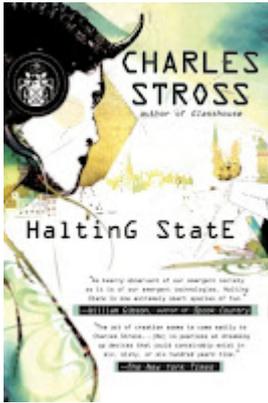


Review: Halting State



A friend recently lent me Charles Stross' novel *Halting State* to read. What a fantastic little book. I fell in love with its world.

Being set in the year 2017 and involving lots of technology many would say that this book would best placed on the “sci-fi” shelves. Really, though, the plot genre for this book would best be described as “whodunnit.” It’s a story that involves a computer programmer, a forensic accountant, a police sergeant, spies, criminals, money laundering, espionage, murder and intrigue. You get carried along on intertwining storylines slowly twisting, turning, interacting and opening up with false leads and deadends until its all finally collapsed in the last chapter.

But the plot isn’t the value of this book. The value of this book lies in the world that it envisions. Set only ten years in the future the use of technology and its sociological implications is nothing if not *feasible* but sufficiently “wow” to stir the imagination. Recently I’ve been working with some others on some scenario planning – imagining the world in twenty years time. This book does a better job of that sort of thing than our feeble attempts.

In this world the basic premise of technology is “augmented reality.” I don’t mean *virtual* reality (like what you see in *The Matrix* or *Neuromancer*) although there is a bit of that. Rather imagine an amalgamation of Next-G mobile phones, publicly accessible free mobile networking, and wearing glasses that “overlays” things over what you can see. Right

now, in 2008, I can go to my mobile phone and it will give me a map of my current location and directions to where I want to go. In 2017 Stross imagines my phone telling my glasses to augment my reality so that arrows and markers appear “magically” on the actual landscape in front of me to assist me with my navigation. Information stores are placed, almost literally, into the real world in front of you. Googling interacts with real life. Imagine a world where when you meet someone again after an initial introduction that next to their face appears, “magically,” their name and perhaps something akin to their facebook profile. Imagine a world where virtual hairstyles and clothes etc. are overlaid on top of real people and online games take place as sidebars to life.

In the book, one of these augmented reality overlays is called “CopSpace” and is an information overlaid on reality for police purposes only. I’ll give you a sneak preview:

“CopSpace sheds some light on matters, of course. Blink and it descends in its full glory. Here’s the spiralling red diamond of a couple of ASBO cases on the footpath (orange jackets, blue probation service tags saying they’re collecting litter). There’s the green tree of signs sprouting over the doorway of number thirty-nine, each tag naming the legal tenants of a different flat. Get your dispatcher to drop you a ticket, and the signs open up to give you their full police and social services case files, where applicable. There’s a snowy blizzard of number plates sliding up and down Bruntsfield Place behind you, and the odd flashing green alert tag in the side roads. This is the twenty-first century, and all the terabytes of CopSpace have exploded out of the dusty manila files and into the real world, sprayed across it in a Technicolor mass of officious labelling and crime notices. If labelling the iniquities of the real world for all to see was enough to put an end to them, you could open CopSpace up as a public overlay and crime would vanish like a hang-over. (If only half the tags weren’t out-of-date,

and the other half was free of errors...)" (p82)

Stross' writing style is a bit quirky at times. The use of the second-person narrative throughout gets a bit of getting used to but it seems to be used as an ode to computer game plot-line scripts and works well, even when you find yourself having to constantly place yourself in a different character's shoes. A good example of the second-person style is this – just note that the "he" in this snippet will be the "you" in a few pages time:

"There's doubt in his voice, and suddenly you can see what's going through his mind: lying awake at night, next to your sleeping form, thinking morbid thoughts about the future, self-doubt gnawing at him – it's the mirror image of your own uncertainty, only he's externalizing it, projecting it on the big picture rather than worrying about his own prospects. So you swallow your cutting response and instead nod at him, encouraging. Maybe you can salvage something more than memories if you help him get this out of his system first."
(p272)

And then there's the occasional gem of geek-worthy word play that I simply admire:

"'Come on, let's get you patched up,' she says, taking a step backwards, and breaking whatever information transfer it was that was going on via some kind of sub-verbal mammalian protocol layer." (p190)

My friend said that in five years time this book will be out of date because the world will have proceeded along a path from which this world could never spring. I agree with him. Right now it portrays a world of the tantalising plausible impossible. It's enjoyable, light, easy, fun and left a smile on my face.

