



## Greetings, Carbon-Based Biped!

*Arthur C. Clarke*

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## **Greetings, Carbon-Based Bipeds!** Arthur C. Clarke

The wonderfully titled *Greetings, Carbon-Based Bipeds!* is a collection taken from Sir Arthur C Clarke's non-fiction writing from over half a century's prolific output. It might seem a rather daunting book at first sight: 110 separate pieces of writing, well over 500 pages, but in fact it's an excellent read, either from beginning to end or simply dipping in at whim.

There are, as might be expected, popular science articles, pieces about space exploration and, of course, science fiction; there are also numerous sideswipes at uninformed UFO believers, spoonbenders, assorted New Agers and Creationists; and there are several fascinating and informative articles on Clarke's great loves, underwater exploration and Ceylon/Sri Lanka.

Clarke completists may already have a few of the pieces in earlier volumes such as *Profiles of the Future*, but most of them are available in an accessible form for the first time, taken from *The Journal of the British Astronomical Society*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *The Times Higher Education Supplement* and other similarly disparate sources. A number of Clarke's speeches are also included.

There are numerous references to the film and book *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Speaking of the late Stanley Kubrick, Clarke writes, "One of my deepest regrets now is that we will not be able to share the year 2001 together." It's good to see that Clarke, in poor health for some years, is still hard at work. --*David V. Barrett*

## **Greetings, Carbon-Based Bipeds! Details**

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## **From Reader Review Greetings, Carbon-Based Biped!** for online ebook

### **Harini says**

I did not read the book completely, but the few sections that I read based on topics that interested me, were amazing. This book showed me that even non-fiction essays have the power to raise the imagination levels of the reader as much as fiction does. A good read, but I wouldn't be too eager to finish reading the complete book, given its vast range of topics and content.

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### **Kim says**

Really enjoyed the book. Good to be able to evaluate how his thoughts played out over time. I'd read it again.

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### **Sean AKA Panky says**

I read it a long while ago, and enjoyed it during that time, but I think I expected more out of it then I got out of it.

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### **Terence says**

I've already expressed my mental wrestling with Clarke and his writing in my review of Childhood's End here and I don't want to belabor the point, though it was reading these essays that led me to tackle that book.

Instead, I'll limit myself to pointing out some of the more interesting ideas that leapt out a me in this particular volume.

In "The Obsolescence of Man" Clarke addresses the certainty of the end of the human species and finds reason to be optimistic:

*Can the synthesis of man and machine ever be stable, or will the purely organic component become such a hindrance that it has to be discarded? If this eventually happens...we have nothing to regret, and certainly nothing to fear.*

*The popular idea...that intelligent machines must be malevolent entities hostile to man is so absurd that it is hardly worth wasting energy to refute it.... Those who picture machines as active enemies are merely projecting their own aggressive instincts...into a world where such things do not exist. The higher the intelligence, the greater the degree of cooperativeness. If there is ever a war between men and machines, it is easy to guess who will start it. [And this was years before "The Matrix"!]*

*Yet however friendly and helpful the machines of the future may be, most people will feel that it is a rather bleak prospect for humanity if it ends up as a pampered specimen in some biological museum – even if that museum is the whole planet Earth. This, however, is an attitude I find impossible to share.*

*No individual exists forever, why should we expect our species to be immortal? Man, said Nietzsche, is a rope stretched between the animal and the superhuman – a rope across the abyss. That will be a noble purpose to have served. (pp. 224-225)*

Clarke toyed with the paranormal in the '50s and '60s (cf. *Childhood's End*) but well before the end of his life had become a thorough-going skeptic. From the foreward to *An Encyclopedia of Claims, Frauds, and Hoaxes of the Occult and Supernatural*:

*How I wish that Randi's Encyclopedia could be in every high school and college library, as an antidote to the acres of mind-rotting rubbish that now litters the bookstores. Freedom of the press is an excellent ideal, but as a distinguished jurist once said in a similar context, "Freedom of speech does not include the freedom to shout 'Fire!' in a crowded theater." Unscrupulous publishers, out to make a cheap buck by pandering to the credulous and feeble-minded, are doing the equivalent of this, by sabotaging the intellectual and educational standards of society, and fostering a generation of neobarbarians. (p. 473)*

I will confess to being a fan of Coast to Coast AM but mainly because I enjoy seeing the host, George Nouri, manage to agree with all the wildly contradictory theories that his guests come up with to explain the Pyramids, NDEs, angels, alien abductions, etc. (E.g., the night I write this review (Dec 25), the show's blurb for tonight's episode says: "Ken Johnston, who worked for NASA's Lunar Receiving Laboratory during the Apollo missions, says he was fired for telling the truth. He joins George Knapp to share his contention that NASA knows astronauts discovered ancient alien cities, and the remains of amazingly advanced machinery on the Moon.") Otherwise, I'm with Clarke on this one 110%; in fact, I discussed just this topic one day with a fellow teacher.

In the eponymous essay of the collection, Clarke advocates what is, for me, an unsettling idea: That we (or our descendants) must strive to become the galaxy's "future guardians." (p. 481)

Guardians against what? This particular corner of spacetime appears to be getting along quite well without our stewardship, and – based on the evidence of the infinitesimally tiny spot we've been living in – I'm sure the galaxy could continue to do so.

In "The Coming Cataclysm" – and in several other essays from later in his life – Clarke touches on why humans + (advanced) technology will never be anything but a temporary arrangement (and he's betting that technology will win):

*I have seen the future, and it doesn't work....*

*For today's primitive interactive toys are only part of a vast spectrum of entertainment and*

*information systems so seductive that they can preempt all other activities....*

*All these dubious utopias depend on the assumption that someone will run the world while the dreamers enjoy themselves. The dangers of this situation were foreshadowed in H.G. Wells's first masterpiece, The Time Machine, where the subterranean morlocks sustained the garden paradise of the effete eloi – and exacted a dreadful fee for the stewardship.*

*The robots and computers who would watch over our cocooned descendants are hardly likely to share the morlocks' tendency...but there is another danger in such a one-sided relationship. Sooner or later, the central processing units monitoring the sleeping world would ask themselves, "Why should we bother?" (pp. 486-87)*

And my favorite essay in the collection is "Life in the Fax Lane," which distills exactly what's wrong with the technologically marvelous world we've created:

*In the good old days when I wrote a letter to my agents in London or New York or to the secretary of my UK company, Rocket Publishing, I could count on at least a week or even two before getting a reply! There was time to think, and even time to work.*

*Not anymore. When I went to bed last night, I faxed a letter to my agent in New York.*

*The reply was already waiting for me when my clock radio switched on the The BBC World News at six-thirty the next morning. Ten days had shrunk to as many hours - and the new novel recedes even further into the future in favor of composing my next (one or two) replies. (p. 356) [emphasis mine]*

And with today's e-mail, IM & twittering, that ten days has been compressed even further to ten minutes (if that).

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## **Siby says**

Arthur C Clarke was one of the leading science fiction writers of the 20th century, right up there with Issac Asimov and probably with Jules Verne and H.G Wells from the earlier years. Though I have never been interested in science fiction, I liked this book, which is a collection of his non-fiction essays on matters of space, science, astronomy and philosophy. This book certainly opens your mind to a new level of thought process, going beyond the terrestrial.

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## **Charles Turek says**

Rather like reading a cross between George Carlin and Carl Sagan. When Clarke states the obvious, it is always "the obvious" that has never occurred to you before reading it on that page. It's the "I coulda had a

V8" reaction every time. Clarke has the ability to look both extremely far back and extremely far forward in time and like what he sees in both places. If we ever invent a time machine - and according to Clarke we probably will - we will have to name it not for H.G. Wells, but for Arthur C. Clarke.

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### **Arun Divakar says**

How do you refer to a person who wrote : *Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic* ? On the cover of this book was a quote that fitted him like a glove : *A prophet of the space age* . This sounded a tad too exaggerated at the onset but the essays in this book proved to me that Arthur Charles Clarke did possess an intellect that could match up to this definition.

Written on a wide variety of topics and covering a span of close to seven decades are the articles in this book. While all through the writings run a strain of intense love for science, Clarke does write about a whole gamut of other topics. The likes of movies, literature, atheism, superstition are touched upon and sometimes dissected upon by him. A lion's share of the articles here are focussed on manned space flight which sadly did not materialize as the author predicted it to be. Humans never colonized the Moon and nor did a human being ever set foot on Mars as most Sci Fi authors believed at one point in time. I found all the articles to be exceptional from a clarity of thought and language perspective. It can all be summed up and said that Clarke knew what he was writing about. Some of the most thought provoking pieces in the book are when he writes about how superstition has clouded the entire face of religion and science. He shoots to pieces the conspiracy theories about UFO's and humanoid extra terrestrials. The writing style of the manager ensured they make a delightful read with the tongue-in-cheek humor and rational explanations.

All this being said, it should also be noted that with time some of these articles have lost their importance. To go back to my earlier point, the focus on manned spaceflight gets tiresome as Clarke (or the publishers !) devote pages upon pages to a topic which never did materialize. This could be the one reason why I did not warm up to a few topics in the book.

It is altogether a swell read. Filled with rockets, space shuttles, science, Sri Lanka, scuba diving, God and many such interesting characters and occurrences !

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### **Todd says**

A great look into the mind of one of the scientific giants of the 20th century, in a wide variety of formats, on a wide variety of topics over time. Pick and choose what interests you or read it cover to cover, there's a lot in here.

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### **Sarah says**

Clarke's essays about a wide range of topics written from the fifties to the nineties. Covers space exploration, science and people. Great reference for sf readers and writers.

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**Louise says**

He's my inspirational guy. Hopeful ideas, joy of life being in the world, good outlook.

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**Elaine Nelson says**

A mixed bag of odd little essays & fragments of essays. Didn't finish because it had to go back to the library; I wasn't loving it so much that I wanted to renew it.

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