

LEVIATHAN WAKES

(JAMES S. A. COREY)

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Leviathan Wakes is extremely well written, with a tight plot and carefully chosen prose. This alone separates it from the vast majority of today's science fiction. Nor is it tendentious message fiction, further separating it from most modern science fiction, which is all about the navel-gazing identity of the characters, mostly as thinly veiled metaphor for present-day political conflicts. Thus, the taut, straightforward story here has broad appeal, which is doubtless at least part of the reason it has been serialized into a TV series (on SyFy), called *The Expanse*. I haven't seen the series, but if it is reasonably faithful to the book, it is probably very much worth watching. Most importantly, it shows how a modern version of Manifest Destiny could work, a consummation devoutly to be wished.

Leviathan Wakes posits that it is around A.D. 2350, and that (courtesy of an ultra-efficient, semi-magical fusion drive), mankind has expanded into the solar system. Mars and Earth are independent but allied powers. The asteroid belt is colonized as a resource gathering site, economically anchored by the large bodies Ceres and Eros, which have been honeycombed with habitats and spun to provide artificial gravity. The moons of Jupiter and Saturn are sites for exploration and proto-colonization. Humans beyond Mars are not part of a political group as such (they seem to be formal citizens of no entity) but a shadowy rising power, the Outer Planets Alliance, claims to represent their rights. The story turns around diplomatic and armed conflict between Mars and the OPA, engineered by persons unknown, which draws Earth into the fray as well. Most of it takes place in the Belt, with a lot of action in space; Earth and Mars are not portrayed in any detail.

Thus, this is basically war fiction, mashed up with a type of film noir detective story, along with some fantastical elements revolving around the discovery of the first evidence of extrasolar life. As with most war fiction with a broad sweep, the historical period is really incidental to the story. Given that human beings are always going to human being, and the humans in *Leviathan Wakes* are not posthuman, the science fiction backdrop is not strictly necessary to the story. The

classic example of this characteristic of good science fiction is Frank Herbert's *Dune*, which could just as well have been set in a medieval setting, as far as the skeleton of its plot. In this book, the best historical analogue is probably nineteenth-century Western power politics, say after the Congress of Vienna—a time before ideology drove nations, though a time when ideology drove movements with an impact on nations, such as Russian anarchists or Serb nationalists. Here, there are no utopian political ideologies like Communism or Islamism; mankind has apparently dropped such silliness, or perhaps an outward-looking and outward-moving culture does not have time for such things. This helps with the plot, too—it's easier to write about how people make deals, because there is almost always a deal to be made when ideology is not the overriding concern, and nobody is screaming "Allahu Akbar!" as he tries to run you over in his spaceship.

The author, James S. A. Corey (actually a pseudonym for two co-authors), strives for realism in both the physical world and the societies depicted. As far as the technology, this is hard science fiction, with real-world limitations playing a plot role, although we are spared most of the technical detail common in that genre. Subluminal travel as described seems reasonably plausible. Naturally, weapons are everywhere, including free use of nuclear weapons in space, as well as railguns firing "Gauss rounds," together with Teflon-coated depleted uranium slugs shot from machine guns, "point defense cannon," similar to today's shipborne Phalanx, but bigger and better. Man-portable weapons and small arms are also universal. There is no silly Star Trek-type universal enforcement of law; there is some law, but every man must also look to himself, most of the time. And everyone has a constant fear of the destruction of larger human habitats, from entire planetoids to sections of planets, which has only not happened so far in this universe because of chance, fear of consequences, and inadequate incentive—but much of the plot revolves around the possible descent to such large scale killing. All this is entirely, I think, as it would be in real life.

Realism also rules on the societal side in the Belt. People act normally, within the broad spectrum of human activity, doing the good and bad things humans have always done and always will do. They form and re-form social groupings; they drink too much; they get married and divorced; they have religious beliefs. (Religion shows up less than it

probably would in real life—but a major plot device turns around the construction of an enormous generation starship for the Mormons by the Solar System's biggest general contractor, and a weary Protestant missionary makes an appearance as well.) Sexual deviants do not appear at all, a relief from the usual celebration of deviancy in modern science fiction, much of which appears to be have been commissioned by the so-called Human Rights Campaign. The Belt (and the outer planets) is apparently not a society with any room for affirmative action; it is a pure meritocracy, presumably because anything else materially increases the chances of getting killed, and affirmative action is a luxury of societies that have money and time to burn. No adult is on welfare. Where the old people are is unclear; children are referred to, including being wards of the state in some instances, and showing up on the fringes in some scenes, but where they fit in overall are is not clear. This is a gap, since a growing society, such as the Belt, must have a very high percentage of children, and pay a lot of attention to maintaining those children.

Some of this is perhaps a bit too socially optimistic, I think. There is less clannishness than is typical for frontier societies, although the way Belters look down on those born on the Inner Planets is well drawn (presumably the opposite is true, too, but it's not shown as much). Similarly, the Belt is a multicultural utopia. Not a stupid one organized around identity politics and supposed victim hierarchies, like a modern American university, but rather one where each culture contributes to the whole what enough people are interested in accepting—such as “Vietnamese power ballads” playing on a bar's sound system. No culture is dominant and there is a lot of blending. The habit that humans have of creating exclusionary groups based on racial hatred, for example Black Lives Matter, don't show up here. This sounds ideal, and not impossible, but perhaps, as I say, a bit too optimistic. All in all, though, with a few exceptions I'll discuss below when talking about human motivations, this is a reasonable view of what the frontier of solar system conquest might look like.

But what I really want to explore is whether we, modern humans, are likely to engage in such a conquest of the solar system at all. Americans commonly have a visceral, but not closely examined, belief that, in the title of Alfred Bester's classic 1950s science fiction novel, *The Stars [Are] My Destination*. That is, we believe that we are, in the nature of things,

progressing toward some version of this future, by fits and starts, perhaps, but generally in this direction. Despite no forward progress in manned space flight for more than fifty years, and in fact very substantial regression, we want to believe, and do believe, that in the foreseeable future, we'll colonize the solar system and even go beyond that. I am very partial to this vision, and I think that manned space flight (and any kind of space exploration) is a cheap way to greatly increase societal unity, which should be aggressively encouraged and pursued. But I am not at all sure that there is any basis in reality for such optimism.

On a psycho-historical basis, I'm not really sure where this confident American belief in future human expansion, which I think still widely exists, comes from. As far as I know, it is purely or largely an American belief—I don't know if anyone has ever examined this in detail, but I am fairly sure that no other culture thinks in these terms to the degree that Americans do, though a few people in every culture must. Thus, China and India aspire to some space exploration—to duplicate what we did fifty years ago, not for its own sake, but so that they can make the case they have "arrived." Nothing more. That is not the same thing; it is copying by those catching up and tired of being in second place. Maybe they'll take the place of the West, but I doubt it, and there is no indication that they will, or that their cultures have the outward looking characteristics that drove America's glory days.

Perhaps the American belief is the modern version of Manifest Destiny, which unfortunately, for no good reason, has a bad odor today. The roots of Manifest Destiny and the related American westward expansion lie not so much in what we usually think of as our founding story, the War of Independence, but deeper, in the days of Spanish colonization. We celebrate Columbus Day in this light. To quote President Trump's recent declaration, "The voyage was a remarkable and then-unparalleled feat that helped launch the age of exploration and discovery. The permanent arrival of Europeans to the Americas was a transformative event that undeniably and fundamentally changed the course of human history and set the stage for the development of our great Nation." (By "we celebrate," I mean the people who are relevant to the future progress, if any is to be made, of our society, not, um, the others, who can be easily recognized by their hostility to Columbus Day.)

Thus, the American belief in a spacefaring future is, I think, a combination of our centuries-old belief in the principles of Columbus Day with the technological optimism of the 1950s. Once we read *Tom Swift and His Cosmotron Express*, and thought it depicted the near future. We were told that we would vacation on Saturn within the twentieth century, and we believed it (well, I didn't, since I wasn't alive at the time). The standard response among the highbrow is that this feeling was just a brief moment in time, a unique combination of circumstances, where the United States winning a war, followed by world dominance, and economic boom across all classes, along with increased freedom for nearly everyone, created a feeling of limitless opportunity, as Yuval Levin argues in *The Fractured Republic*. But this is not true, because a belief in Manifest Destiny that created concrete action by millions of people not only had existed for decades, it had existed in various forms throughout American history, and before. Thus, the 1950s were not an aberration, other than with respect to space being added to the mix. Instead, they were merely the latest, and apparently the last, such manifestation in history, at least in the West (no such modern manifestation, of a core societal belief in expansionary Manifest Destiny, has ever existed in any modern non-Western culture, though the Mongols, and certain Islamic societies, arguably exhibited some of the same tendencies).

The international and overseas expansion of the West from 1500 to 1900 was, of course, unprecedented in human history. It was not driven by the Industrial Revolution (which only began around 1750); it was exemplified, perhaps, by the Spanish conquests of South and Central America, although the Dutch in the South Seas, as well as the Portuguese and the English, engaged in much the same behavior. As with all great human events, the masses had little or nothing to do with it—the expansion was initiated and driven by a tiny minority, usually wealthy monarchs and aristocrats, often working with religious leaders or zealots. They funded and encouraged, for a combination of motives, small groups of hard, greedy, and wildly ambitious young men, who took enormous risks leading other men across the oceans to likely death, to land on unknown shores, for their glory, the glory of God, and profit.

American Manifest Destiny was somewhat of a departure from this historical pattern. It did not have a top-down impetus, and was in large part conducted by individuals on their own initiative (with intermittent

government support in the form of military clearance and infrastructure such as railroads). Such an expansion is probably only possible overland, where the individual risk is easier to calibrate than setting off overseas. Moreover, it's not clear that expensive, ultra-dangerous initial expansions such as those of Spain, Portugal and England could ever work in a democracy. True colonization of that type requires long-term vision, constant hard decisions, and often a variety of behavior we, in our easy chairs ordering items for same-day delivery online, find unpleasant, because it is—but it's also necessary, and probably necessary that it be ordered from above, in cooperation with a minority of those willing to implement it at the risk of their lives.

All this is well known. But why did they do it, and what does that tell us of the world of *Leviathan Wakes*? I don't mean what drove men like Raleigh, Columbus, da Gama, Magellan, and so on. That's obvious—love of money, of God, of fame, of power, and of adventure, in varying degrees among each individual. But why did they risk everything for those goals? Obviously, because the next best alternative was worse. They were, to use the driest possible terms, maximizing their personal utility. That doesn't make such men necessarily good men—see, for example, that man of destiny and contradiction, Hernán Cortés, or Walter Raleigh's half-brother Humphrey Gilbert, who led butchery in Ireland, claimed Newfoundland for the English crown, and foundered in his ship in a storm, crying “We are as near to Heaven by sea as by land!” They were doing what worked for them, as they saw it.

The next best alternative of the great Cortés was a dull career as a relatively poor lawyer, which did not suit his personality or desires. But the problem this creates for the possible future depicted in this book is that in the future, the incentives are differently balanced. Someone like Cortés could do almost anything in the *Leviathan Wakes* universe, no matter where he was born. He would have a whole range of options. Why would he risk his life to go to space, where there are no riches to be made? He might find gold on an asteroid, if with enormous capital investment he went out to mine it, but that is hardly El Dorado. Nobody gets rich quick in this universe, or gets glory for landing on yet another identical spinning rock, or brings God and salvation to the savages. That is, of the traditional reasons for an individual to involve himself directly in Manifest Destiny, religion does not seem to drive these future

people (other than the Mormons). Money isn't it either—there are no instant riches portrayed, such as those that drove the Spanish (it is well known that “the physical attraction of gold exercised men's minds in those days in a way impossible now to recapture,” as Hugh Thomas outlines in *Rivers of Gold*); at most, people here have jobs that pay a mediocre amount. Fame isn't available, and ambition doesn't appear to be something that gets satisfied—there is no path to promotion by the monarch for uniquely good work, for the same reasons that money and fame aren't on the table. That leaves only adventure as the rationale, and there's not all that much adventure either, mostly crushing boredom and hard work. In sum, there is not enough on offer here to get millions of people to emigrate to space and chance a likely unpleasant death in exchange for the opportunity to be a grunt on an ice hauler, living inside a tube, operating machinery.

Corey's book seems to try to get around this by mentioning in passing that Earth has thirty billion people, with the implication that life is hard there, and that going into space is better. But an Earth with limitless free energy from fusion, and limitless cheap resources from the Belt, would be a paradise for thirty billion people. Even if that were not true, those people would have an enormous amount of alternatives to heading into space, such as simply immersing themselves in virtual reality. Sure, a few might choose space, but you need tens of millions to colonize in the way described. This suggests to me that none of this will ever happen. It is just not true that any significant percentage of the population has an inborn lust for adventure such that they will drop everything to go into space.

Related, and returning briefly to the societal realism of this book, the story does fall down badly in one area, which is in its portrayal of men and women as equally interested in the same things—namely, in masculine things. It is not fashionable to note that Manifest Destiny particularly requires, and relies on, the masculine virtues and talents of protecting and providing. That is also, perhaps, in these emasculated and stupid days, one reason why Manifest Destiny itself is unfashionable. The simple reality is that men, far more than women, are interested in what's depicted in this book: fighting, risk-taking, adventure and glory, as well as dangerous and physically demanding jobs—and that almost all, or perhaps totally all, of that difference in interests is due to biology.

Despite what the movies show us, no society has ever existed that had any relevant number of women who set off to seek for glory, or that has successfully had women in actual, direct participatory charge of a masculine environment such as war or mining. Women rulers over states have sometimes been successful, perhaps because they don't seek glory as much; no woman has ever been successful as a war leader in face-to-face battle. Men and women simply want, and are capable of, different things. For example, I doubt if a single female mercenary exists on Earth today, or has ever existed, yet that lifestyle is attractive to a non-trivial percentage of men—the same types who would have followed Cortés, or been any of the main characters in this book. Thus, when this book shows women as indistinguishable from men in their life and career choices, it falls down on the realism. (I focus here on choice, as dictated by biology. Totally separately, women should not fight, except in desperate circumstances, for teleological reasons. But that is another discussion.) In any case, this is a small fault in the book, all things considered.

I'd like to believe this is the future. I'm afraid, though, that our future is more likely to be stupid. It's more likely to be like the inward-looking society of *Idiocracy*. I suspect that wealth and mind-numbing alternatives are more attractive to humans than great adventures. That's too bad. Maybe there's a solution to what is in essence a side effect of massive wealth, the stagnancy of mankind, but if there is, it's not obvious to me.