

## The Write Stuff



### In the Bookstores... History of Science Made Fun

by Karen Shashok

*Neal Stephenson. Quicksilver (Volume One of the Baroque Cycle). London: Arrow Books (Random House Group), 2003. ISBN 0 09 941068 0 (Paperback)*

Since so many of us have crossed more than one cultural border on our way toward our chosen profession, it is probably safe to say we are comfortable working with more than one language, and in more than one area of knowledge. The profession, in fact, seems to contain a larger number of us than even we tend to assume who started out specializing in some area of the human or social sciences and ended up transposing our skills into scientific-technical-medical (STM) writing, whether out of necessity or out of curiosity about the so-called harder sciences.

#### **A queer amalgam of historical and biographical fact and fiction**

But regardless of whether your academic background is in experimental, exact, human or social sciences, this opus, a sometimes queer amalgam of historical and biographical fact and fiction, has something to delight everybody. Although some of you will have already heard more than you want to know about the acclaimed Baroque Cycle, be assured that this is just the sort of stuff that STM communication professionals (who tend to be curious about lots of other things besides the topics we handle in daily practice) are likely to enjoy. There is endless diversion for historians of science and technology, geographers, economists, ethicists and alchemists (I know you're out there!)

For readers who enjoy delving into the psychological relationships between characters, there are well-developed threads that show Stephenson to be an excellent contemporary novelist no matter how sceptical you may feel after all the hoop-la in the literary supplements. Particularly enthralling is the portrayal of the intimate personal and professional relationship between the brilliant but irascible and jealous Isaac Newton and the novel's fictitious protagonist Daniel Waterhouse, Puritan and pioneer in proto-computer programming. For fans of postmodernism there are blatant anachronisms, abrupt intrusions of contemporary English idiom and slang into otherwise carefully rendered 17th century speech, and romps through time that happily stomp all over our notions of continuity. I know; postmodernism can look like sloppiness disguised as art to those of us who were taught in school about good writing and critical reading, and there are times when I thought to myself "If I see that pedantic 'phant'sy' just one more time, I'll scream." But postmodernism as style is probably just a passing fad that will not do permanent damage to good written English expression, so try to ignore these minor, fashion-driven irritations and enjoy the story.

What I found best about *Quicksilver* was the way it documented the origins of the Royal

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Society by bringing its founding members to life in a believable way. The alliances, rivalries, quirks and personal biases Stephenson uses to animate eminent historical figures make their behaviour so like that of their contemporary scientific offspring that Wilkins, Wren, Boyle, Hooke, Newton and Oldenburg become human beings, as magnificent in their personal failings as they are in their historical achievements, rather than hallowed icons with unknowable and hence presumably impeccable ethics. (The great Newton vs. Leibniz controversy over who invented The Calculus is another part of the story, and yes, Leibniz himself makes an appearance, but you'll have to read the third volume of the cycle for that.) The mix of religion, politics, science and intrigue in England (and to a lesser extent, in France, Germany, and Russia) during the end of the 17th century and beginning of the 18th century is rendered not only understandable but also a pleasurable read for those of us who always wished we had time to learn more about the history of science (or just history, period).

**Best is how the founding members of the Royal Society are brought to life**

The Baroque Cycle has been classified in the big chain stores—rather inappropriately—as science fiction, probably because the author initially achieved fame as a cyberfiction writer. The full three volumes of the trilogy total about 2600 pages in paperback, but once it gets into your blood you can't stop turning the pages. The historical erudition is impressive, and the author duly acknowledges the very considerable assistance he received with the research and fact-checking. The characters and events are epic on a scale readers haven't seen since *The Odyssey*. At the deepest level, the Baroque Cycle is a thesis on how Western thought evolved during the bumpy transition from the Stuart dynasty to the Hanoverian dynasty in Britain, but if you're looking for an updated and greatly expanded Restoration comedy that's well written and makes the history of science fun, the 900-odd unputdownable pages of Quicksilver—the first of the three volumes comprising the full Baroque Cycle—will not disappoint you.

#### More information and further reading

Harmon JE, Gross AG. The Scientific Article: From Galileo's New Science to the Human Genome. Fathom. Available at <http://www.fathom.com/course/21701730/sessions.html> . Accessed 2 June 2005.

The Royal Society website is at [www.royalsoc.ac.uk](http://www.royalsoc.ac.uk) .

Stephenson N. *The Confusion*. (Volume Two of the Baroque Cycle). London: Arrow Books (Random House Group), 2004

Stephenson N. *The System of the World*. (Volume Three of the Baroque Cycle). London: William Heinemann (Random House Group), 2004

The Wikipedia entry for The Baroque Cycle is at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baroque\\_Cycle](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baroque_Cycle) . (Beware; Wikipedia entries can be habit-forming.)

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