Hi Didier

Now that I have your “deeper” thoughts on the reasoning behind the novel, its themes, and your choices of plotting and characterization, I can put in my two cents on how that is all realized. I’m no stranger to reading the philosophical novel or what is often called a “novel of ideas.” And yes, despite the dark humour, this is definitely one.

Having things clarified in terms of your intent definitely gives me more to say.

Regarding the “point” of the book, there are two. (I have sometimes considered that this may be one too many, but didn’t really have it in me to break the novel in half.) I don’t think having a main theme and a subtheme is too crowded.

1. The novel is a theodicy; an attempt to grapple with the problem of evil. The idea arose in the months after my daughter suffered a disabling brain injury. I found myself in the unusual position of - despite coming from a fully nonreligious, Dawkins-reading background - attempting to explain why a loving God would still construct a universe with such suffering.

The problem of evil is probably the biggest problem of all, since so much that happens in our society stems from warring ideas of good and evil. I think the dealing with the paradox of a loving god deliberately creating suffering is generally more important to those who feel the need for their monotheistic deity to BE loving and caring, someone you can appeal directly to for aid. But yes, it’s an interesting theme that you came by very honestly as you wrestled with trauma in our own life. This gives your effort more heft, for sure.

The book tries to present a multifaceted answer. Firstly, God wants it this way to serve his own ends (of which, ironically, he himself is not even fully aware). But more importantly, while he looks omnipotent to us, the reality is that he’s budget-constrained, easily distracted…as Russ101 says in the prologue, he’s got a lot going on.

I mean, the fact that god is a mere functionary (albeit a brilliant scientist), a tool of powers himself, was one of the primary amusements of reading the novel. I don’t think the idea that God is so distant and vast that it actually doesn’t care particularly about our individual suffering is particularly new. It’s the subject a great deal of philosophical debate. How God be omniscient and omnipotent and also compassionately answer Nonna’s prayers to heal her broken hip?

However, this debate has slackened as more devotional and evangelical forms of Christianity have started to dominate the conversation. Certainly, a Calvinist god is never represented as caring a toss about any of us! God’s plan, in that case, is inscrutable, and we’re just supposed to accept our legacy of suffering and original sin. Entire schools of Christianity have existed based on that premise, not a loving god.

So there are many visions of God, even within Christianity.

Case in point: my ultra-Catholic mother in law told one of us that while climate change is a tragedy, we shouldn’t worry because God wouldn’t allow us to go extinct! Those are the sorts of mental gymnastics devotees of a benign God put themselves through to justify the suffering all around us.

As a sort-of practicing Zen Buddhist, I find that kind of pathetic. But then in our darkest hour, we DO wish there was some caring parental figure that could make everything better. And we don't want to have a nihilistic impression that we’re mere biological machines that accidentally attained consciousness and sentience — we want there to be a REASON why we’re here. No one, no matter how materialistic, can escape this emotion, I imagine not even Richard Dawkins.

I guess being in StevieNix IS a reason for existence, albeit not a very comforting one!

Anyway, I don’t think your point was lost, so far, about some of the absurdities inherent in the concept of a loving God ruling over the vast eternity of the universe yet able to answer individual prayers. Long way of saying that.

This is where the novel breaks with traditional theodicies (I think – I must admit I haven’t read any). By “banal-ifying” the divine – dragging God down to our world of instant coffee and petty office politics – my goal is to present an unusual theological theory that makes sense to my community of science-brained nonbelievers.

I have a feeling I’ve read things of that nature before (God as a mundane figure), but I can’t say I remember doing so either! I’ve read too many things. Anyway, I think the concept that our universe may be a simulation is definitely popular with certain scientific types; there are some scientists who actually think this would explain a lot! I think where you differ is you have made that god a hapless tool. The simulation was almost abandoned, the project is a failure, until bad actors take it over for their nefarious ends. That’s the source of much of the humour and probably is where your concept diverges from other such attempts to portray this idea.

Aside from being the reason why Steve’s world is so similar to ours, my goal forces the novel to walk a fine line between apology and blasphemy. I guess you picked up on a bit of that in Chapter 10 (thanks; I’ll dial it back), but in my mind the riskiest bit is probably the direct Deuteronomy 20 reference in Old Testament Diplomacy. This is probably the closest I come to breaking the fourth wall - but hey, I haven’t seen any other contemporary thinkers try to seriously address why “save alive nothing that breathes” would be in the divinely inspired Word of God, and why that God might be a decent guy regardless.

I’d agree that you’re trying to walk between two ideas there, that God’s actions can be profoundly hurtful and cause endless suffering while God himself has the best of intentions. Usually the excuse is that His ways are too vast for our puny minds to comprehend, thus necessitating faith! Faith is the only way most people can reconcile this (see my mother in law above).

In other words, the only appeal the faithful have is to “God loves us, this is all in his plan, and it’ll all make sense when we’re in Heaven”). A concept such as yours does successfully poke holes in that.

So, yes, while I am trying to “write something wildly entertaining and zany but with a sharp satirical edge”, I’m also trying to accomplish something deeper – and if that didn’t come across in the draft, I would love your suggestions!

To me, you DO make this point, but to my memory, the tone of the novel is driven by the fact that the action zips forward relentlessly, in several settings. SO MUCH happens in this novel, to so many people, over lengthy time spans. And that’s kind of how I got to “zany” and “entertaining.” You’re not really taking much time for anyone to reflect on what’s happening to them — the pace is madcap, as far as I’m concerned. Steve himself is not the deepest character (not that I necessarily feel he should be).

But if needless, unexplained suffering was a theme, perhaps that’s lost a bit in the manipulations, the sheer amount of callous ultraviolence the poor apes perpetrate against one another … we don’t necessarily “feel” that suffering. We’re more portrayed (overall, anyway) as helpless tools and victims of our own instinctive urges to rule, dominate, etc. The suffering is, if not cartoonish, at least played for sort of dark humour laughs. That's how I responded, anyway. I can’t say that at any point I actually felt sorry for anyone, and I’m actually quite sensitive.

But then if you do start messing with that, the tone in places would shift away from that same edginess and the cynical tone that makes the novel fun to read.

I guess that’s what you could ponder about it. If there was a very serious philosophical discussion as intent, it’s not “lost” per se, but the sheer forward drive of this plot and the extreme situations you put the characters in doesn’t allow for much reflection.

2. The novel is also about realpolitik - for whatever reason, I had it on my mind while writing. Again and again throughout the book, characters start out with noble idealism, only to have their naïveté shattered by the harsh realities of power dynamics. This culminates in the most idealistic conflict-avoiders (Xavier’s Anarchists) ending up under the absolute control of the most natural manipulative political operator (Allen). I wanted to show the realities of pragmatic power politics as not just universal, but hyper-universal, infecting not just all human societies, but even the Gods themselves.

Given all that, do you have any thoughts about how I can better accomplish my goals without becoming preachy or losing entertainment value?

Most certainly it was clear that the novel is a sendup of 20th (and 21st) century (mostly) political systems, and yes, I’d say realpolitik was in there. It’s easy to poke holes in a monarchy, but the satire of the communist state was particularly apt. After all, while Lenin et al supposedly founded the Soviet Union based on noble ideas about equality and peace for all, pretty well none of their actions reflect that; they did whatever they could to seize and maintain power, and not much else when it comes down to it (same with Maoist China and other places).

Where I guess I feel something small might be lacking is to me there’s little serious suggestion that your three characters, Vincent, Russell, and Stacy are all that serious about what they’re doing. I mean, yes, the systems of government they choose reflect their belief systems and personalities, but that’s about it. I don’t get much of a sense that there’s a ton of idealism behind their choices in that regard. It’s because, as I said, the characters serve a purpose rather than have the intention of being “realistic” in the sense that we get to know them well (when compared with a standard character-based “lit-fic” novel).

In other words, to me their original motivations don't seem noble because the characters seem too shallow (shallow’s a strong word, though…I’d have preferred something milder).

Maybe that’s the answer — maybe yes, the pragmatic and often brutal politics are the end result due to human folly, but we get a stronger sense of initial idealism from the people. I mean, I dunno, maybe you feel that’s already there. I can’t say I felt that. It just felt…humorous.

I was thinking about your comment regarding how we never see people being “good”. It’s a tricky question, eh? What does it mean to be good in a world where the people are literally designed by the Gods to be violent?

Depends on whether StevieNix is indeed the world that you and I inhabit. If so, there’s lots of people (well, *some* people) practicing the “golden rule”, or utilitarian ethic, or the concept of basic empathy without having to combat some more selfish amorality inside themselves. Even I’m not so cynical that I don’t believe that. Maybe that means fighting against our own violent instincts instilled in us by nature (or Steve). Where do the Gandhis and ML Kings come from if there’s no good in the world? The Thunbergs and Attenboroughs and Goodalls? It’s kind of reductive to say because so much violence exists and is prevalent in the world at certain times, then goodness must not be genuine or truly attainable in a widespread way (not accusing you of suggesting that per se, but it’s a risk).

Of the three second-generation human characters, I consider two of them to be “good”: Filbert and Xavier.

Xavier spends a large portion of the book being, by far, the most powerful human in the world. His dad is killed, his country is invaded, and he briefly ponders using his powers to wipe out his adversaries and essentially dominate the world. Instead, though, he works very hard and leverages every asset he has – the ASIC, his inherited leadership position and his personal connection to the Gods – to break the cycle of violence. After Xavier fully steps into his leadership role, you’ll notice that there’s never any violence in The Anarchy again (I think). That’s pretty good!

Filbert, being a bit more of a struggling everyman, has to break the cycle of violence twice (sorry Filbert). I originally had his story a bit more fleshed out, but most of his arc was truncated in the Great Viewpoint Character Reduction of March 2025. Being so close to power, he’s close to the violence, but a generally unwilling participant. Ultimately, it takes an almost-Buddhist ego-death experience to make him finally see the light and sail into the sunset.

Of course, Filbert doesn’t end up with any power. Realpolitik, you know. But my goal with his character is to show how ordinary people (without nanoscale manufacturing facilities) can still choose to step away from it all and find love/meaning outside of the power struggle.

Anyway, all this “goodness” stuff was a lot less fun to write than the torture scenes, etc., so I take your point that the moral balance of the manuscript is probably somewhat unbalanced! Definitely open to suggestions.

I agree that Filbert and Xavier are the most “harmless” or well-intentioned apes in the story. Neutral at worst, generally pushed around the by the stronger, more violent personalities. If they were Soviets, they’d have been purged by 1920! But seriously, there’s potential there. But they’d have to be characters with a more intentional desire for goodness, less victims of the cruel winds of fate and machinations of others. Whether that happens or not. In that way they could act as a stronger counterpoint, making it clear to readers that there COULD be another way, that we’re neither pawns of an uncaring god nor just gene-controlled automatons, which is where materialistic science may be leading our view of ourselves. I’m not sure where you stand on that, but I’d like to think there’s more to us (and all other life forms) than just being a biological machine. The “better” characters may offer an opportunity to suggest that. Up to you, though. Again, maybe you think you’re already achieving this. I found that aspect muted if so.

Not to interrupt your pondering, but I thought I’d add a bit more on the penal colony backstory: The picture I have in my mind is that Elba is another breeding experiment. The architects of that society populated it with a bunch of “criminally ambitious” males (including Murdoch and Allen), put FEDSEC in charge, and have spent the millennia since creating docile descendants from their DNA. Steve and Gabe are products of their work – intelligent but non-threatening academics.

Most of the original seed population has long since been “deleted”, but Murdoch and Allen, having made themselves essential very early on, live on in perpetual torpor.

After a hundred thousand years, the outside world has largely forgotten about Elba, and vice versa. History has become myth, the truth remains only in Mum’s old book and in the increasingly fuzzy memories of Murdoch and Allen. I suspect that even FEDSEC barely knows why they’re doing what they’re doing anymore. So when Sirius disappears, it genuinely takes the entire society by surprise. The Dyson story rises organically, the people really do want to make contact (and can barely remember why they’re not allowed to go to space), the government really does allow the construction of an interstellar radio, and Murdoch and Allen capitalize on the moment of opportunity to – you got it - dupe Steve into helping them escape.

I don’t think Murdoch and Allen fully understand the phenomenon either, but they’re pretty sure it’s their own people causing it.

I didn’t really want to clutter the main narrative with all these details, but they’re sitting here on the shelf if you can find good spots to slot them in! While The Book of Steve is intended to be a “novel of ideas,” it still needs to convincingly wear sci-fi clothing so I’m very much interested in making it work within the genre.

I have to say…I kind of like this idea! And it’s doable. The ms. is under 90,000 words. I only really worry about a sci-fi fantasy novel if the word count gets close to 100k. Which far too many do.

In a way it kind of mirrors what Steve et al are actually doing with their “apes,” not knowing they, themselves are the result of experiments. In sci-fi terms, as well, it’s a cool concept, the lost experiment penal colony.

If you want to strengthen the sci-fi aspects, this would actually be a good thing to do.

A lot of it could certainly be conveyed as a “reveal”. Presumably, Gabe and Steve aren’t aware, but Murdoch and Allen are.

So then the question is do you dump that info on us toward the end of the novel or as a conclusion, or do you also give us hints of the truth throughout, sort of bread crumbs that gradually reveal the nature of Elba. At the moment you do that in terms of it being a penal colony — its nature is not originally known to us, which works well. But the exact nature of the colony you describe is very interesting. It’s worth trying.

Though why it would be named after a place Napoleon was exiled to, I STILL don’t get. It’s very on the nose. But I get the sense that my pedantic critiques of these guys having standard whitebread names from the world of StevieNix (named after the singer of “Rhiannon”!), not their own, doesn't really concern you. That’s your choice, of course!