



The Years Of The City

Frederik Pohl

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Frederik Pohl, one of the most honored science fiction writers of our time, gives us an extraordinary vision of a New York yet to come - from the wounded, struggling behemoth of tomorrow to the domed, atmospherically controlled megalopolis of the twenty-first century. In Pohl's prophetic novel, a woman awakes in another century, a man's eyes are replaced by radar, criminals are frozen for future justice, and hang gliders soar above Central Park.

New York - long the symbol of turmoil, tragedy and brilliance, becomes a dazzling metaphor for mankind's future - and for the promise of civilization.

The Years Of The City Details

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From Reader Review The Years Of The City for online ebook

Tena says

One of my personal favorites! I try to re-read it every year. A set of stories strung together showing the course of New York and our society's norms. I loved the section where they incorporate a 2 year mandatory community service for every citizen: a brilliant concept.

Tom Ritchford says

Such an unpromising concept - the future politics of New York City - and such a fantastic read.

What's splendid about this is that it starts off with New York City in multiple crises, and then as the story progresses, you can see how the reforms undertaken in desperation do actually get closer to a just society.

And it's all done on a human, individual level... I'm not ashamed to say that I wept when I read the first story, many years ago now.

Miles Carter says

Boring blather, not nearly up to Pohl's usual standard.

Olethros says

-Lo socio-urbanístico dentro del género.-

Género. Ciencia-Ficción.

Lo que nos cuenta. Aproximación a la ciudad de Nueva York y sus habitantes, a través de las vivencias de distintos personajes, que debe afrontar muchos problemas distintos en su concepción urbana y social desde los años ochenta hasta unas cuantas décadas después.

¿Quiere saber más de este libro, sin spoilers? Visite:

<http://librosdeolethros.blogspot.com...>

Byrne says

This book is a book about New York in the 70s and 80s, with some gadgets. The early stories are very clearly set in NYC at a particular time—there's a character who is definitely Robert Moses, and another who is probably Bill Zeckendorf.

Later stories drift from this, but just a little bit.

The science fiction conceit of the book is that New York adopts government by Universal Town Meeting, a system where citizens debate public issues in 30-second soundbites, after which everybody votes. It's claimed, late in the book, that this is a hugely popular televised event. It's really public access television, plus The X Factor, plus sovereignty.

The idea that this would lead to a slow-but-steady improvement in policy, as happens over the course of the book, is kind of crazy.

The story is split into five novellas, with a few commonalities:

- They're all set in New York
- Some of the characters are the same
- Everyone smokes weed
- Every story revolves around marital infidelity

I can't tell if the last two are intentional, or if that's just how things were for Pohl and his friends.

Tim Elkins says

Pretty good airplane read for something I picked up in a \$1 donation bin at the grocery store. Started during a cross-country trip and finished on the return trip. Novel is divided into five sections, each a self-contained novella covering a different time period, but with interrelated characters. Starts in the 1980s and jumps ahead a generation or two at a time, nicely showing the gradual change in New York City before and after it is domed. The last is the most speculative and "alien" but not much more alien than the NYC of 150-200 years ago.

Jaime Jimenez says

Classic Pohl.

I live in California, and it was amusing to read Frederik Pohl's *The Years Of The City*. Pohl did a great job in this book, and introduced me to the life styles of many groups of New Yorkers....From the ghetto boy in the ethnic neighborhood, to prominent characters and everything in between. All characters related to their very own personal struggles living under a dome in New York, and amidst each individual's life story, comedy and drama ensued. Characters such as Rinty de Feigerman, Marcus de Harcourt, Jimpy Nutlark, John Bratislaw, and Gwenanda and her role as a Supreme Court judge made this book a great read.

tENTATIVELY, cONVENIENCE says

review of

Frederik Pohl's [The Years of the City](#)

by tENTATIVELY, a cONVENIENCE - July 8, 2015

To read the entire review go here: <https://www.goodreads.com/story/show/...>

To paraphrase SF writer James Gunn's introduction to his bk of short stories entitled Breaking Point (see my review here: <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/6...>):

"a concern for technique was exhibited by writers throughout the history of magazine science fiction" [...] "When they were successful their stories helped to bridge the gap between the ghetto and the larger world outside". [...] "The stories contained in this collection were intended as part of that effort. I called them my "serious stories"; I look back on them now as my attempts to bring to the task of telling a science fiction story everything I know about setting and symbol, theme and character." - p 9, Breaking Point

All of Pohl's stories are infused w/ a social consciousness that I admire but it's this bk in particular that seems to do what Gunn describes above, "to bridge the gap between the [SF] ghetto and the larger world outside". In other words, The Years of the City is the closest SF thing I've read yet by Pohl to combine somewhat realistic contemporary lit w/ SF. Given its emphasis on urban planning, I'm reminded of John Brunner's excellent The Squares of the City (see my review here: <https://www.goodreads.com/story/show/...>).

Pohl focuses on a NYC of his near future (as of the time of the writing, 1984) to a NYC that's developed generations later along lines of sincere & visionary urban planning that encounters, & defeats, selfish & myopic resistance from greedy forces. This is an epic that has the city & its characters as its continuity - rather than the more conventional one family type historical epic.

Each section starts w/ a short *italicized* 1st person intro. The 1st is from the perspective of a New Yorker. I probably spent more time in NYC in the early 1980s than any time since & I can accurately say that the Lower East Side, where I usually was, was plagued by drug addiction & the attendant crime. Of course, the biggest criminals of all were, & still are, the landlords. *"I pay through the nose to do it—monstrous taxes and preposterous rents are my way of life. I wouldn't change. This is where the action is. Even if the action turns out to be a good chance of being mugged and a near certainty that my apartment will be robbed every two or three years."* (p 1) Yep, that describes the NYC I knew, I wdn't want to live there, I prefer affordable living conditions w/ fewer people out to victimize me for their own benefit. I've got more than enuf "action" for me to keep up w/ outside of NYC.

"In Washington's day it was a tiny town and not much worth visiting. He disliked it—would have burned it if the Congress had let him (but he didn't have to, because rioting New Yorkers did it as soon as he left)." - p 2

The 1st section of The Years of the City is called "*when new york hit the fan*", an obvious take-off of 'when the shit hits the fan'. It chronicles a not-unlikely sequence of negative events that add up to a crippling of the city. ""We've been warned there's a bomb on the premises.["]" [...] "No one protested being herded across the street into the park, although the place stank terribly—most of the grass was covered with ten-foot-high stacks of plastic garbage bags" (p 5) from a garbage-worker's strike.

A character named Brandon has a job in wch he can make some social proposals that might actually be considered. One of them is the "UTM": "The Universal Town Meeting itself was complicated enough, and Brandon wasn't at all sure that Feigerman knew what it was about, other than that it involved using the electronic media to get all the people of new York City talking together." (p 8)

"The Universal Town Meeting, which, through the use of electronic media and random-access interviewing of ordinary citizens, might achieve a decision-making assembly comparable to the New England town meeting or the old greek agora—on a scale of tens of millions of people." - p 15

Brandon meets an influential man named Feigerman while they're both evacuated during the bomb scare:

""What do you need to have happen to get the thing going again?"

"'Help from City Hall,' Brandon said promptly, and searched Feigerman's face for a reaction. But you could never get one through those thick distorting glasses. He went on. 'The stations are only stalling—nobody wants to be the first to give away a whole night's time. But they all know the FCC will give them brownie points for it. So if the Mayor would put in a word it might get them off the dime.'" - p 8

"'Everybody *always* wants more, Jeff, that's what governments are all about. That's what the UTM's about, it's what keeps the power brokers and the bribers from taking over. Not just unions. Contractors. Builders. Everybody who can make an extra buck by breaking the law, or forcing the government to let them do something they're not supposed to.'" - pp 192-193

"The video monitors were carrying the current UTM discussion—dome repairs, for or against luminescent panels to make the night bright" - p 299

It's ideas like this that help get NYC rolling toward a brighter future. But, in the meantime, Brandon's got plenty of the typical New Yorker problems: "it was no surprise at all for Brandon to learn that while Jo-Anne was in school and he was performing his civic duty in the Municipal Building, their apartment had been burglarized." (p 10) But, of course, a part of those problems is that stereotyping other people isn't always a correct assessment & often exacerbates problems rather than solving them: "Their across-the-street neighbors were what was termed "Persons in Need of Supervision"—Pins, for short—which meant that they were graduates of a reformatory, a jail or an asylum." (p 11)

Gridlock wasn't making Brandon's life any easier. "Coming into the garment center the taxi inched along. then, for three changes of the traffic light, it didn't move at all, because a tractor-trailer trying to make a turn had blocked the intersection." (p 12) Neither was his wife's recent suicide: "It was tough times for a man when his wife went six stories airborne. It was even tougher for a ten-year-old girl, particularly when it was the ten-year-old who had been awakened first by the sirens and found that all that remained of Mommy was a note" (p 13) How do people overcome these obstacles & tragedies? By keeping their shit together, not an easy thing to do but ultimately worth it.

Brandon has other ideas w/ potential:

"The Five Per Cent Solution, by means of which individual citizens willing to pay a five per cent surcharge on their income taxes could direct that the whole of their taxes be directed to whichever function of government they thought most important." - p 15

Ever since i've been an adult I've sd that I'm less opposed to being taxed than I am to being taxed w/o having a say about where my money goes. Health care for everyone? Yes. Education for everyone? Yes. Food for everyone? Yes. Maintenance of public projects like road maintenance? Yes. Libraries? Yes. War? No. Corporate bail-outs? No.

Ideas like this are easy to criticize w/ "Yes, but.." statements. ALL "What if.." statements, common as premises in SF, are easy to criticize in that way. The genius of Pohl's novel is that he takes the reader thru the "What if" AND the "Yes, but" & shows the objection overcome - regardless of how rooted the obstacles are in what seems to be 'basic human nature' - ie: the brainwashed stupidity of the construction workers who'd terrorize people mourning innocent students murdered by trigger-happy National Guardsmen. This isn't a 'utopic' novel imagining a world w/o problems, it's a realistic novel imagining a future where people solve problems by keeping their shit together & staying true to their vision.

Bomb scares, ceasing of garbage collection, gridlock, terrorism, all-too-common problems in Pohl's near-future: "Terrorists, of course. Some terrorists. Any terrorists; and the bomb they had used this time was no fake and no toy." / "The bomb had been more than a block away, planted under the hood of a parked car in one of the theater blocks leading to Times Square." (p 37) This was written before 9/11. 26 yrs after this bk

was published we get this; "Inside the mind of the Times Square bomber - Faisal Shahzad was a 31-year-old US citizen who lived in the Connecticut suburbs. He was an account analyst on \$50,000 and mowed the lawn at weekends. But in May 2010 he was arrested after parking a car full of explosives in New York's busiest square." (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010...>) In this case, the bomb didn't go off.

Pohl's conception of a city remind me of a movie I witnessed tonight, Troy Herion's "New York: A City Symphony" & of its predecessors like Francis Thompson's 1957 "N.Y., N.Y.". In both these movies, &, perhaps, in City Symphony movies in general, there's an organic vibe or rhythm to a city that's highlighted. Pohl:

"City as organism?"

"Why, yes. There was another sense, When an organism is in health its parts share the work of keeping it alive—so do a city's; when an organism's parts begin one by one to fail, it becomes ill—so does a city. But when the parts of a creature begin to fight against each other it does not matter which of them wins. before long they all die." - p 48

"It was true that the city had never been in worse shape. Nothing unprecedented had happened. There was not one of the things that had gone wrong that hadn't gone wrong before—even often before. But never before had it all hit the fan at once." - p 72

The 2nd section, "*The Greening of Bed-Stuy*", jumps ahead a little in time to the realization of Feigerman's vision:

"When Bed-Stuy was done it would not have to import one kilowatt-hour of energy from anywhere else—not from Ontario Hydro, not from Appalachia, not from the chancy and riot-torn oil fields of the Arab states. Not from anywhere. Winter heating would come from the thermal aquifer storage, in the natural brine reservoirs under the city, nine hundred feet down. Summer cooling would warm the aquifers up again, topped off with extra chill from the ice-ponds. By using ice and water to store heat and cold the summer heating and air-conditioning and winter heating peaks wouldn't happen, which meant that maximum capacity could be less. Low enough to be well within the design parameters of the windmills, the methane generators from the shit pit and all the other renewable-resource sources" - pp 98-99

Pohl had obviously done his eco-design homework. Nonetheless, I tend to think any such massive rearrangement of an eco-system, gentle tho it may be in contrast to nuclear or coal power, etc, is bound to have unanticipated eco-drawbacks even if it's just something 'small' like the wiping out of microorganisms the value of wch we don't understand until it's too late, if ever.

"somebody named Charles Engelke had described a way of making a small suburban community self-sufficient for energy as far back as the 1970s" - p 118

In a quick search I didn't find anything about the above online. Still, if I were to make an educated guess, I'd say that Pohl's "homework" consisted of studying the ideas of an actual person named Charles Engelke whose work has since become more obscure than it was in the 1st place - making his name yet-another one to keep in the back of my mind to look out for. Of course, he cd be fictional.

Pohl, obviously, pays attn to his times. In the following excerpt, it's easy to deduce that "HARVEY" is fictional at the same time that I 'know' that "Captain Crunch" wasn't: "Inmate 838-10647 HARVEY John T. had a record that went back thirty years, to when he was a bright and skinny kid. he hadn't intended to get into violence. He started out as a Phone-Phreak, rival of the semi-legendary Captain Crunch. When Ma Bell got mad enough to put the Captain in jail, young Johnny Harvey got the message, Making free phone calls to the Pope on his blue box just wasn't worth it, so he looked for less painful ways to have fun. He found them

in proprietary computer programs. Johnny Harvey could wreck anybody's security." (p 127)

Having cofounded & run Baltimore's "B.U.T.N." (Baltimore Underground Telephone Network) from 1979 to 1981, starting w/ "TESTES-3", I was peripherally connected to Phone Phreaking & have an ongoing affection for its history (wch I actually know very little about). Pleased w/ Pohl's informed reference to it as a precursor to computer hacking, I decided to do some casual research. The 1st online article that caught my attn was about where 5 old school hackers are at now. Clearly, I don't know the proper way to connect to such info b/c the msg I rc'vd when I clicked on the link was:

"Forbidden

"You don't have permission to access /blog/5-old-school-hackers-where-are-they-now/ on this server.

"Apache/2.2.3 (CentOS) Server at wikibon.org Port 80"

Ha ha! An immediate obstacle that I deduce an actual hacker wd know how to bypass.

Pohl's character, Feigerman, is blind "but his otoliths were in fine shape". (p 139) &, what, pray tell, are "otoliths"? "The otolith organs sense gravity and linear acceleration such as from due to initiation of movement in a straight line. Persons or animals without otolith organs or defective otoliths have poorer abilities to sense motion as well as orientation to gravity." (<http://www.dizziness-and-balance.com/...>)

Pohl's epic chronicles the changes potentially wrought by persistent visionary action:

"Once the dome was up sanitation men wouldn't use trucks any more: there went one job classification. They would get more deeply involved in recycling on-site, maybe" - p 204

"Lucy was the one who had explained to him that with most of the drug laws repealed and all of the prostitution statutes, so that cocaine was sniffed even at the Mayor's fund-raisers and the Yellow Pages had a fifteen-page listing under "Sexual Services," more than half the revenues of organized crime had gone down the toilet. The unions were about all they had left." - p 205

The above possibilities are classic 'food-for-thought'. The envisioned dome covers a city for climate control. I wd'n want that. My nightmare vision of the future is a world where someone has learned to control the weather. That strikes me as the biggest eco-disaster, even worse than oil spills.

As for legalized drugs & prostitution? That's more complicated. Having spent a large portion of my adult life in a society of rampant drug abuse I certainly don't have very positive opinions about cocaine or heroin or speed or downers in general or even pot. Nonetheless, I see enormous problems caused by criminalizing the users.

As an anarchist, I'd rather that there be no laws but that *doesn't mean that I therefore support heroin pushers & pimps*. To the contrary, I prefer a society where people have enuf sense to recognize the bad effects of addictive drugs (& my version of that category includes pot - against the common apologist position) & the ethics to be against profiting off of other people's suffering.

Organized Crime profits exclusively off of other people's suffering. So how does one discourage it? According to Alfred W. McCoy's [The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia](#) Mafiosa had an honor system that was against dealing drugs & pimping until Lucky Luciano came along & promoted those practices as immensely profitable. How wd society transform if doing things exclusively for profit w/o any other consideration were repulsive even to the Lucky Lucianos of the world? IMO, organized criminals shd find new skills that're more socially beneficial to thrive from - but under what conditions is that likely to happen?

Super-Guidance-Counselor, where are you when we need you?!

As for prostitution? I'm all for people having control over the economics of their own bodies but it rarely works that way in prostitution. Even if it were to work that way, for me, the intervention of capitalism into basic human drives is a sad thing. But, then, eating is a basic human need & I don't object to farmers selling food. This is too huge a subject to get into here. At least Pohl is thinking about it.

"And when the dome was complete it made a new world. A magnificent one, with magnificent new temptations." - p 222

Each of The Years of the City's sections envisions a next step of the future in a fairly serious manner. The final section, "*Gwenanda and the Supremes*" is a bit more light-hearted but not completely. Crime has been minimized & redefined to the point where Supreme Court justices are drafted from the general population w/ minimal quick training.

To read the entire review go here: <https://www.goodreads.com/story/show/...>

Michael says

A bunch of nicely crafted individual stories, mostly with clever upbeat endings, with an implicit future history focusing on the implications of a dome over the city of New York. By no means a utopian view, and plausible, except, perhaps for the over-the-top finale. I'm surprised I missed this one until now. Not a book that will change your life, I think, but solid entertainment and thought-provoking enough to hold the futurist's interest.
