



Eclipse

John Shirley

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Book one of John Shirley's pre-holocaust series, *A Song Called Like* many works defining the wild cyberpunk fringe in the 1980s, this depiction of a near-future dystopia, here revised and updated since its 1985 debut, seems almost acceptably mainstream today. But Shirley's spiky prose and edgy attitudes, which lately have cultivated a following among horror readers (*Wetbones; Really, Really, Really, Really Weird Stories*), still hook the reader's attention. Tapping anxieties about rising global nationalism, Shirley presents a Goya-esque vision of war-torn western Europe, bombed out and unstable in the early years of the 21st century from a resurgence of Russian militarism and the collapse of NATO. The Second Alliance, a government-sanctioned multinational police force, has rushed in to restore order and revealed itself a nightmarish incarnation of every fascist and fundamentalist power fantasy. The only defense against the Alliance's creeping totalitarianism is the New Resistance, a polyglot pick-up team of rebels that includes Rick Rickenharp, a tripping retro guitarist whose artistic and political sensibilities are sinuously intertwined, and John Swenson, a mole whose soul is blackened through his infiltration of the Alliance. Stitched together from vivid swatches of action and intrigue alternating kaleidoscopically between Earth sites and the orbiting FirStep space colony, the novel offers a thrashy punk riff on science fiction's familiar future war scenario and lays a solid foundation for the subsequent volumes of Shirley's "A Song Called Youth" trilogy.

Eclipse Details

Date : Published November 19th 1999 by Babbage Pr (first published 1985)

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Author : John Shirley

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From Reader Review Eclipse for online ebook

Michael says

It's inexplicable that I am just now coming across this book! I read City Come A'Walking years ago and loved it. But not as much as this one! All the best elements of the Cyberpunk Troika of Gibson, Sterling and Stephenson are present here....the world-building and attention to detail of Sterling, the stylized writing of Gibson and the "mood of scene" skills of Stephenson. I am wildly impressed. The characters were all intriguing and well-drawn...regrettably hardly any survived!!

I would have become weary of the Paris battle/fight parts but they were written so well that I was not inclined to skim them! One single geographical mis-step stood out: Hard-Eyes and Rickenharp were at a MacDonalds on the Champs Élysées (which the Parisians would never have allowed!!!) and proceeded to make their way to the Parc Butte Chamont, which is way the hell and gone in the far NE of the city. Add rubble and SA to avoid and there is no way it would have taken less than a full day to get there! Plus, the geography of the park is super-hilly...no flat fields for pod landing. I also wish there had been a section detailing Claire and Bonhams flight to Earth.

A small thing, of course....I have the other two books on order.

Outis says

I've unfortunately read the updated version. More about its wrongness lower.

This is actually an interesting book, with much to recommend it. But for my taste the wrong outweighs the good.

Though that's hard to tell on account of its self-indulgent meanderings, this book seems to be merely the first part of a long tale, not a complete book that's part of a series: basically goes nowhere, way too much setup, red herrings and so forth. I don't like.

I reckon it might have been awesome when it was released but I don't think it aged well (since I've only read the updated version, I can only guess).

So the good: mainly, it's an unconventional genre story. Daring and unpredictable. Sometimes funny. Some good scenes and descriptions. Also, it's got nice fascists. I can suspend disbelief about the higher ranks (if not about the troops) and that makes them satisfyingly creepy.

And now the bad: The macho antifa fantasy is simply unbelievable. And dated to boot. It reads like some conspiranoiac left-Bolshevik wet dream. Also, the whole war is rad thing. The future about which we're served much thinly-disguised exposition is generally unconvincing. There's too much that's over the top silly considering the low literary content. And the books fails at women in my opinion.

The updated version seems to have been a rushed affair. Annoying fluff like names of corporations which didn't exist back in the day have been inserted but the basic Cold War framework seems not have been altered (I have no way to tell). In any case, what might have been convincing as a quaint alternate history has become a highly implausible retcon.

There was stuff in the book which I might have considered visionary if I knew that it was written back in the day. But since it might have been inserted later, I can't credit the author. An dated work can also be interesting as a reflection of its time in a way such an updated book isn't.

Instead of mangling the setting, you'd think the update could have fixed mistakes... but no: the badly broken

bits of French somehow survived the process. Aside from the grammar fails and whatnot, a major faction is called "stratégie actuel" (sic). It's not only annoying: to put it mildly, this sort of thing isn't helping the setting's verisimilitude.

Mike says

I found this off a list of cyberpunk books back in the late 80s. This is the first of a 3 part epic telling the story of the rise of fascist powers in post-WWIII Europe. It reminds me a great deal of the new Battlestar Galactica series in tone and pacing. This is one of those books I reread every few years and will never not own a copy of it.

Cameron says

I read a used 1987 Warner Books used version with copy write 1985. John Shirley created a vivid world that appears to be a post apocalyptic and in the throws of a limited nuclear world war. As always, it is fascinating to see what great minds like John Shirley foresaw for the future back in the pre-internet 1980's.

The rise of a new, small 'f' fascism is prophetic, but the circumstances regarding its reemergence were more dramatic than the mundane race to the bottom we see today. Christian fanaticism was just beginning to be an issue back then and Handmaiden's tale was another dystopian novel published in the same year.

He foresaw surveillance drones before they were a real thing. He also predicted the rise of contractors as law enforcement and security in war zones and I don't recall them really existing much before the occupation of Iraq.

Perhaps it is still too early to judge whether or not his other predictions will come to pass, but many other authors tend to compress time to show a greater rate of technological change than is really possible.

His prose was excellent, but there were a lot of subplots and characters. I suppose this was necessary as a setup for the trilogy but it made for some jumpy reading when he frequently switched back and forth between different worlds. Regardless, it was a very enjoyable read and the conclusion was satisfying.

Bob Rust says

Shirley created his finest sf work in the Cyberpunk-coloured Song Called Youth trilogy – Eclipse (1985), Eclipse Penumbra (1988) and Eclipse Corona (1990) – set after a realistically conceived World War Three and describing a technologically deft resistance movement which fights a neofascist regime to a standstill, ultimately defeating it.

Erik says

A cyberpunk novel about an ongoing WW3 written in the mid-1980s, marred by the author updating it in this late 90s edition. Would rate higher if the typesetting/proofreading weren't the worst I've ever seen in a professionally published novel.

Michelle Tackabery says

Simply a stunning, underrated masterpiece. This is the first volume of a trilogy. Reading it now is amazing. Shirley's world of drone technology, a Europe decimated by the economic policies of the US and China, and a lunatic, fundamentalist Christian running America was scary to me, but gee, here we are in 2012... The characters are well-drawn, the world they live in is brutal, and heroes trust in rock and roll. Gotta read it.

Crabby McGrouchpants says

John Shirley's first volume in his *A Song Called Youth* trilogy is rip-roaring, more-plausible-than-entirely-comfortable, and limned to such usually-omitted concerns as starvation, other hungers, and the way caprice can cause an event which shifts the whole narrative — of your life, of the whole nation-state, perhaps the whole Planet Earth we're all stuck on.

How he keeps it all straight & moving is astonishing: don't be too sure which characters you identify with are going to make it, 'cause, for sure, the unyielding nature of Death ("no idle prankster," as Thomas Pynchon noted, in his introduction to his friend Richard Fariña's novel *Been Down So Long, It Looks Like Up to Me*) is one of the main lessons of this trip. You *do* cry, you *do* miss these people, and still ... you taste the bitter victory of thinking maybe, just maybe, you aren't bullshitting yourself that it'll be worth something, that the resistance has a chance at striking back at the New Fascists (guised as the "Second Alliance," of course — in *this* case study).

Here's what Science Fiction can do, when you cram in — à la using "oven mitts," stuff that'd be "too depressing to talk about," as William Gibson said in *index* magazine — topical and cultural references with brio belonging only to the best novelists, "genre" or not, and analytical abilities surpassing most (51%) on the U.S. Government's ticket, well-known cred. or no. Bargain shopping, for those who want to work their mind, no matter what the price!

Lars says

If there was ever a successor to the neo-dystopian but not fully cyberpunk mantle of Gibson/Sterling then John Shirley should be so named.

I found his works through *Demons* (2000) and was suitably impressed to start looking at his other fiction. I was not disappointed. Fortunately, the full *A Song Called Youth* trilogy was completed by this time so I did not have "sequel anxiety," which I suffered during David Eddings' Belgariad and Mallorean quintologies in the Eighties. (Yes, I am a but older...)

His writing has an immediacy and tone that reminds me of Gaiman but with enough hard sci-fi à la Asimov and Gibson that his near-future world is believable and frighteningly real. While not every sci-fi fan will appreciate his stylings, if you read cyberpunk but long for something other than another "noir detective story with computer implants and weak imagery" then Shirley is for you. I had enough of the score of cyberpunk imitators and Shirley broke out of the mold but retained enough of the cyberpunk sensibilities that he has the

tech in the novels but it not the star. Yes, I concede that "Johnny Mnemonic" would have gone nowhere without the tech, but all flash and no substance gets old after a while, like subsisting on cotton candy for a week--not recommended.

Buy these books.

Lawrence says

well, this is the first book in a long long time that I could easily put down every night. I mean, I literally fell asleep reading this more times than I could count.

I think it is interesting that everyone is rediscovering this early cyberpunk work. It really does have a timeless appeal with the ideas and concepts, although a couple of the recent updates/edits ring hollow in odd ways (the mentioning of Blackwater in one discussion of security contractors, for example). all the characters and elements of an excellent cyberpunk thriller are there, but they just aren't put together right. The pace is a staccato of forward movement interspersed with religious world building, diatribes, and inner conflicts. With fewer characters, perhaps the internal discussions would have been more compelling. of maybe just slightly less "fascism is terrible because..." sections.

I am undecided about the next two books in the series.

Neon Snake says

You know, I never really bought in to 1984. It's a fantastic book, a great work of fiction, but I was never one of those people who thought we'd ever get to a point where the books themes were hugely relevant. By the time I read it, in the late 80s, it had already turned into retro-futurism. Doublespeak had been co-opted by the Right as a term used to discredit laws and regulations (wrongly) perceived to be limiting free speech, and the rise of the surveillance state was being countered by cell phone cameras and hactivism by the time it became truly relevant.

But this, this I can believe in. After a week in which UKIP have grown power massively in the European Parliamentary Elections, with Britain First proudly "invading" Mosques in East London, and the ongoing marches by the EDL, Shirley's tale of Fundamentalist Religion, Classism and Fascism rings frighteningly plausible; the characterisation and subtlety on show is fantastic, this is a truly mature and nuanced book.

One of the classics of mid-80s cyberpunk, this was updated fairly recently. I've no idea whether the thrust of the story was changed, or whether the changes involved details, but the anti-Islam, anti-foreign interest themes are extremely relevant and timely as we sit here in 2014. And it's a fantastic story in it's own right, even leaving aside the politics.

We may never reach a 1984. But we might well reach an Eclipse.

Must-read.

Bradley says

FASCISM!

Did I get your attention? Well, yeah, that's the main drive, or drive AGAINST, in this novel, but it's no cookie-cutter SF adventure. It's actually rather rich, mostly named as a cyberpunk title coming out of 1985 and revamped to include more updated cultural references to music and even Ipads as of 2012 and repubbed. Do I mind? Hell no. It seems pretty excellent and timely and who am I to say that the author can't change his mind about a few things?

Most authors can't get away with that and too many fans might get upset, wrongly or rightly. Frankenstein, anyone?

Back to this. All the characters in this are getting established to run through the whole trilogy as one single novel, so even tho there's a great blowout by the end of this one, it's not meant to end with one big battle.

Battle? Yep, this is the build-up of a fascist regime and we follow the fascinating peeps who either die or survive the rise of it. This includes the colony off Earth as well as the Earth, itself, with all the racist elements that the Us vs Them mentality you can think of. Religion, neo-nazis, corporate aggrandizement, overpopulation, disappearing resources... you name it.

The rest of us are feeling the downfall of society. I did say this was timely. And the careful attention to detail and world-building, not to mention the depth of characterization, really makes this something special.

Yes, it's a novel of civil war on a global and extra-global scale, with all the misfits banding together. There's one particular scene I loved featuring a certain old-school rocker, totally pre-punk, which made my day.

Am I impressed? Yes. Absolutely. The sprawling nature of settings, how deeply the situations are novelized makes this more like 3 or 4 books in one by sheer weight of detail. And it's often funny and personally relatable. I love my music and obviously, the author does, too. :)

My only quibble is with the somewhat one-dimensional nature of the fascist movement. Most of it could be taken right out of a pop-culture diary without much exploration into the deeper roots of the movement, including the kinds of deeper frustrations that might give rise to it. We're introduced to it as a fact of life and we're in the middle of it.

Perhaps this is true to life, but nothing is ever QUITE this simple. I'm amazed at the scope the novel provides, but I am slightly underwhelmed by the direct application of the fascism. Alas.

Matt says

The review by Outis is fairly accurate. However, in the end I found the ending was exciting and satisfying enough to rescue the book.

I think the author somewhere described the book as not cyberpunk. Well, it certainly has mainly elements of

cyberpunk; dystopia, a huge corporation ruling the world from behind the scenes, not so distant future scifi, etc... no matrix though. Anyways, it is true that the ambiance is altered by the war ravaged world.

The best thing about this book are the characters. Some have excellent depth and grit, such as Hard-Eyes, Smoke, Rickenharp, Steinfeld. I found the chapters involving these characters went fast. You'll become attached to these characters and sad to see some of them go.

The other chapters, especially the ones on Firststep, were kind of boring. These often had characters that are either too over the top and weird/goofy (Rimpler), or forgettable (Molt and Bonham... kind of like Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum). The BDSM scenes with Rimpler were a bit much, felt forced, and why???

But most of all, the worst part of the book is the waaaay forced backdrop of end-of-the-world facism. I think I read the updated version of the book, and it appears the author updated the book to reflect modern political conflict within the US. I haven't read the original yet, but presume I'd prefer slightly less accurate predictions, even if anachronistic.

Fortunately the book saves itself with an awesome ending. I'm intrigued enough to read book 2, and maybe one day will read the original book 1.

John says

One of the finest cyberpunk novels

John Shirley belongs to the generation of science fiction writers led by William Gibson and Bruce Sterling who are known as cyberpunks. Shirley was one of the early proponents of cyberpunk fiction. "Eclipse", the first in his "A Song Called Youth" trilogy, is a vivid, stylistically hip mix of politics, rock and roll and computers. His lean prose is almost as elegant as Gibson's; here he depicts a near future in which Europe falls under the sway of a Neo-Nazi Christian fundamentalist tyranny, the Second Alliance (SA), in the aftermath of a limited nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union. Opposing the SA are a motley band of rock musicians and socialist guerrillas known as the New Resistance. Those interested in reading some great cyberpunk fiction should acquire John Shirley's "A Song Called Youth" trilogy.

(Reposted from my 2001 Amazon review)

Jimmy says

I read the original version, not the updated one.
