

***Time Ships* by Stephen Baxter, *The Wind-Up Girl* by Paolo Bacigalupi, and *Children of the Sky* by Vernor Vinge**

As you may recall, we left the Time Traveler in 1891, after just recounting to his friends his trip into the far future, where he encountered the child-like Eloi and the gruesome Morlocks, who fed on the Eloi for supper. Feeling guilty and despondent over losing Weena (an Eloi) in the dark woods of the distant future (802,701 AD), the Time Traveler, after telling his story, disappears again. Perhaps he intends to go back and save Weena?

Now let us assume that one of the Time Traveler's friends in 1891 is a writer, who takes copious notes on the Time Traveler's tale and writes it out as a book and publishes it. The writer is H. G. Wells and the book published in 1895 (which is indeed an accurate chronicle of the Time Traveler's fantastic tale) is *The Time Machine*.

This is exactly where we now take up the tale again. The Time Traveler sets out once more into the future to rescue Weena. But as he is traveling through thousands upon thousands of years he begins to notice that the unfolding future does not appear the same, as on the first trip, and in the year 657,208 AD, he stops the machine. The earth is dark and cold and there is no sun or stars in the sky. His first trip—his recounting of the trip to his friends, including Wells, and the subsequent publication of *The Time Machine*—have changed future history.

This is the beginning of Stephen Baxter's science fiction novel *The Time Ships*, the sequel to Wells' *The Time Machine*. It is the best science fiction novel I have read in years—indeed, one of the best science fiction novels I have ever read. We travel to a war-ravaged Europe in the 1930s where the First World War never ended; we travel fifty million years into the past, where humans create a colony and begin an entirely different human history on the earth; we travel to a future where the Morlocks are cerebral, scientific, and peaceful and the Eloi are warlike, but on a scale almost incomprehensible in scope and carnage; and finally we travel in “time ships” to the beginning of time—the Big Bang—where our A.I. descendants from one of our far distant futures create an infinite and eternal universe. What a cosmic trip! I highly recommend this novel.

Two other noteworthy science fiction novels I have read in the last few months are *The Wind-Up Girl* by Paolo Bacigalupi, last year's Hugo and Nebula winner for best science

fiction novel of the year, and *The Children of the Sky* by Vernor Vinge, his sequel to his epochal science fiction classic *A Fire Upon the Deep*. *The Wind-Up Girl* is a dark, gritty, and highly visceral tale that takes place in Bangkok, Thailand in the 23rd century; the heroine, Emiko, a wind-up girl, is a genetically engineered “pleasure doll” seeking freedom from the exceedingly corrupt, brutal, and treacherous city in which she is repeatedly, cruelly, and quite graphically humiliated and enslaved. A complex story—with a host of conniving, nefarious characters—not for the faint of heart.

In Vinge’s new novel, he takes up and further develops his depiction of a world of “pack-minds,” where the aliens are groups of dog/wolf-like creatures who think as single conscious minds; it is the pack that has an ego, a consciousness, and not the individual members. Again, Vinge excels at describing a truly alien form of intelligence and mentality, introducing in this new novel “choir minds,” and also, once again, he creates a host of interesting villains, human and other-wise.