). The premise is that some uber-aliens experimented with various life forms, seeding them in hexagonal bounded territories on a single planet. He distinguishes carbon from non-carbon based life forms, and spends some time discussing how various species were situated to make it hard for any one to conquer neighboring species.

I don't recall much science, however.

Sepia

On Wednesday, March 27, 2002, at 08:49 AM, Michael Andre-Driussi wrote:
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Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 27 Mar 2002, 19:17 · follows Jason Ingram

"Well World," I think. Yeah, I read those too -- Chalker as a writer is about a step above Piers Anthony: he recognizes he's writing potboilers (unlike Anthony, which regards itself as an Artist), and as the saying goes, he boils an honest pot.

-----Original Message-----

From: Jason Ingram [mailto:j_ingram at mac.com]

Sent: Wednesday, March 27, 2002 11:14 AM

To: urth at urth.net

Subject: Re: (urth) sf works featuring spectrum of alien bio-chemistries

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Adam Stephanides — 28 Mar 2002, 21:20 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

on 3/27/02 1:17 PM, Dan'I Danehy-Oakes at ddanehy at siebel.com wrote:
Chalker as a writer
is about a step above Piers Anthony: he recognizes he's writing
potboilers (unlike Anthony, which regards itself as an Artist)

I don't know about that. I once looked at his afterword to a collection of his short stories (DANCE BAND ON THE TITANIC, iirc), and it was pretty self-important: he claimed that fans recognized him as the master of the transformation story, just as Heinlein was the master of the time-travel paradox story; and he talked about his stories of women magically transformed into sex slaves as if they were serious warnings against women's oppression (again, iirc).

--Adam