PAPER TITLE

Fedora Hats and the Great Gazoo:

Pop Culture References in Robert J. Sawyer's novel
Triggers and Red Planet Blues.

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INTRODUCTION

Any paper analyzing the use of pop cultural references in a specific work or works had best start with a great deal of narrowing, after all, one of John Storey's definitions of pop culture, "is the culture which is left over after we have decided what is *high* culture" (5). And that is many magnitudes too large for this presentation. The topic at hand is Robert J. Sawyer's use of pop cultural references in the contemporary novel Triggers, and in the futuristic novel Red Planet Blues, and the implied question is, 'What does Sawyer do that's different than other writers?' To this end, routine references used simply to establish the fictional world and connect it to our world are excluded. There are many other ways in which pop cultural references

are used, but I will focus on two important ways Sawyer uses these references.

POP CULTURAL MAJOR PLOT ELEMENTS

The first important way that Sawyer uses pop cultural references are as significant plot elements. Red Planet Blues is modeled on the Klondike Gold Rush, which, in a sense was a pop cultural phenomenon. One hundred thousand people from all over the continent flooded into the frigid Yukon and formed their own culture for four years. Little of that contemporary culture, beyond Jack London, has been chosen as high culture; though the cultural event is still revered in literature today. Sawyer sets up a parallel situation in his novel; in fact the working title was 'The Great Martian Fossil Hunt' which parses similarly to the Great Klondike Gold Rush. Sawyer's purpose here is simple. As he said in an interview, "regardless of the setting of a science fiction novel it is always about the time in which it was written" (23 July 2011).

The city of New Klondike on Mars, years after the major fossil finds have played out, ***is*** the Yukon, and perhaps Canada, long after the gold rush. In case there's any doubt, in the Acknowledgements of the novel, Sawyer notes the importance of his "time in the Yukon--living across the dirt road from Robert Service's cabin, and just a block

from Jack London's old home" (vii-viii). As on homage, the novel opens with an epigraph that rewrites Service's poem "The Cremation of Sam McGee" to foreshadow the events on New Klondike. I suggest that Sawyer's goal of positioning the reader to see the story as an allegory for the Yukon allowed him to "explore the madness and greed that drives stampedes of [Wall Street] prospectors" (Sawyer Red viii) today, and conduct this exploration without provoking political extremists and free-market zealots. In this sense, he uses a pop cultural reference as a distraction to allow him more freedom for his greater purpose.

But we're talking about Robert J. Sawyer, a writer who is always ready to give the reader an extra idea or two as lagniappe. Beyond the gold rush, Sawyer has written Red Planet Blues as a noir hard-boiled detective novel, strongly modeled on the 1941 film version of The Maltese Falcon, thereby combining pop culture of the 1940's and the late 1890's. On April 11, 2013 Sawyer noted that forensics and DNA analysis have robbed the detective novel of much of its power, and he suggested that historical and futuristic detective novels have more potential for entertainment. In this novel he set out to connect the historical and futuristic time settings. In the novel's framework a key element of his homage are frequent references to two iconic noir items, an archaic Smith & Wesson revolver, and a non-existent fedora

hat. The fedora references bring the reader back to Humphrey Bogart's portrayal of Sam Spade just as the shape and speech of Gargantuan Gargalian evokes Sydney Greenstreet's portrayal of Kaspar Gutman in the film. Sawyer once noted that "every year a new generation of university discover Humphrey Bogart. 2087? There will be Bogart fans there" (5 April 2013).

Most of this paper assumes Sawyer's exceptional intentionality as an author, but the choice of a Smith & Wesson revolver may be the exception to the assumption. According to the Internet Movie Firearms Database, Spade is seen using only Colt automatic pistols in The Maltese Falcon. If this is in fact an exception to Sawyer's typical intentionality, I hope we can excuse it. As Sawyer himself notes, "I don't know shit about firearms. I am Canadian to the core" (7 April 2013). More on that later.

INTRUSIVE CHUNKS

When Sawyer uses pop cultural references in this fashion, they permeate the work. But the second unusual way that Sawyer uses them is by dropping in isolated and intrusive anecdotes that are one-offs. Sawyer told me once over dinner that one of his favorite pop cultural references was using The Great Gazoo to explain a point in Triggers (10 November 2012). The Great Gazoo was a character in

the early 1960's animated prime-time television series The Flintstones. In Triggers, Sawyer's character cites the reason that Gazoo was banished to Stone Age earth, "He'd invented the ultimate weapon, [...] A button that if pressed would destroy the entire universe. So his people sent him somewhere with primitive technology so he could never build anything like that again" (283-4).

While The Flintstones are a widely recognized pop culture standard, Sawyer does not expect many readers to get the specific reference. He hedges the reference by having the character think, "he rather suspected that hardly anyone beside him remembered" (283) why Gazoo was banished. Using the origin of The Great Gazoo at an emotional high point of the novel is risky, but obviously Sawyer finds it worth the gamble.

This is notedly an interdisciplinary conference, and at this point I want to draw from psychology. Martin H. Erickson was renowned for using anecdotes as a form of therapy. I am not yet suggesting that Sawyer is attempting any such thing with his anecdotes. Instead I want to note that Erickson was also renowned for his steadfast belief that the human brain is always listening, regardless of whether it is asleep, distracted, or in a trance. Sawyer's anecdotes appear to be distractions, testimonials to geek credibility, or bridges between his fictional universe and our universe. But taking a cue from Erickson,

let's see what it is the reader hears regardless of the other motives for the anecdotal insertion.

In Triggers Sawyer chose to pull his readers from the setting of 2016 back to October 1965 ("Great") when viewers first learned of Gazoo. 1965 was at the heart of both the Cold War, and an era of terrorism that produced stunning political assassinations with John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963; Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 4, 1968; and Robert F. Kennedy on June 6, 1968. While Sawyer has distracted the reader from his call for pacifism today, he has also positioned the reader to see a world with history going in both directions. Why is this important? Because the reader is reminded that fifty years ago we almost all believed the world was going to end. And Sawyer's message in a novel exploring assassination and terrorism, is that there will be a tomorrow despite the tragedies of today. So, with a nod to Erickson, maybe that is a form of therapy, after all.

HISTORY AND SAWYER'S POP CULTURE

Let me go in another direction. References such as fedora hats and The Great Gazoo are limited to individual novels, but Sawyer's frequent references to Star Trek travel throughout his work. In Trash Culture, Richard Keller Simon proposes that Star Trek, through "its

denigration of the past and love of the future" (140) reverses the process of Gulliver's Travels which denigrates the future. Sawyer is at neither of these extremes. The recognition of things that did not work out in the past, and a love of the future, may relate to Sawyer's frequent use of pop culture, but Sawyer does not denigrate the past just because it did not always work out well. If Storey is correct, and pop culture is the rejects of high culture, then all of pop culture in some way did not work out. Sawyer does not believe this. Instead he says, "the best of pop culture endures. Not just the zeitgeist is captured" (5 April 2013). And, to be honest, Sawyer does not limit himself to the *best* of pop culture. The first appearance of The Great Gazoo is famously considered the point at which The Flintstones jumped the shark. (And I note that jumping the shark is a pop cultural phrase that Sawyer enjoys.) Sawyer writes with a love of the future, but also saves some love for the pop culture of the past.

DISTRACTION VERSUS REALISM

Another purpose of Sawyer's pop cultural references is to remove a specific stumbling block to realism. Speaking of Triggers, Sawyer said "SF exists in my SF universe. It's lack is unrealistic" (10 November 2012). In fact, I argue that one of the things that including pop cultural references in a science fiction novel does is admit that

science fiction novels *are* pop culture. Not pop culture of Storey's leftovers definition, but pop culture of Marshall W. Fishwick's 'intentionally wide appeal' definition (7). Speaking about Red Planet Blues, Sawyer said, "Noir exists in my noir novel" (11 April 2013). His argument is that the absence of pop culture is artificial and distancing from realism. It may be difficult to reconcile Sawyer's argument with his later comments at the same presentation when he said, "I don't think there is anything necessarily wrong with art acknowledging that it is art." This implies that *not* self-acknowledging art is okay. Clearly Sawyer was mincing words when he has taken a rather strong stand, at least in the case of pop cultural art, that art acknowledging itself as art is preferred.

I've suggested that his references distance the reader from the current world, while he argues that a lack of pop cultural references distances the reader from realism. Can these references both prevent unrealism while also distancing the reader from current events? Does the increased realism, or perhaps naturalism, compensate for pulling the reader out of the created universe of the novel and into her own past? The answer is different in different cases, and in the case of The Great Gazoo, the proffered therapy is a high payoff for any spacial or temporal dislocation.

TWICE RECASTING THE PAST

& QUESTIONS OF SELF-AWARENESS

If we accept that Sawyer's use of the Great Gazoo pulls the reader into the 1960's era of the Cold War and assassinations, than Triggers is operating in two timeframes, the 1960's and 2016, just as Red Planet Blues is operating in three timeframes the 1890's, 1940's and 2115. But Blues is an allegory placed over history while Triggers is merely a projection of a historical time into a new time. Blues has to work within the limitations of an allegory based on two historical pop cultural events. Triggers uses a pop cultural reference to tie history to the near future, but Triggers is not limited by allegory. Instead it is limited by its near future setting and a commitment to realism.

This may be splitting hairs, but I do not believe highly mimetic art to be on the same footing regarding the use of pop culture as the footing of intentionally artificial art such as The Flintstones. In writing Triggers, Sawyer attempted to maximize realism excepting his one fantastic but well-researched component of shared memory. The reader is positioned to see her own world in a nearly contemporary story, and to see it with a high level of realism. In writing Red Planet Blues, Sawyer stepped away from rigid realism not only by embracing many futuristic components, but also by choosing the inherently

subjective view of the first person narrator. If Plato and Aristotle were around to argue today, they would agree that Triggers is much closer to mimesis, and Red Planet Blues to diegesis. Red Planet Blues is a self-aware work of popular culture, and will remain so, even if it ascends to also become a piece of high culture. Because of the artificiality, the reader is positioned to accept the temporal displacement of references moving between the 1890's, 1940's, and 2115 (14 April 2013) the year in which Red Planet Blues is set. She has offered up an appropriate suspension of disbelief. In short, much of Blues is actually dependent on pop culture as contrasted with Triggers, which seems to use it primarily to avoid a lapse in realism.

CONCLUSION

The point here is that putting The Great Gazoo into Triggers is a much greater gamble than the fedora hat. If the same point were made without the Gazoo reference, the reference would not be missed. Then why take the gamble? Cultural inclusiveness. Because Sawyer is "Canadian to the core" (7 April 2013).

In each novel the effect of the pop cultural references is to position the reader such that she sees a world that is inclusive of cultural levels that are usually excluded from non-niche fiction. This refers back to Sawyer's genuine love of popular culture, but it also fits

in with his consciously Canadian persona. Sawyer would extend Canadian inclusiveness not just to citizens and their cultures, but to all cultures. Simon argues that "Star Trek is Gulliver's Travels for the American empire" (140). I suggest that the novels of Robert J. Sawyer are Star Trek for the Canadian Dominion. Instead of presenting a single universe of high tolerance of aliens and a love of the future, Sawyer presents diverse universes with appreciation for all artistic endeavors, and a love of all times. In the end Sawyer would have us consider Robert Service, Jack London, The Maltese Falcon and the Great Gazoo in the same spirit as Shakespeare, Hugh MacLennan, and Alice Munro, as different colored stones in the Canadian cultural mosaic.

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