



Last and First Contacts (Imaginings #2)

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Imaginings is a project from NewCon Press in the UK producing a limited number of signed hardback editions with unlimited numbers of ebooks. The ISBN is for the hardback, but this is an ebook edition.

Last and First Contacts is a collection of eleven short stories written by Stephen Baxter and selected by him for this edition.

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From Reader Review Last and First Contacts (Imaginings #2) for online ebook

Andrei says

Last and First Contacts was an expected little romp of short sci-fi stories. Most enjoyable, some meh, with some gems. I figure I'll just blurb about all of them.

Erstkontakt

Erstkontakt takes place in WWII, on the Nazi side. An alien equivalent of a rover arrives from Alpha Centauri, and lands in the lap of Werner von Braun's rocket research facility. The story is mainly meant to foreshadow the possible implications of such a landing. How it might provide technological hints that would inspire the Nazis to leapfrog Allied weaponry, what a Nazi space exploration agenda might look like, and how they might treat the matter of contact with extraterrestrials. Not peacefully, the book assumes.

In The Abyss of Time

In The Abyss of Time provided one extremely memorable image. The sci-fi tech here was a "cosmological bathysphere" that utilized an abnormal concentration of dark energy to propel the vehicle through time.

I can't say I'm one-hundred percent on the scientific conjecture, but the concept relies on the relative concentration of dark energy to dark matter to normal matter changing over time. The bathysphere utilizes a radically different local concentration of the three to propel the vehicle forward through time to reach the time with the equivalent relative concentration of dark energy, dark matter, and matter. Sort of like diffusion.

In any case, my favorite part of the story was the image of the universe at the far edge of time, when everything has expanded to near-nothingness with the exception of the last remaining universal consciousness, which spends most of its time dormant in order to conserve its limited resources. Like the deep ocean where occasionally foodstuffs will fall from the more abundant shallows to the deep, this consciousness snatches the dense matter and energy of time travelers who venture to the end of time from many different species and civilizations who've independently discovered time travel.

Halo Ghosts

Halo Ghosts I was sort of meh about. It was an okay story, but it did at least introduce a concept I hadn't heard of before. A Berry phase, or geometric phase, is a physics concept, which Wikipedia densely introduces as

a phase acquired over the course of a cycle, when the system is subjected to cyclic adiabatic processes, which results from the geometrical properties of the parameter space of the Hamiltonian."

In any case, the application in the story is of explorers who search comets for very old and untouched matter, because they have a device that's able to read some quantum mechanical Berry phase that allows them to essentially determine what the matter was like and what was around the matter at some energetic time in the particles' histories.

Tempest 43

I skipped this one because I'd read it before. But previously I had enjoyed its take on sentient machines and the mid-future of humanity in the face of climate change and high technology.

The Children of Time

This was very reminiscent of Baxter's Evolution novel -- a series of snapshots over extremely long swathes of evolutionary time.

Unlike Evolution, however, where humanity evolves toward and then away from homo sapiens sapiens, in The Children of Time Baxter plays with the concept that humanity's ability to modify its environment stunts the normal process of evolution, essentially freezing humanity as homo sapiens sapiens through the ages. Though industrialized humanity used up all the easily available resources and our descendants are never able to reach a similar level of technological development.

It makes the imperative to not mess up this particular go at technological civilization seem more important.

The Pacific Mystery

A particularly interesting story--it contains both alternate history intrigue (Nazis, naturally) and a non-Euclidean earth.

No More Stories & Dreamer's Lake

These stories both deal with intelligent stromatolites. The first in the context of a transformed earth, and the second out in space. Both also involve an exploration of a transformed humanity. The first is through a biological re-engineering of the species, the second through a technological discovery that makes FTL travel possible, opening up the universe to humanity.

The Long Road

Flash fiction. A cyclical story tracing a rise and fall of a civilization as seen through a road.

Last Contact

This story deals with the Big Rip (a number of the other stories in this collection also mention it). It's actually the first time I've been exposed to this particular cosmological theory, despite the theory having been around for a decade.

The Big Rip describes an ultimate fate of the universe, wherein the expansion of universe actually tears apart matter at a certain point. Last Contact tells a story of that certain point being right now.

David Mendiola says

Low character development; high imaginative stories of humanity over eons. Awesome. Just what I want.

I read it because "Last Contact" was one of my favorites in a best-of anthology. It was the best in this collection. "Pacific Mystery" and "Children of Time" were also great.

Richard says

The curse of the short story collection: the ones I like, I wish would be longer. The ones I don't like, seem to drag on and get no-where.

Matthew Connolly says

The title *Last and First Contacts* is a play on Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men*, and Stapledon's influence is evident in several of the stories in this collection. I enjoyed the sweeping cosmological scale against which pieces like "In the Abyss of Time" are set, but also the more intimate atmosphere of some of the other stories.

I hadn't read anything by Baxter before, but his style here struck me as something of a throwback to an earlier, classical (?) form of "situational" sci-fi, where the emphasis lies more on the exploration of a core concept than on the resolution of the action ... very much along the lines of Arthur C. Clarke's *Odyssey* or *Rama* books. That's not necessarily a bad thing in itself; I quite enjoy that style. In this collection, however, several of the stories ended with me thinking, "Yes, and ...?" There seemed to be a final beat missing. This was more of a problem in the first half of the book, notably in "Erstkontakt" and "Halo Ghosts".

Several elements and concepts surfaced repeatedly across different stories: (inhuman) consciousness and intelligence, indistinctly seen aliens, journeying, Nazis, stromatolites, and religion (specifically, Catholicism). I was pleased to see the latter treated gently, given how religious belief is so frequently ridiculed in modern science fiction.

All in all, this collection was a bit of a mixed bag. My favorites were "Last Contact" and "The Pacific Mystery", while "No More Stories" hit the other end of the spectrum. I would prefer to give this 3 1/2 stars; but, rounding down, that leaves us with a three.

A.B.R. says

I read a couple of Baxter novels a year or two ago, but this is the first time I've read any of his short stories. As with any collection, I found some very good stories and a couple of stories that didn't resonate to the same degree. Every reader will have his or her own favorites.

Baxter's stories involve grand cosmological concepts unfolding over vast sweeps of time or space, and several alternate histories, including one of my favorites, *The Pacific Mystery*. Like many of the stories in this collection it does not have a happy ending. The unifying motif in this collection is first and last contacts, and sometimes the first contact is also the last contact (*Dreamer's Lake*).

The stories in this collection dramatize scientific cosmological concepts and moral issues in science, but characterization is what brings stories to life, and my favorite stories are those with more fully realized characterizations. It is this ability which puts Baxter in the upper echelon of hard science fiction writers.

Barry Gilder says

I love science fiction because I love the journey of imagination into the human species' possible futures. And, for reasons I'm not totally sure of, Stephen Baxter is one of my favourite sci-fi writers...correct that...he is the only sci-fi author I read these days.

Surely all of us are fascinated by the future and by the big scientific and political questions and challenges that humankind will face as we trace the contours of our past and present and try to imagine them into our future. The biggest question of all, I guess, is whether we will ever have the technological capability to find and explore other habitable worlds and their inhabitants. And, by the time we do, what will our world look like politically and economically? Will, as Baxter suggests in one of the short stories in this collection, space exploration be led and conducted by the private sector? Will there still be a private sector?

Perhaps I enjoy Baxter's writing so much for three reasons.

Firstly, as Ian Whates points out in his introduction to this collection of Baxter's short stories, Baxter knows his scientific stuff, so his imaginings of the future are based on seemingly profound knowledge of present-day science and where it may be leading us - so much so, in fact, that I often struggle to understand some of the science.

Secondly, Baxter seems to have a deep sense and knowledge of history. His one story in this anthology, based on Nazi research during the Second World War on rockets, speculates on the arrival of an alien spaceship near their research site and the Nazi's plans to use the alien technology to start an inter-galactic war. Nice detail - scientific, political and personal - in the story.

Thirdly, Baxter has a fine sense of the interplay between the big things (very big things in some cases) and the mundanely human and personal. The last story in the anthology tells the tale of a mother in rural England and her astrophysicist daughter waiting out the Big Rip - when dark energy (a real scientific concept) permeates the universe, gains precedence over gravity and eventually rips everything apart down to molecular level. Not the end of the world, but the end of everything, of all matter. The daughter is the scientist who has predicted the exact date and time of the Big Rip. Her mother, knowing that all is to end, continues to nurse and plan her little domestic garden.

Some of the stories in this collection are not so good - a little bland, mundane and perhaps hastily put together. But there are mainly gems.

The only problem I have with Stephen Baxter is that he has not written enough works to satiate my appetite for good, thoughtful, realistic and imaginative science fiction.

Louis says

This is a book of short stories by Stephen Baxter who I feel is one of the best authors writing "hard" science fiction. I read this book as an ebook.

While I have enjoyed his novels and longer works more, this was a nice little diversion. Some nice ideas were tossed about and explored.

For someone new to the author or science fiction I would not recommend this book only because I feel some of this work is a bit too subtle and "quiet" in its story telling. I wonder if a new reader to the genre would want stories with a bit more impact overall.

To be fair, some of the stories do hit that mark but not all.

But if you are a fan of Mr Baxter, definitely pick this up. It shows off his talent differently than some of his other work.

Steve says

A collection of mostly recent short stories by Baxter. A good number of the stories cover Baxter's familiar territory of vast sweeps of time and the fate of humanity as a minor part of a large universe. My favorites in here were "The Children of Time" (human survival over the next billion years), "The Pacific Mystery" (alternate history with a rift in the middle of the Pacific that prevents circumnavigation of the globe), "Last Contact" (cosmic inflation leads to the end of the universe", and "In the Abyss of Time" (time travel to the end of time). Some of the other stories are fairly minor, but the whole collection is worth reading.

Scott says

Great collection

This is a well written set of short stories. Refreshingly old school sci-fi. Made me think of some of the older sci-fi legends.

Nat says

Love Baxter's short stories. Such a buffet but always a thread tying them together.
