

Neal Stephenson's new novel, *Anathem*, charts the adventures of a group of hyperintellectual monks out to save their world from an extraplanetary menace.



guys, and historical figures (Alan Turing, Douglas MacArthur, Isaac Newton, and Louis XIV, to name a few).

Stephenson's new novel, *Anathem* (William Morrow, 2008), is his most ambitious project yet: it seeks to completely reshape the history of scientific and philosophical thought. Set 4,000 years in the future on a planet called Arbore, the novel chronicles the adventures of a cadre of hyperintellectual monks who must save their world from an extraplanetary menace.

With *Snow Crash*, Stephenson (CAS'81) was writing alongside the young upstarts of sci-fi (they call it *cyberpunk* for a reason), but with *Anathem*, he is vying for a position among spec-fic's old guard: Asimov, Clarke, Heinlein, and Huxley.

Stephenson spoke with *Bostonia* about his work.

A Voice from the Future ///

Speculative fiction writer Neal Stephenson talks about his new book, his influences, and why he can't write short. BY DEVIN HAHN

NEAL STEPHENSON HAS been a dominant voice in the world of speculative fiction — known as sci-fi/fantasy to the uninitiated — since the 1992 publication of *Snow Crash*, a novel that predicted with eerie accuracy the advent of virtual communities like

Second Life and World of Warcraft. Stephenson's subsequent works have dealt with subjects as diverse as ecoterrorism, nanotechnology, cryptography, and alchemy and have starred a motley cast of punks, hackers, soldiers, scientists, pizza delivery

I understand that you started writing about halfway through your undergrad career.

Yeah. I had tried to write some short stories much earlier, because the conventional wisdom is that the way you get into writing is by starting with little stuff and then working your way up to novels. So I tried to write a couple of short stories, and they just didn't go anywhere. So based on that I thought that maybe being a writer just wasn't in the cards for me. And then about halfway through college, I was stuck in town over break — no money, nothing to do — and I ended up just banging out a short novel. Not a very good book, but the point is, I was able to finish a novel even though I was never able to finish a short story. They're different forms. To this day I'm not particularly good at writing short stories.

What motivated you to start writing in the first place?

Even when I was in elementary school, I thought it seemed like a good gig compared to other things that a person could do for a living. Setting aside any highfalutin ideas about art or intellectual content, it's nice work if you can get it.

Academic settings crop up frequently in your work. How much of your life have you spent in academia?

It depends on how you look at it, because I come from a long line of preachers and professors. My great-grandfather was a professor of classics. One grandfather was a physics professor, the other was a biochemistry professor. My dad and a bunch of my uncles were professors. I grew up in college towns, and all of my friends' parents either had Ph.D.s or were working on their Ph.D.s. So in

that sense, I spent my entire life up until the age of about twenty-four in academia.

You're clearly comfortable writing both speculative and historical fiction. What challenges does each kind of novel pose?

When I'm doing it, I'm not hugely conscious of there being two modes. Once I get the place and the people in my head, the process is somehow the same. There are two different ways of getting to that point. In a historical novel, you try to gather information about the time and the place: the buildings, what people wore, the manners, the sets of attitudes and mental habits that people would have had when they walked into a room. In a speculative book, that has to be made up. But it's not totally made up, because it's always based on historical precedents to some extent. So, for example, with *Anthem* I've got a speculative future, but it's based on monastic communities of medieval

Europe, so I can go back and look at the way people behaved in those historical communities and use that as a basis to construct the future reality.

In *Anthem*'s fictional world, the planet's thinkers — its philosophers, mathematicians, and others (dubbed the avout) — are segregated from the rest of the society (the extramuros). How does this division reflect aspects of twenty-first-century American society?

This is an unusual book for me in that the subject matter is the bifurcation of society into long- versus short-attention-span people, for lack of a better way of putting it. I kept seeing all of these examples in day-to-day life of how people who read books and who focus on the life of the mind are becoming more and more like the monks of medieval times. That is, they're more and more separate from the mainstream of society. They are to media culture kind of what vampires are to mirrors. I know that they're out there — they're out there by the millions — but they are invisible to the rest of the culture, and they're talking to each other on back channels of e-mail and books that are like a separate stratum of communication. The world of *Anthem* reflects that through the speculative fiction lens.

Most of *Anthem*'s characters believe that there are no new ideas, and the novel suggests that even original ideas are nothing but transmissions from another world. That seems like a bleak position for a writer to take.

There are very few mathematicians who believe that they are creating something in the same way that an artist creates a sculpture. Most of them feel pretty certain that they're discovering something that's out there. And yet, they're not depressed by that, they don't think it's bleak.



If anything, it heightens the enjoyment and the sense of excitement for them, because they feel as though they're exploring a landscape that's filled with incredibly beautiful and surprising results. Look at how the Greeks thought of it: they would invoke the Muse at the beginning of a work of literature. I think they were responding to a

feature — call it a neurological feature — of how creativity works, which is that once you get into the flow-state, it just sort of happens. You feel as though you're a conduit for material that's flowing into your consciousness from some place that you don't understand, and you're just transcribing it. That's an experience that artists have reported, and it's also an experience that's been reported by mathematicians who say, "I didn't feel as though I was creating this proof. I was just writing it out. I was the stenographer."

Many of your novels devote a substantial number of pages to explaining things, such as mathematical proofs or obscure word origins. Why?

I remember reading books when I was a kid — Robert Heinlein novels, let's say — where things would be explained. In books like that there's a payload of legitimate science info delivered in a vehicle that's reasonably fun and engaging to read. And that's part of why I sought those books out; it's part of why I still remember them. So I'm not conscious of doing something out of the ordinary or engaging in some kind of strange literary experiment when I do that, just because I used to see it all the time in science fiction books I read as a kid.

With *Anthem* you may have one-upped Heinlein in that respect.

In *Anthem* I think it's taken about as far as you could ever take it. Time will tell whether I'm going to get away with it or not.

WEB EXTRA
Watch a video of Neal Stephenson reading from his latest book and read the full transcript of *Bostonia*'s interview at www.bu.edu/bostonia.

Fiction

THE ANGEL

Carla Neggers (COM'77)

Mira Books

A BRUTAL THIRTY-YEAR-OLD crime, the murderer long ago discovered and dead, kicks off this romantic thriller set



in Ireland and Irish South Boston and peopled in part by the angelic and the purely evil. Neggers is a pro, author of more than fifty books, ten of

them *New York Times* best sellers. She unveils a series of personal secrets on the way to revealing whodunit, but skillfully keeps two of the best: she doesn't say whether supernatural forces are at work and, mischievously, she never tells the Irish tale on which much of the initial action is based.

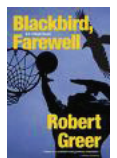
Natalie Jacobson McCracken

BLACKBIRD, FAREWELL

Robert Greer (SDM'73/'74, GRS'89)

Frog Books

IT'S THE WORLD of Greer's six previous C. J. Floyd mysteries: Denver's Five Points community — black, respectable, decidedly western,



and upwardly mobile working class. It has its share of thugs, and the cast is augmented by outsiders, mostly white and villainous. C. J.'s

godson, Damian, backed by other Floyd protégées, sets out to solve the murder of his best friend and longtime basketball teammate, and C. J. himself is only a name occasionally invoked until he comes riding to the rescue in the final pages. *NJM*

Nonfiction

EVE OF DESTRUCTION: THE COMING AGE OF PREVENTIVE WAR

Thomas M. Nichols (CAS'83)

University of Pennsylvania Press

AS OTHER CRITICS ponder the effects of America's invasion of Iraq on international norms of war, Nichols, a United States Naval War College professor, argues that preventive force didn't make its debut with Operation Iraqi Freedom. Nichols bypasses the

standard debate, so common since March 2003, of whether the West has a right to counter threats before they materialize.



Instead, he builds a case for the idea that prevention is already the post-Cold War reality,

and suggests how preventive action might best be managed for achieving international security. *Katie Koch*

AN EXACT REPLICA OF A FIGMENT OF MY IMAGINATION

Elizabeth McCracken (CAS'88, GRS'88)

Little, Brown and Company

WRITING POWERFULLY ABOUT one



of the saddest things imaginable, the death of her nearly born baby, McCracken is sometimes improbably, bleakly funny. In the French

hospital where she and her husband learn that their boy, forever known by his *in utero* name, Pudding, has died in the ninth month of pregnancy, a bungled translation provides the odd comfort of black humor. "I will always be a woman whose first child died, and I won't give up either that grievance or the bad jokes of everyday life," she writes. As she chronicles her carefree first pregnancy, her cavernous loss, and her caution-filled (and ultimately successful) second pregnancy, you understand that she's fulfilled that vow. *Bari Walsh*

FAITHFUL TO FENWAY: BELIEVING IN BOSTON, BASEBALL, AND AMERICA'S MOST BELOVED BALLPARK

Michael Ian Borer (GRS'01/'06)

New York University Press

IF THE RED SOX are New England's one true religion, then it's not a stretch to view Fenway, the oldest functioning



ballpark in America, as a shrine worthy of serious study. Still, it's funny to imagine Borer, a sociologist and a New York native (don't worry,

he favors the Mets), sizing up Sox fans as if he were Dr. Livingstone peering down his nose at the natives. Yet he avoids much of the nostalgia and bravado that pervade popular

writing about Fenway in favor of an evenhanded approach that respects the zealotry of fans while questioning the authenticity of their famed park. *KK*

GOOD GUYS & BAD GUYS: BEHIND THE SCENES WITH THE SAINTS AND SCOUNDRELS OF AMERICAN BUSINESS (AND EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN)

Joe Nocera (COM'74)

Portfolio

IT'S TEMPTING TO pigeonhole America's corporate titans as good guys or bad guys — especially these days. But that wasn't Nocera's intent throughout his career as a business writer for publications such as *Fortune* and the *New York Times*. Nocera, now a *Times* business columnist, says his job has always been "to draw out the people and stories that fascinated me



and to show why things happened the way they did." In this collection of profiles, articles, and columns he's written in the last twenty-five

years, Nocera does just that. His subjects range from Apple cofounder Steve Jobs (the bounce to his step "betrays a certain youthful cockiness; the quarterback of your high school football team used to walk that way," he writes in a 1986 profile) to one-time junk bond king Michael Milken ("greedy beyond belief"). In the end, Nocera acknowledges, "Journalism is a profession that, by its nature, searches for heroes and goats — good guys and bad guys — and my journalism is no exception." *Cynthia K. Buccini*

THE PRESIDENTIAL BOOK OF LISTS: FROM MOST TO LEAST, ELECTED TO REJECTED, WORST TO CURSED

Ian Randal Strock (CAS'89)

Villard Books

IN A CAMPAIGN season of firsts — come November, we will have our first African-American president or our oldest president to enter office and our first female vice president —



it's easy to forget that there were presidential groundbreakers before now. Take Grover Cleveland, still the only president to marry while

in office, or Andrew Johnson, the only president without any formal education (he taught himself to read as an adult). Hundreds of examples like these are in Strock's collection of lists, a necessary addition to the libraries of American history buffs and *Jeopardy!* hopefuls alike. *KK*

SCHOOL SHOOTINGS: WHAT EVERY PARENT AND EDUCATOR NEEDS TO KNOW TO PROTECT OUR CHILDREN

Joseph A. Lieberman (CFA'69)
Citadel Press

THIS ACCOUNT OF school shootings over four decades makes vivid an undeniable truth: they are horrifyingly, increasingly frequent. Denial is, in fact, part of the message here — the ongoing denial of parents, classmates, schools, even communities, whose watchfulness might have prevented tragedy. Lieberman's concluding advice summarizes the lessons implicit throughout the book: be aware of the



warning signs, control guns as individual parents and as a nation, actively oppose bullying, teach students that when they

report worrisome behavior they are protecting, not betraying, a schoolmate, and hold school shooting drills as regularly as fire drills. *NJM*

SERIAL KILLERS AND SADISTIC MURDERERS: UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

Jack Levin (COM'65, GRS'68)
Prometheus Books

LEVIN, THE BRUDNICK Professor of Sociology and Criminology at Northeastern University and a retired FBI profiler, has been studying serial killers for more than twenty-five years and has interviewed many, their families, friends, and victims. Serial murderers generally plan carefully and coolly and kill not for money or revenge, but



for power and perhaps fame. They are most often depressed, controlling loners. Still, Levin says, parents, neighbors, and teachers are to be blamed

only for their failure to seek help for the hundreds of thousands of such unhappy, but nearly always harmless, individuals. *NJM*

Entering the Fray ///

The women journalists who fought to cover Vietnam

BY NATALIE JACOBSON MCCrackEN

Back in the 1960s, when fortunate women reporters covered local cultural events and the rest wrote about cooking, child rearing, and fashion for what were called women's sections, the first of some seventy American women journalists were officially sanctioned to cover the war in Vietnam. That in itself was an achievement. Most newspapers and wire services were, at best, reluctant to send women to the front. Freelancers, required to prove that two news organizations would buy their work, presented documentation from such outlets as *Iron Age* and *Goddard College News*. Permission from the military was even harder to come by; a not-untypical officer refused to allow one young woman access to battle because she reminded him of his daughter. Still, inspired by the words of grandmothers, mothers, or teachers, the changing role of women, political interests, or simply their independent spirit, women reporters went to war.

Until now, published accounts of that war, almost entirely by men, have largely ignored these women or spoken briefly of, for instance, "girl reporters" observing battle from a downtown Saigon rooftop bar. "I

wanted to give these women their rightful place," says Joyce Hoffman (COM'73), author of *On Their Own: Women Journalists and the American Experience in Vietnam* (Da Capo Press, 2008).

Writing the book, in effect a collection of vivid biographies, took eleven years and more than 100 interviews. Hoffman traveled twice to Vietnam and conducted interviews in Japan, Paris, Prague, and Munich. When one reporter would neither talk to her nor allow her family to, Hoffman "spent a whole week in the wasteland of Nebraska," to get a sense of growing up on a Nebraska farm in the forties and fifties.

The fifteen women she focuses on ranged from ardent "anti-Communist, bomb-them-back-to-the-Stone-Age" hawks to traditional midcentury reporters who accepted official U.S. pronouncements and revealed nothing of their own opinions to ardent doves, increasingly distraught over American policy. Some became tough-minded, foul-mouthed, and battle-soiled; some wore short skirts and plenty of makeup. None, in that consciousness-raising age, called herself a feminist. "They were too busy doing other things," says Hoffman.



Joyce Hoffman (COM'73)

One was killed on Marine maneuvers; the others came back and continued at least for a while as reporters or photojournalists. All were affected by their Vietnam experiences, Hoffman says. "Like the men, some of them never got over it. Gloria Emerson is probably the best example of that; life was never the same for her after her tour as a *New York Times* correspondent."

Now a member of the Old Dominion University faculty and public editor of the *Virginian-Pilot*, Hoffman hopes to interest a documentary filmmaker in a project about Emerson, who won a National Book Award for her 1977 book about the Vietnam War, *Winners and Losers*.

Times change, nudged by such women as these Vietnam correspondents. Many female reporters are now in Iraq, Hoffman says. "I'm going to send them each a book. I want them to know they're standing on the shoulders of these women." ■