

## Q&A with Bill DeSmedt, author of *Singularity*

Q: What's the difference between your protagonist, consultant Jonathan Knox, and Tom Clancy's analyst, Jack Ryan?

A: I'd say the biggest difference has got to be that Ryan, even back when he was a consultant, was always part of the military-industrial complex (he was consulting, after all, to the head of the CIA). Knox, on the other hand, really wants no part of government work. Too dangerous, and the feds don't pay nearly as well as the Fortune 50.

Q: Being a consultant, how much of you is in Knox?

A: Well, there can't be a whole lot, or the guy couldn't have kept on surprising me the way he did. What he does at the end there, for instance — the way he basically saves the world? — I never saw that one coming.

Knox (Mycroft, too) is based on real people. But he's more like an amalgam of real consultants I've worked with over the years. He's certainly not me, or any other single person I've ever known.

Q: What drew you to the Tunguska mystery?

A: It's all Carl Sagan's fault! Several summers back, I was sitting around on a rainy Saturday afternoon watching a rerun of *Cosmos*, the episode where Carl talks about meteor and cometary impacts.

About midway through the program, Carl gets around to the Tunguska Event. And from there to the Jackson-Ryan hypothesis: that the Event was a collision between the earth and an atom-sized black hole. And then he's refuting J&R, citing the standard missing exit-event objection — namely, that the black hole should have cut through the earth like a knife through morning mist, and come exploding up out of the North Atlantic about an hour later, wreaking all manner of havoc. Never happened. QED. And, next thing you know Carl's gone on to Meteor Crater in Arizona or some such, leaving me sitting there, staring off into space.

"But, Carl," I said slowly, "What if the damn thing never came out?"

Q: Has a consensus been reached yet on what *did* cause the Tunguska event?

A: Not that I've seen. Although in the last couple decades the field seems to have narrowed down to a choice between an asteroid strike and a comet impact. Which is really too bad, seeing as both those theories have serious difficulties accounting for the observed phenomena. In fact, the only thing they've really got going for them is that no viable third alternative has come forward.

Q: And does *Singularity* put one forward, do you think?

A: Well, I wouldn't go quite that far out on the limb. *Singularity* is meant as entertainment, first, last, and foremost. Still, I'd be delighted if it gets folks thinking along new and different lines.

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Q: But what you're proposing is that we were hit by a black hole in 1908. How is that possible? Wouldn't a black hole have destroyed the world?

A: Not if it was small enough, the black hole, that is. The one I use in *Singularity* isn't much larger than an atom and weighs "only" about five billion tons, about the mass of a smallish mountain. Now, there's no denying an object like that could do a lot of damage — and in fact whatever crashed in Tunguska back in 1908 did wind up devastating an area half the size of Rhode Island — but the earth as a whole would've hardly noticed the impact.

Q: That's if the hole were as small as you claim. But aren't all black holes huge?

A: All the ones that could form nowadays, by gravitational collapse, are. They're anywhere from twice the mass of the sun on up to billions of solar masses. But size doesn't really matter here: you can make a black hole out of anything if you can squeeze it down small enough. For instance, if you could compress the earth down into a sphere about an inch in diameter, it would collapse into a black hole all by itself. That's actually what the characters in *Singularity* are trying to prevent.

Q: *Singularity* is like a chess game played on a jigsaw puzzle. Did all the pieces fall into place to create the plot of *Singularity*, or did you figure it out as Knox did along the way?

A: Well, like I said, the central concept — that once the mini black hole plowed into the earth it never came out again — hit me all at once on that rainy Saturday. But that was it, just the one concept... hardly what you'd call a plotline.

Still, the idea wouldn't leave me in peace. It kept rattling around in my hindbrain, gradually building to a critical mass as more and more pieces from my past life fell into place, made me begin to believe I could write this book. What with my background in Sovietology, it made sense to throw some Russians in (and they certainly fit, given that the Event itself took place in Siberia). Then, too, I'd always had an educated layman's interest in the further fringes of modern physics — relativity, quantum mechanics, string theory — so that aspect just folded in naturally. And I'd spent the last decade working in the consulting industry, so why not make the protagonist a consultant? It's not like there aren't enough legal and medical thrillers out there; I decided to give the consultants a turn at bat.

Anyway, one thing led to another and, over the next couple years, that first, minuscule germ of an idea grew into a storyline. Finally, on another rainy Saturday over a lost Memorial Day weekend, I sat down at the word processor, and *Singularity* began to write itself!

Q: Is there really such an agency as CROM?

A: I sure hope so! I *can* tell you that the Department of Energy has a mandate to oversee the Initiative for Proliferation Prevention, like Marianna says, and they do have a Defense Nuclear Nonproliferation program up and running. So, if there isn't a real CROM yet, there's reason to believe there will be soon. What with terrorists out there claiming it's their "religious duty" to acquire nuclear weapons, CROM can't happen quick enough.

Q: On an equally foreboding note, your own "solution" to the Tunguska Event leaves a miniature black hole orbiting around inside the earth, slowly eating away at it. If that part were true, what would it mean?

A: Well, to quote Jon Knox, "Giant sucking sound, end of story."