

**Reflections on Human Civilization:  
Alternative Realities in Robert Sawyer's *Neanderthal Parallax***

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And now for a work of science fiction to please a truly diverse array of readers; anthropologists, bisexuals, atheists, environmentalists, feminists, peaceniks, and promoters of male bonding and birth control will all find in Robert Sawyer's brilliant trilogy, *Neanderthal Parallax*, an updated and relevant utopian vision of intelligent life and community on earth, as well as a gripping good yarn where the hero is, contrary to 30,000 years of vilification and underestimation on the part of the dominant species on earth, a highly intelligent, sensitive, and sexy Neanderthal. Sawyer poses an intriguing thought experiment: What if the Neanderthals had flourished and culturally evolved and *Homo sapiens* had become extinct? To answer this question, he creates an alternative history of life on the planet and a parallel Neanderthal world which present not only a very appealing picture of how human culture could have evolved (imagine no war and true equality of the sexes, for example) but also an unsparing critique of contemporary human society and culture.

Although much of science fiction deals with the future, the *Neanderthal Parallax* series is science fiction that delves into a different arena of possibilities. This arena is alternative realities, which includes the engaging and interesting topic of alternative histories. What if some significant event or trend in the past had not occurred; how would present reality be different? Alternative histories help us to see our world more clearly and help us to understand the causal significance of key events in history and how they impact the direction of history. One of the most famous alternative reality novels is Philip Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), which is set in a post World War II world in which Germany and Japan won the war. Although *The Man in the High Castle* turns our contemporary world upside down, it ends up having some very revealing things to say about our modern society, including the nature of military versus economic and cultural victory, and leaves the reader with a sense of enlightenment (or confusion – depending on how you look at it) regarding what indeed is real and what isn't. We are left asking who really did win World War II.

With *Neanderthal Parallax* Sawyer has written an extremely fascinating alternative history trilogy that rivals Dick's masterpiece. The three novels in the series are *Hominids* (2002), *Humans* (2003), and *Hybrids* (2003). The main scientific premise behind these novels is that there may be alternative causal pathways within history (based on the Many-Worlds interpretation in quantum physics), and consequently there may exist alternative realities of the present which co-exist in some type of quantum multi-verse of possibilities. (Of particular relevance to futurists, the corollary of this idea is that there are multiple futures which will unfold, following different pathways into tomorrow.) Given this premise of multiple contemporary realities, Sawyer presents the reader with a technologically advanced Neanderthal civilization in many ways equal to, though clearly different from, our own and one not only with sophisticated justice and

governance systems but also rational, workable and, yes, humanistic approaches to the environment, gender relations and population control. Indeed, it is during a botched experiment with a quantum computer at the Sudbury Neutrino Observatory, coincidentally the same site in both worlds, that the main protagonist, Neanderthal scientist Ponter Boddit, is accidentally propelled into our reality. The story unfolds as he and then other members of his species interact with our species both in the *Homo sapiens* (gliksin) world and the Neanderthal (barast) universe. Needless to say gliksins and barasts alike suffer a considerable degree of culture shock and Sawyer throws no punches in suggesting that the Neanderthals have more reason to be baffled, disgusted and bemused than the *Homo sapiens*.

Finely crafted, inventive and credible, (*Hominids* won the Hugo Award for the best science fiction novel of the year and *Humans* was a finalist in the balloting), the novels move along at a brisk narrative pace and present a variety of highly compelling characters, especially the Neanderthals. And Sawyer is perhaps at his best in depicting a Neanderthal world that is both in sync with our present conceptions about the species and yet displays the kind of sophistication we would expect from an evolutionary path parallel to our own. The Neanderthals may still collectively hunt, slaughter and consume large mammals, as they do at an engagement feast, but they are also capable of designing a highly effective hi-tech crime prevention device, the *companion*, which is embedded in the forearms of all citizens and which keeps an ongoing record of all their actions through life. The Neanderthals know that if they were to commit a crime, this, like all their actions, would be recorded, transmitted to an archive, and possibly viewed by the legal authorities. The automatic punishment is sterilization, not only of the perpetrator but of any who share half his genes. Hence, they do not commit many crimes. And far from moaning about the violation of their civil rights, the Neanderthals find nothing wrong in having these monitors, since it has eliminated all serious crime.

Perhaps the most intriguing and educational dimension in the novels, though, is how much they say about *Homo sapiens* and our modern world. Alternative realities make our world more salient or visible through the psychological phenomenon called the "contrast effect." Placing something next to something else which is very different, if not a complete opposite to it, highlights its reality; black next to white makes white look whiter and black look blacker. Contrasting our reality with a totally different reality brings out the unique qualities and features of our world that may go unnoticed since such features are commonplace. In *Neanderthal Parallax*, the contrast effect is amplified through the psychological reactions of the Neanderthals to the strangeness of our world and the ongoing dialogue and debate that occurs between Ponter and various human characters. Though filled with action, the novels have a strong philosophical flavor as well, and the issues of ethics, God, mortality, love, and war are argued and discussed through the novels. The Neanderthals, in many important respects, are very different from us. They have almost no war or crime (and do not honor warriors); have a much lower world population; are hunter-gatherer rather than agricultural; live in tune with nature (they build their houses

within big trees); are universally bisexual (they almost all have mates of each sex); and are all atheists, finding it incomprehensible how we could believe in life after death or a supernatural, all-powerful being who watches over us. Given such cultural and psychological differences, the Neanderthals find our world mad, frenzied, and irrational. Through their eyes we are unbelievably crowded and congested, senselessly abusive and destructive of our environment, abominably cruel toward each other in the name of freedom, and highly superstitious in our belief systems. By the end of even one novel, many a reader wistfully wishes the Neanderthals had prevailed in our own history.

Science fiction stretches the imagination and in Sawyer's *Neanderthal Parallax* a plausible high-tech, culturally sophisticated global civilization is created that stimulates the reader into considering how our own world could be different and perhaps much improved if we were to alter some of our basic premises, values, and practices. In the final analysis, this seems to be Sawyer's central message: Consider the *Neanderthal* world and ponder what lessons can be learned for our own world and its future.