

multiverse of electronic networks. Some reviewers have accused him of selling out to an easy popular genre, but Stephenson is no Tom Clancy. In common with other writers of techno-thrillers, he tends to stress the individual versatility of his characters at the expense of institutional involvement in the search for the terrorists. However, he doesn't do this in any escapist spirit. In fact, characters are repeatedly shown to be embedded in their own cultural histories as well as the financial and informational networks of the present. For instance, as the novel approaches a final showdown with Jones, a community of former Vietnam protesters in Idaho are drawn into the conflict. The shooting down of a warden's helicopter gives an imagistic reprise of Vietnam, whereas for Sokolov the arduous cross-country tracking recalls his experiences in Afghanistan. Broadly speaking Stephenson describes a challenge to an already precarious social and commercial order through the terrorists and the final scene of thanksgiving at an isolated Christian farm seems to re-establish that order a la Stephen King, but the novel leaves it unclear how many jihadis might remain in the USA and the ethic mix of characters reflects Stephenson's careful balancing act between the local and the global.

Reamde breathes new life into a metaphor as old as spy fiction itself – that of the great game. He extends the notion of game-playing beyond the central characters into a collective act of speculation which includes all readers. Game-playing in other words becomes an analogue of processing the novel itself. At every point strategy becomes crucial and we watch over the shoulders of the main characters to assess their skill in reading situations and second-guessing the next moves of their antagonists. It says a lot for Stephenson's skill at managing the pace of Reamde that our curiosity never flags. It also shows his media savvy in making one of Richard Forthrust's first sources of anxiety a Wikipedia entry about himself of unknown authorship. Within months of the novel's first publication in 2011 Wikipedia entries about Stephenson's characters have proliferated as if they have a life of their own.

The Beast with Nine Billion Feet

By Anil Menon (Young Zubaan, 2009, 259 p, £11.99)
Reviewed by Paul March-Russell

Anil Menon is perhaps best known to sf readers through his story, "Into the Night" (2008), the sympathetic portrayal of an elderly father unable to accept the realities of a technological future. The story was first published in the "mundane sf" edition of *Interzone* and has been reprinted several times since. Realism laced with elegy, the social effects of advanced technology and generational unease are also present in Menon's enjoyable debut novel.

Which is not to say that readers familiar with the short fiction will find the novel predictable.

Beginning with its title, the novel as it were wrong-foots the reader. It sounds like a hyperbolic, possibly tongue-in-cheek rendering of some kitschy B-Movie horror or sf film title (*The Beast from 25,000 Fathoms*, *The Beast with Five Fingers*). We learn that it refers to the global population – the nine billion people who inhabit the earth of 2040 AD – and that the events described in the novel will affect not just the main characters but all of humanity. This revelation is a long way-off from where the novel begins and our first sight of one of the protagonists, Tara. It might be thirty years into the future but her concerns are amongst those that any present-day adolescent would recognise – family arguments, school, boredom, acne. The novel is published by the junior division of Zubaan Books, celebrated in India as a pioneering feminist press. Menon is as effective here in capturing the inner life of a female teenager as he was in evoking the bewilderment and obstinacy of an elderly man in "Into the Night". His writing is clear, direct and witty: "That's another thing, Tara. Do stop using words like "discombobulate" and "quakebuttock" in the student magazine. I've been getting some complaints." Menon slips in reference to "the Pune weather" but, despite the Indian location, the appeal of the novel is universal.

So far, so much fun, but what has any of this to do with sf? Maybe we get an inkling when Tara has to flash her ID card to enter the complex of bungalows where she lives. It's a gated community – the milieu of J.G. Ballard's later novels – but we are now so used to the concept that we pass on by. Equally, "PerfectSkin" sounds like the invented name for any everyday dermatological product; only later do we recognise the theme of perfection and that its invention might be related to the genetic engineering technologies that underwrite the plot. Aunt Sita, with whom Tara and her brother live following the death of their mother and the more recent disappearance of their father, busies herself making chai and bhajias while Tara's friend, Chitra, tries to persuade her of the merits of Molecular Cosmetology. It is only when the House interrupts this domestic routine by addressing a visitor in "the snooty butler-ish tone it adopted with outsiders" that we realise we are in a radically different reality from our own. A

fully automated building with an artificial intelligence of its own is not new in science fiction but Menon's personification of the House as a kind of Malvolio figure (the novel begins with reference to another of Shakespeare's plays, *Romeo and Juliet*) refreshes the cognitive estrangement of the device. But the element of defamiliarisation seems to be only one of Menon's intentions both here and elsewhere in the novel. Its use is neither as absurd as in, say, Philip K. Dick's *Ubik* nor as obviously satirical as in Douglas Adams's *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Instead, having arrested our attention, Menon's overall aim is to draw his readers further into his future society. He has deliberately laid out Tara's narrow world with all the familiarity of TV youth soaps like *Beverly Hills, 90210* in order for us to accept not the possibility but the inevitable likelihood of artificial intelligences within a domestic setting. Menon's future is neither one of shock (dystopia) nor awe (utopia) but something in-between, both pragmatic and experiential, a lived reality that his characters already inhabit and to which we are invited.

This immersion into a fully convincing reality might seem to be the epitome of mundane sf – no FTL travel here to worry scientifically conscientious readers – but Menon's attempt at believability is of more significance than that. Firstly, he can be seen as tackling an aesthetic question – one of realism – that characterised the work of such sf progenitors as Edgar Allan Poe, Jules Verne and H.G. Wells (the holy trinity of writers cited by Hugo Gernsback) while, secondly, Menon's invitation to his readers to participate in the lived reality of the novel complements other examples of postcolonial or world sf (Lauren Beukes's *Zoo City* is an obvious recent instance) where such participation has an overriding ethical and political imperative. To experience Tara's reality is to submit to how technology is affecting – and is likely to affect – the citizens of the world's so-called tiger economies. Being only thirteen, Tara has never experienced another world: she is already in the frontline of technological innovation and its socio-cultural effects.

Consequently, although Menon's use of his teenage protagonists makes for an accessible read, in particular, for his target audience, his novel is of sufficient depth to appeal to an older readership as well. Having established his future world, he quickly advances the plot. Tara meets the mysterious siblings, Ria and Francis, who have recently arrived in the neighbourhood with their mother Mandira. Next, we encounter Tara's brother, Adi, who works as a janitor at the hi-tech fitness and entertainments business, BodZ, and uses their virtual reality "illusion pods" to take part in a secret genome project based on an artificial island in the South Pacific. Although highly intelligent, Adi is illiterate – the discrepancy will only be explained with the reappearance of his father, a brilliant geneticist who has vanished after falling foul of India's agri-businesses. Inexorably, the plot will hinge upon the origins of Adi and of Ria and Francis, and the convergence of their mutual storylines, with Tara discovering the exciting – and dangerous – life that she has craved.

To structure his deployment of parallel and interlocking storylines, Menon makes effective use of doubles and mirror-images. In so doing, he touches upon familiar sf tropes, such as the perversion of nature embodied within the Frankenstein myth and the question of truth versus falsehood, beloved of authors such as Dick and the cyberpunk sub-genre. However, Menon also grounds his use of the *doppelgänger* within literary allusions to the warring families of *Romeo and Juliet* and to *Tweedledum and Tweedledee* from Lewis Carroll's *Alice through the Looking-Glass*. These references place his text into a wider set of discourses other than sf, with ensuing questions that surround the themes of family, identity and creation, and which contribute to the universality of his fiction. It is again interesting to compare Menon with Beukes, in particular, the post-cyberpunk motifs in the latter's debut novel, *Moxyland*, and the visceral horror at the abuse and manipulation of children in *Zoo City*. Although Menon's target readership means that he has to curb the full extent of his critique, he nevertheless makes profitable use of other aspects of the Frankenstein story – which may have been of possible appeal to his publisher's feminist agenda – namely, anxieties surrounding reproduction and birth, the technologisation of natural processes by a masculine, scientific discourse, and the irresponsibility of parents towards their offspring.

Menon's novel may be simply and clearly written but, without divulging the ending, he offers no simple solutions. As in "Into the Night", his novel hovers ambivalently between cautionary warning and keen embrace of the future. The ambivalence is nicely caught by Tara's reaction to being told that the transport she is about to travel in has synthetic emotions: "Tara was almost afraid to insert her body into so alive a machine." Nevertheless, the future beckons us in and Menon effectively performs his role of bridging this world with ours. Although written for a juvenile audience, his debut novel has a universal appeal and should be read by anyone interested in the current state of sf. He has created a convincing future reality into which he invites the reader. Besides universality, a keynote of Menon's writing is accessibility – often seen in some quarters (with justification) as a synonym for simplification – but there is nothing simplistic about either Menon's characters or narrative. By constructing his future as a lived reality, he immerses the reader and invites him/her to explore its complexities for themselves. Writing on the World SF Blog in 2010 ("World Building in a Hot Climate"), Menon argued for an improvement in the content of Indian science fiction written – at least – within the English language. His accessible novel, in the best sense of that term, brings that improvement a little closer by making its ideas available to all.

Paul March-Russell teaches Comparative Literature at the University of Kent. He edits the SF Storyworlds series published by Gylphi and is currently writing *Modernism and Science Fiction* for Palgrave Macmillan.