

SEEING GOD

Bob Riedel

SEEK!

Rudy Rucker

Four Walls Eight Windows
39 West 14th Street, Room 503
New York, NY 10011
364 pages; cloth, \$35.00

SAUCER WISDOM

Rudy Rucker

Forge Books
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010
287 pages; cloth, \$23.95

In the summer of '78, I was freshly dropped out of college, maintaining a marginal existence in New York as a full-time taxi dispatcher and part-time actor. I also became a frequent customer at Baird Searles's now lost and lamented Science Fiction Book Shop on Eighth Avenue; during my tours of duty as the midnight shift dispatcher, Searles's wares served to fill the void between last call and rush hour at the rate of about a novel a night.

Science fiction in the late 70s was largely in listless thrall to "hard science" practitioners like Larry Niven, Jerry Pournelle, and Joe Haldeman, with a few bright humanistic glimmers: Thomas Disch was putting the finishing touches to *On Wings of Song*, and Philip K. Dick was still alive, pumping out his weirdly visionary late works in the wake of his "pink light" experience. Cyberpunk could scarcely have been a gleam in William Gibson's eye, and certainly figured in no one's version of 1984.

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Not that I was cognizant of these circumstances at the time—I only knew it was getting increasingly difficult to find anything on

Searles's well-stocked shelves that would keep me awake through the long New York night.

The snooze-urge was banished, though, the evening I bought and brought along a copy of the short-lived indie sci-fi magazine *UnEarth*. The summer issue contained the first installment of a first novel, *Spacetime Donuts*, by then-newcomer Rudy Rucker.

Donuts proved to be an oasis of fun in an otherwise somber desert; its "big idea"—that the scale of the universe is a torus where at some point the immeasurably macroscopic becomes the immeasurably microscopic—driven by cartoonish, pot-imbibing slackers (another yet-to-be-coined term) with a soundtrack by Frank Zappa and the Rolling Stones.

The slackers (or "Dreamers" in Rucker parlance) whiled away the hours plugged via sockets at the base of their skulls (shades of Gibson!) into "a vast network of computers and robots" called Phizwhiz. It was hip, humorous, and refreshing.

(Almost as interesting was the contributor's note, from which I learned that Rucker taught mathematics at the same state college where my father worked. During one of our irregular phone conversations, I mentioned to Dad that I'd been reading a story by one of his colleagues. "Rucker?" he said. "He's nuts!" That sealed it; I became a Rudy rooter on the spot.)

It would be nice to say that Rucker arrived with a bang, but in fact *Donuts* made a barely audible, if avant-, pop. *UnEarth*, facing financial difficulties, brought out the second installment (in an issue which let me know Rucker had been "fired from his post as mathematics professor"—ah, well...), then folded, leaving the story's ending in limbo.

I was heartened, then, in 1980 when his second novel, *White Light* (republished by

HardWired in 1997), made it to the shelves in one piece, courtesy of Ace Books, as a mass-market paperback original.

Subtitled “What Is Cantor’s Continuum Problem?,” *White Light* is less science fiction than math fiction, a fantasy in the tradition of Carroll’s *Alice* books and Edwin Abbott’s *Flatland*. It also marked Rucker’s first foray into what he’s come to term “transreal” writing: science-fictionalizing the people and events in his everyday life. The method derives in large part from the Beats that inspired him in his youth, especially Kerouac. (*All the Visions*, published dos-a-dos with a poetic sequence by Anselm Hollo in 1991, is an experiment in “spontaneous prose”: a one-hundred-plus-page, unparagraphed reverie of Rucker’s teenage years in Louisville, Kentucky. And he once explained his willingness to be associated with the cyberpunk movement by recalling a conversation with Allen Ginsberg: When he asked the poet how the Beats managed to get so much ink, Ginsberg answered, “Fine writing.”) *White Light*, to my lasting delight, tackled his tenure at “Bernco,” the college where he had been lately employed.

White Light got a warmer welcome than its predecessor; Disch called it “the most auspicious debut in the sci-fi field since I don’t know when.” Ace’s back-cover copy for *White Light* put the novel’s concerns in a nutshell: “Do you want to see God?” the banner blared.

Ten novels, four dense-but-readable nonfiction works, a story collection, assorted odd pieces and nearly twenty years later, Rucker is still on the cosmic prowl. In the introduction to his new volume of collected

nonfiction, *Seek!*, he could almost be responding to that old question: “I think *Seek!* makes sense as the name for this collection because seeking is very much something that I’ve done my whole life. I’ve always had a desire to push out to ultimate reality, to discover the Answer, to reach a union with the cosmic One.” An unabashed statement, off-putting and New Age-y to some critics, but no surprise coming from Hegel’s great-great-great-grandson.

Seek!’s title is a distillation of a Rucker imperative: “Seek ye the gnarl!”—the gnarl being that border-edge between randomness and order where the universe (and hence, life) is at its most vital and interesting. (I couldn’t

help but be reminded of Samuel R. Delany’s *Times Square Red*, *Times Square Blue*—another recent nonfiction book by another sci-fi writer—in which he posits that the most meaningful and rewarding life relationships come not through an intentional practice of “networking,” but from the more chaotic—“chance,” if you will—associations, or “contact,” made in public spaces.)

Seek! is divided into three sections, transmitting Rucker’s takes on science, life and art, respectively. Roughly a third of the articles appeared in WCS Books’ 1991 Rucker collection, *Transreal!*, now out of print. Fans of his nonfiction books like *Infinity and the Mind* and *The Fourth Dimension* will be glad to hear that the science section here is largely new. The author is at his best here and shows off his well-honed teaching chops, challenging the reader and holding her interest at the same time. An interview with Russian physicist Andrei Linde, who proposes a model of the universe that radically departs from the Big Bang



Illustration by Rudy Rucker for *Saucer Wisdom* used with permission

theory, is most welcome, as are Rucker's historical lessons and explorations into a topic dear to his heart: the creation of computer-simulated artificial life. These sections are illustrated with examples culled from "a-life" software developed by Rucker himself, and I had great fun using the book as a companion piece while I fiddled with the programs myself (downloaded as freeware from <http://www.mathcs.sjsu.edu/faculty/rucker/>).

But whether he's investigating the fractal-ized cutting edge of science and math theory, or traveling through Tonga and Tokyo, it's hard to think of a more genial, or more well-informed tour guide. And like his idol Kerouac, Rucker's a hell of a reporter.

Given the reader-friendliness of *Seek!*, I was dismayed to observe the reception that Rucker's other 1999 book, *Saucer Wisdom*, received. But then, even his publisher seems to have trouble getting a handle on it. "[A] sure winner with the alien-abduction crowd..." trumpets the press release. Well, probably not.

And despite the efforts of a *Salon* writer to cast it as Rucker's novel about, finally, "seeing God," *Saucer Wisdom* is nothing more, and nothing less, than Rucker's *Things to Come*.

Like H.G. Wells, Rucker has jettisoned all but the thinnest of plot lines to make room for what really interests him: speculating and extrapolating from present theory and technology to produce a vision of the future. But where Wells was concerned with creating a blueprint whereby his Fabian Society friends' New World Order could come to fruition, Rucker conjures a more chaotic (and therefore pleasant) millennium, in which the Internet and a concomitant drive toward decentralization and miniaturization have taken research and development out of the hands of institutions and big business, and back into the backyards of entrepreneurs.

To dispense with the basic plot premise, a writer named Rudy Rucker is

approached by a wild-eyed, disheveled, and not-wholly-trustworthy human named Frank Shook, who convincingly (to Rucker) demonstrates that he is in contact with interdimensional aliens who are showing him scenes from humanity's future. Shook asks Rucker to collaborate on a book about his experiences, and Rucker agrees. Got it? Good. On with the show.

In the future world according to Shook, hard science results in soft corners. Functions once performed by angular machines are assumed by "sluggies": blobs of "piezoplastic" programmed with "a-life." The spinal sockets of *Spacetime Donuts* never come to pass; instead, people wear "uvvies" that link their brainwaves electromagnetically (and cordlessly) to the Net (an innovation familiar to readers of Rucker's novel *Freeware*). Bio-technological advances pave the way for (literally) homegrown housing and radical body modifications, and at the furthest reaches of Rucker's imaginings (in this book anyway) sub-atomic "quark-flipping" makes possible both matter transmutation and teleportation.

The text is liberally sprinkled with Rucker's whimsical drawings (cartooning has been a pastime for him since his student days), and the whole production, from Bruce Sterling's introduction to the fanciful index ("morphed humans, 170-72. *See also* chemical beasts; tweaked plants"), is executed in a spirit of great fun.

What is bringing some readers up short, I think, and causing *Saucer Wisdom* to be miscast as an example of New Age spiritualism, is the insistently autobiographical nature of Rucker's writing. More exactly, Rucker refuses to use the process of fictionalizing his life to tidy up or obscure its details. In his earlier writing Rucker, or a fictional factotum, often got drunk, used drugs to excess, behaved like a jerk. Now middle-aged, he's sober, apparently (though it's not specified) through a 12-step program; he has, in the parlance, "come to believe." So, in the course of what passes for *Saucer Wisdom*'s story line, he occasionally

prays. "God is everywhere, and if you ask, God will help you," he matter-of-factly notes.

Rudy Rucker has spent a life and career in pursuit of an answer to the Big Question. I guess my big question to his critics is, What is it about a seeker finding faith that they find so disturbing?

Bob Riedel is a contributing writer for the New York Press, a Manhattan weekly. His review of The Twofold Vibration by Raymond Federman appeared in the May/June 1997 issue of ABR. Due to unforeseen fluxations in the space-time continuum, he presently resides two exits south of "Bernco."