DEVELOPMENTAL REPORT ON *THE BOOK of STEVE*

OVERVIEW

If you aimed to write something wildly entertaining and zany but with a sharp satirical edge, you have certainly succeeded.

Evaluating a novel like this can be challenging. Its antecedents are not the sort of ultra-serious sci-fi; rather, it’s wittier writers like Douglas Adams, Philip K. Dick, Terry Pratchett, Vonnegut, sometimes Heinlein…those willing to go to the edge with their satires of contemporary life but couched in “speculative fiction” terms.

By this I mean things like in-depth “character development” and a deliberate “pace” are not as important in this situation; is a character like Stacey II “realistic”? Does she need to be “relatable”? Well, no, not really. She serves a purpose in the narrative, and she fulfils that purpose.

So then, the evaluation has to be on whether the story and “world building” and setting make sense within themselves, and whether the “point” or “points,” whatever that might be, are made clear by the end of the story.

There doesn't have to be some ultra-serious point underlying the humour, but of course it’s always good to have one, so teasing that out will be important.

I have no issue whatsoever looking like a fool if there are things I have not understood, or that went over my head, or anything like that. So maybe you will find that this has happened sometimes. So be it. I’ll just give you all my impressions, and you can decide what might justify revisions or further discussion.

Overall, though, the story is paced well, holds together well, has a fascinating premise or two, and is a lot of zany fun, which I assume was at least part of your intent. It’s already a successful draft.

THE WORLD-BUILDING

- STEVE’s “UNIVERSE”

I have to admit I’m a VERY pedantic reader of sci-fi. A real pedant. I always ask lots of questions about the world-building, to the point of being annoying. But I do think this helps authors sharpen their concepts, even if they only adopt some, not all, of my suggestions

Again, if my questions here indicate I missed important clues while note-taking, then I stand corrected.

The one thing that “confuses” me (maybe not the right word…maybe “doesn’t quite satisfy me”) is the differences between the world of FEDSEC and StevieNix.

So, my impression is that StevieNix is OUR world/universe, and we are the apes. That seems fairly obvious.

But if so, and we were created by other humanoids as AIs in a hard drive, then why is their world so similar to ours? I mean culturally, not people living hundreds of years or space travelling.

Why do they have names like Murdoch and Allen? Those are names associated with specific Earth cultures and language that developed over thousands of years. Does StevieNix just mirror a much earlier part of their creator’s world’s own development, so their world IS ours, just later? If so, I don’t think that’s made clear. StevieNix seems to be presented as a brand new experiment, not a reconstruction. And is somehow named after a singer who loved to wear shawls and scarves. (I guess that supposed to be, what, a coincidence?)

So, then who are these people? They may as well have names like Fleegix and Barblebee if they’re going to be “aliens” who create AI worlds as science experiments with “apes” in them.

As funny as it is to have a god called Steve, this had my pedantic head scratched. Why can’t Barblebee (or whatever) call himself Steve only when dealing with the apes? These guys don’t “feel” like aliens at all. Just people watching a bunch of miniaturized people in a menagerie.

They live on a place called Elba, which is a direct historical reference to something that happened on Earth. But if that was something that ONLY happened in StevieNix, how could the planet Elba have had that name long before Steve’s experiment? No Napoleon, no reference to Elba, right?

Which again makes me ask if the “outer” world is just a distant future version of ours, which is then re”grown” or something in StevieNix. But then why the different physics there? Just for shits n’ giggles, or as part of the experiment?

So to me, while this is all a lot of fun, the background of this universe/world isn’t really that clear.

Even the appearance of these “aliens” is unclear. It’s hinted they’re like people but not. What does that mean? Roswell aliens? Or what? I’m almost certain that is danced around in the text. What do they look like? What are their physical characteristics? Do they wear clothes like us? Do they live in cities like ours and drive around in vehicles and eat the same sorts of things? I’m not suggesting you clutter your story with unneeded detail (honestly!), but it just feels like this wasn’t really considered.

— If it’s a penal colony, did I miss seeing the reason why Steve and Gabe are confined there? I get that Murdoch (who says “feck” like an Irishman, which doesn’t make sense to me) and Allen are scoundrels, but do we know what got Gabe sent there?

— The people that Stacy and Russell come across at the end after their space journey…so they are part of the same species/world that Murdoch et al come from, right? That’s how they identify that Stacy and Russell have come from their own people’s penal colony? I’m pretty sure of that but wanted to double confirm.

— I suppose if there’s simple explanations given for all of this stuff above and it went over my head, well, I shall be embarrassed.

PREMISE of MURDOCH AND ALLEN COMMANDEERING STEVIE NIX

OK, so this is just to make sure I’ve totally grasped the central plot point:

Murdoch and Allen invented the thing about aliens building a Dyson sphere, perhaps knowing full well what the phenomenon really was. They sold Steve and Gabe on this so that they could fool them into inventing both space travel using StevieNix and give them AI soldiers to help break out of Elba without FEDSEC catching on.

So the whole plan is a breakout plan, and Steve is a dupe. Correct?

— If they’re on a penal colony and travelling off planet is illegal, why would Steve and Gabe fall for the aliens story? They’d know full well FEDSEC wouldn’t allow Murdoch and Allen to fight a war; they’re prisoners. Just curious about that.

— The monkeybot soldiers at the end…how did they make them clandestinely? I guess FEDSEC doesn’t really monitor what their prisoners on the penal colony are up to? No monitoring, checks, no guards, no surveillance? They just dump them there and leave them to their own devices? I mean, that’s fine if so, just checking.

WHY WERE THE THREE CHOSEN?

I don’t know that I found a reason why Steve chose, out of all the apes on Earth, these three people to run his main experiment on. I think it would be interesting to know. Stacy and the others weren’t even acquainted. Not only that, but she’s only one influencer out of many. Is she one of the more successful “faith influencers”? Why wouldn't Steve select the world’s most prominent influencer? Why wouldn’t he select the two best computer programmers? I never got a sense that Russell and Vincent were unbelievably talented.

Given these three are the ones playing out the plot, I think that could be clearer. Again — not to sound like a broken record — unless I forgot reading some key paragraph or line that explains it.

WERE THE THREE SYSTEMS OF GOVERNMENT “PLANNED” TO BE THAT WAY?

So I guess Steve assumed they’d set up their own island states with the new tech he’s given them. But was it predicted as part of the experiment that each of the three would choose a different system of government, and that each of those three would desire supremacy over the others? Is it necessary for the experiment? What if they didn’t and they all just happened to agree to set up a boring liberal democracy instead? Would that ruin what Murdoch and Steve were up to?

Or was that just something that happened and the “outside world” fellows just took advantage of the situation as it evolved? (both for their ultimate goals and their wagers?)

I guess what I’m getting at is why would Murdoch and Allen assume that this strategy would provide what they wanted? There seems to have been a lot of elements of chance here. What if the “apes” never came into conflict and never produced the wanted AI supersoldiers? How sure were they that this could work?

THE MEANING OF THE APES’ PLOTS

Is it being suggested in this novel that we apes simply aren’t capable of coming up with a system of government that works?

The sendups of monarchy, communism, and anarchism/libertarianism are wildly funny but seem to imply that, which is kind of bleak, I guess. Not the first time someone has posited that we may, in fact, be completely hapless (I’ve done this in my own fiction writing, to be honest). But these societies as presented have few redeeming qualities and are basically guaranteed to fail.

THE WORLD IN STEVIENIX

Here’s where I get really pedantic. The other countries of Earth aren’t even part of the story after the main characters move to their new island states they created. What does the rest of the world make of what’s going on in all these new island states? How much interaction do the island states have with the rest of Ape Earth? Does Stacy II have clients everywhere? Does Stacy still post influencer stuff around the world, or just to her constituents?

Wouldn't countries like the US and China consider these bizarre and warlike new places to be threats? They seem to leave them alone. That doesn’t seem realistic.

Also, do you ever actually say where this archipelago is plunked down? In the vast open area the Pacific, I would assume? Far from other landmasses?

Again, it’s just about me wanting to know the full possible picture. Me, I think the US would try to invade the place…it’s just the sort of thing they like to do when they get the chance.

Or at least they’d send JD Vance on a state visit to declare he would like to annex it!

Maybe there’s an opportunity for even MORE satire here that is not being fully exploited?

CYNICISM RE: HUMANITY

Basically, what I take from this novel is everything we do stinks. All people will resort to some sort of barbaric savagery if you let them and given them enough time. All social and political experiments are bound to fail.

And yet you have Steve muse: no matter how hard life got for his AIs, they never gave up, and never ceased to find meaning in their short little lives.

And yet, to play devil’s advocate here…I never got the slightest sense of that. OK, never giving up… they could be said to persevere (in being horrible!).

But meaning? Well, maybe they flail around for it, but never in a way that conveys even the slightest nobility or higher feeling. They mainly seem to commit acts of violence against one another! Sometimes quite horrifying violence. We never really see people being…good.

Now, don’t get me wrong. I’m not squeamish. And I’m a card-carrying member of the cynics association. I have a pretty dim view of humans myself.

And I understand the value of black comedy, of using extremes to make points.

I just want to point out that to me that’s what you’re doing. The novel doesn't contain more reflective moments, nor does it show the “apes” (or the ones controlling them) expressing finer or more sensitive feelings and behaviours. The plot’s more of a mad headlong rush into destruction than anything else!

None of this is a “critique” unless you feel it is, meaning if you are fine with what you’ve presented and my response to it, then fine.

And once more —broken record again — if you think there are examples I’ve overlooked that show the apes “finding meaning” in a more noble and sensitive way, then please point them out to me.

— This gets me to a question, not a critique, per se: what do you feel is the philosophical “point” (or political, or sociological) that you’re trying to make here? It’s not strictly necessary to have a “message” in a novel — it can just be fun in a nihilistic sort of way — but I’m curious. There are a number of things one could pull out of this, but it’s not as easy to identify as it is in novels that sort of hit you over the head with a meaning. I’d be curious to know what the genesis of the idea was and whether you had a particular ax to grind with humanity, since you do portray us as rather hapless (and violent!), which seems an accurate portrayal to me!

THE STACEY II PLOT

As the novel reaches its conclusion, there are essentially two plots, the finalization of Murdoch’s escape plans, aided by Xavier and his dad et all; and Stacey II’s last-ditch attempts to reassert her dominance in StevieNix.

All the things that Xavier is up to make sense in the larger plot.

Other than the humour value and sort of “finishing the story” of the island states, I don’t totally see the point of that latter Stacey II plot continuing on like that. I mean, I also have no problem with it…but it’s my job to try to poke holes. Why do we care what’s happening to Stacey II/Sullivan/Filbert in those latter stages? Just to wrap up the overall storyline in parallel with what’s happening outside StevieNix and make it clear who comes out on top? Just to play devil’s advocate a bit here, that’s the part where the greater plot is reaching its apex, and that’s what’s most important.

ENDING

The StevieNix plot seems wrapped (for now), but the main one is a bit of a cliffhanger. We’re not sure what will become of Steve at all, whether they’ll escape. Not an issue per se, in that cliffhangers are common. Though some readers don’t like them. But if you plan to do a sequel (?), I can see that it makes sense to leave things hanging.

STRUCTURE

At the start, I kind of wrestled with this unorthodox mini-chapter structure, where we get little scenes that switch quickly. But I admit I did get into the rhythm of it after a while, and it stopped “bothering me”. Bothering is a strong word there. It just took a bit of getting used to is all.

—Monkeybots

It’s not really made clear what they “are.” “Bots” is a clue, sure, but you show them eating and drinking. Why would a robot need to do that? How humanoid ARE these bots? Are they designed to look and function like an actual human being? Do the Stacey, Vincent and Russell bots look like them? Or do all monkeybots look identical? I think this isn’t made clear.

— Dark Satire note:

I wasn’t sure about interpreting this, but there seems to be a derogatory description of Islam and its supposedly warlike nature in section 10. I’m assuming it’s to fit the overall tone that everything us apes do stinks (I’m struggling to find positives in how we’re portrayed, honestly), but the way it reads, it seems like Islam is considered more bloodthirsty and ignorant than Christianity. The Crusades and colonialist evidence like the conquest of Mexico and South America show that Christians are very bit as bloodthirsty, if not more so, than Islamic countries have ever been, historically. So I just want to make sure that this is presented in a balanced way. Put it this way: this is how it reads right now (I assume you’re not referring to the Mongol horde!), so that should be reconsidered. Unless I’ve completely misinterpreted what I read. If one group of us is bad, then we all are!

I apologize if I misread this, but if I did, others will too. Just want to make sure that the point is violence and invasion are part of the DNA of all human cultures, and no one culture is more inherently violent than another, despite how it may sometimes manifest.

CONCLUSION

So that’s a grab-bag of impressions. I honestly don’t have huge structural recommendations; my critiques are more about completeness of concepts and of tone, I think. I think you’ve written a really good dark comedy here that sends up all kinds of things in our world, and we definitely have it coming.

The writing is strong and the forward thrust of the narrative is absorbing.

So I think with a few refinements, this will be an excellent successor to the works of those authors I mentioned off the top.