

Singularity: Print Reviews

Seattle Times

Sunday, 28 November 2004

“Singularity”: The nerd gets the secret agent in taut science-fiction thriller

By Nisi Shawl

Special to The Seattle Times

A wild yet theoretically possible thriller involving ex-KGB agents, maverick cosmologists and a microscopically small black hole, “Singularity” is Bill DeSmedt’s first novel. It’s also Seattle publisher Per Aspera’s first book. By basing their infant reputation on the debut of this unknown Pennsylvania author, this new local press has made a big gamble — perhaps a smart one. De Smedt’s clear descriptions of everything from the core of a typical star to the sinister device an assassin uses to mimic a wolf’s bite make it easy to follow his swiftly swooping story line.

“Singularity” begins with a vivid, almost cinematic reconstruction of the Tunguska Event. In 1908 a mysterious explosion devastated acres of remote Siberian tundra. Its impact registered on scientific equipment as far away as Germany, and sunshine reflecting off the resultant high-altitude debris illuminated London’s night skies so brightly it was possible to read a newspaper by their light.

Speculation as to the cause of this real-life occurrence has ranged over the years from a meteorite to a crashing UFO. Basing his plot on the hypothesis that the Tunguska Event marked the Earth’s collision with a miniature black hole, DeSmedt doesn’t stop with merely making that unlikely-seeming idea plausible. He goes on to ask what its implications might be.

The novel’s main action takes place during the present day. An athletic young woman working for a top-secret U.S. government agency charged with watching over the intellectual fallout from the Soviet breakup, Marianna Bonaventure is hot on the trail of a Russian scientist with the potential to create weapons of mass destruction.

The scientist has apparently slipped away from Russian authorities. On the high-rise rooftop where she’s sure she has her quarry trapped, Marianna runs afoul of a mercenary killer who dumps her down an elevator shaft and flies off with the scientist in an ultralight airplane. With McGyver-like intrepidity, Marianna rescues herself, then uses all her wiles (feminine and other-wise) to persuade the novel’s male protagonist to join the hunt.

A reserved, nerdish systems analyst, Jonathan Knox’s intuitive approach to problem-solving provides a perfect counterpoint for Marianna’s James-Bondian exploits. At first she’s attracted to him for purely pragmatic reasons: During his days as a Russian exchange student, Jon became acquainted with both the scientist Marianna seeks and a man who works on the yacht where the ultralight landed. Later, of course, more carnal concerns bring the two even closer.

DeSmedt’s depiction of Marianna is more action hero than action figure. She feels lust, remorse and ambition; she’s resigned to intimidating most men she meets and defiantly aware of the ways her body comes up short when measured against their ideals. Still, Jon’s point of view is one the author finds more familiar (like his creation, DeSmedt has lived in Russia and reads science books for fun). So there’s an extra depth of intimacy to his writing, as when after a night of passion, Jon watches Marianna perform her morning exercises, which he sees as a sort of erotic ballet. “A man could get used to this,” he thinks — then quickly changes his mind as she segues into “a lethal-looking kickboxing sequence.”

A third major character, colorful, cowboy-hat-sporting cosmologist Jack Adler, has his share of adventures at the Tunguska site, but his main function seems to be to explain to Jon and Marianna just exactly what former KGB

agents and other enemies of glasnost would want to do with a captive black hole. Which, contrary to the hopes of the wayward scientist, turns out not to be providing the world with clean, dependable, nearly free energy. Their plans are decidedly sinister, as “Singularity’s” plot orbits ever tighter, ever faster around the conclusion at its core.

Nisi Shawl reviews science fiction for The Seattle Times.

Cleveland Plain Dealer

Sunday, 7 November 2004

Black hole hitting Earth grabs readers of thriller

John R. Alden

Special to The Plain Dealer

Singularity by Bill DeSmedt (Per Aspera Press, \$25.95) is a slam-bang first novel where the science is as important as the fiction.

Remember hearing about the strange explosion in Tunguska, Siberia, back in the beginning of the last century? The standard explanation is that it was caused by a small comet blowing up in the atmosphere, but more esoteric suggestions, including the notion that the event was caused by a catastrophic engine failure in an alien space ship, are extraordinarily popular. “Singularity” is built around the idea that the explosion was caused by a tiny black hole smacking into the Earth.

Microscopic black holes, smaller than an atom but with masses of millions of tons, might have been created when the universe was formed. If the orbits and energies were just right, a black hole could have been captured by Earth’s gravity. If so, it would still be there, circling around in the interior of our planet and ever so slowly eating it away.

“Singularity” takes this bizarre possibility, adds a cast of exotic characters, whips in a blitzkrieg plot and bakes it all into a hugely entertaining near-future thriller. James Bond would have loved to star in a story such as this.

Kansas City Star

Sunday, 5 December 2004

Three first novels should get these writers off to a good start

By Robert Folsom

The Kansas City Star

As the book closes on another year, some writers are making debuts with theirs.

For his first effort, Bill DeSmedt chose as his topic the Tunguska event of 1908, when a meteorite was believed to have smashed into the Siberian wilderness, leveling trees for miles. DeSmedt has his own explanation: a submicroscopic black hole.

That black hole is the central object around which Singularity (499 pages; Per Aspera; \$25.95) revolves.

Jack Adler is the astrophysicist who has theorized the presence of the black hole, and he believes it's still there, doing its thing — devouring the Earth. He educates the thrown-together duo of Jonathan Knox and Marianna Bonaventure, who has convinced analyst Knox to join her on a secret mission for the U.S. government. For her part, Bonaventure is a determined gun-wielding character who's very attractive. Casting wouldn't be a stretch in case a studio wants to option the rights for a movie — think Angelina Jolie or Jennifer Anniston.

The dialogue would be another matter; it's very scientific. But DeSmedt has managed a neat trick: Conversations are lively even though they're peppered with accurate physicist's jargon. The thriller aspect of the book helps.

Like excited electrons, the action moves along with increasing momentum. Bonaventure needs to get close to Russian industrialist Arkady Grishin to uncover his involvement with weapons of mass destruction. The only problem is he lives aboard an enormous yacht that is home to his corporation and labs. She and Knox had better keep up appearances or the power of a fallen star could prove too dangerous for anyone to possess.

Publisher's Weekly

25 October 2004

SINGULARITY (Bill DeSmedt, Per Aspera)

DeSmedt's debut SF thriller, a brisk Michael Crichton clone, vividly depicts the Tunguska event that leveled a big patch of Siberia in 1908, then shifts to the near-future, where warrior woman Marianna Bonaventure is working for CROM (Critical Resources Oversight Mandate), the U.S. Department of Energy's branch for dealing with loose WMD talent. Meanwhile, in Siberia, scientist Jack Adler discovers that Tunguska was actually hit by a microscopic black hole, not a meteorite. Marianna and an intuitive analyst, Jonathan Knox, are assigned to infiltrate the gigantic yacht *Rusalka*, owned by the Russian billionaire Arkady Grishin, who is on the trail of something odd. It turns out that Grishin is not who he seems and his motives for finding the Tunguska object are a great deal more sinister than anyone had supposed. The book bounces along, from well-developed scenes to lesser ones and back again, with a good deal of deft if not particularly original characterization. The sexual chemistry between Marianna and Jonathan adds spice. Exotic hardware, lifestyles of the rich and notorious, double- and triple-crosses and a slightly rushed and facile conclusion all make a respectable if not outstanding first effort. Agent, Jake Elwell at Wieser & Elwell. (Nov. 8)

Forecast: A \$25,000 promo budget, a blurb from Greg Bear and an 11-city author tour should ensure respectable sales.

Singularity: Online Reviews

Infinity Plus

The first book from a new Seattle publisher that aims to compete head-on with the established “big boys”, Per Aspera Press, *Singularity* is an effective technothriller that stamps DeSmedt’s name on the field in no uncertain manner.

Marianna Bonaventure is an inexperienced agent for CROM, a US covert agency charged with keeping track of the nuclear materials and knowhow left lying around after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and — more to the point — with attempting to make sure none of it falls into the hands of terrorists or rogue nations. (Yes, there’s an irony in the “rogue nations” part of this.) She finds that there is something suspicious going on around the enigmatic Russian industrialist Arkady Grishin, who makes his base of operations on a vast ocean liner, the *Rusalka*. In order to help her probe this mystery, she ropes in Jonathan Knox, a high-priced civilian business analyst who has a great knack for solving problems through near-instinctive pattern-recognition. At first reluctant about everything to do with the caper except the charms of Ms Bonaventure, Knox soon finds himself an enthusiastic participant in the investigation, as it becomes clearer and clearer that the nature of Grishin’s ambitions is world-affectingly grim.

Meanwhile, on the far side of the globe, Texan physicist Jack Adler is bemused at the extent to which his Russian colleagues on an expedition into the wilds of Siberia to examine the region of the Tunguska Event of 1908 are resistant to his theory of its cause. That theory posits that the earth was hit by a mini black hole, a remnant from the Big Bang. It’s a perfectly valid real-world hypothesis; Adler’s extension of it is that the black hole may very well have taken up a complex spiralling orbit within the body of our planet. He finds what appears to be proof of this, but then all of his records and equipment are destroyed in a murderous attack.

Through many complicated routes, Bonaventure and Knox, placed as spies aboard the *Rusalka*, come close to hitting on Adler’s theory independently, and in due course their suspicions are confirmed through a direct electronic contact with Adler himself. Grishin and his scientists have developed a way of capturing the black hole, stripping it temporarily of its event horizon, and using the naked singularity as a time machine whereby they can alter history to their own gain and human civilization’s enormous disbenefit.

As in any technothriller, there are two elements to this novel, the techno part — the scientific/technological underpinning — and the thriller part.

It’s in the techno part that DeSmedt really shines. He has an astonishing gift for explaining really quite abstruse physical and technological concepts with clarity and immediacy, and in making such explanations both fascinating and — let’s be forthright here — enormous fun. Even if you’re perfectly *au fait* with current ideas about black holes and their physics, the novel is worth reading just for the flamboyant *joy* of these expository passages. DeSmedt is clearly passionately in love with these areas of physics, and he succeeds completely in conveying that passion to the reader.

Similarly, his extrapolations from present into near-future technology are entirely convincing — at least to this reader. I finished this book with my mind in a total jumble as to which of the communication/surveillance technologies depicted are current in the real world and which are merely products of DeSmedt’s controlled imagination; all of them seemed equally plausible. As for the technologies involved in black-hole capture, they too seemed highly feasible. It’s a while since my disbelief has been so convincingly suspended by a technothriller.

DeSmedt is less accomplished in the thriller element of the novel, but luckily he’s saved by another of his great skills: the creation of excellently sympathetic characters. Marianna Bonaventure is a wonderful creation; she stands

out in a genre where the smart, kickass, yummy female has come to be regarded as little more than a standard part of the toolkit. This is because all of her many strengths as a person are in part a product of the weaknesses she also possesses. At first she completely flummoxes Knox, who simply cannot find a way to relate to her complexities, his reactions to her beauty and her personality all clashing with each other. The reader's reactions are likely to be similar, until at last, probably more than halfway through this long book, it becomes possible to understand, at all levels, this thoroughly three-dimensional — and certainly very engaging — individual.

Knox himself is no mean fictional creation. He's somewhat reminiscent of an Ellery Queen for the twenty-first century in his powers of ratiocination and his veneer of general geekiness, but he's a far more real person than Ellery Queen could ever be. DeSmedt's semi-major characters, too, leap from the page: Sasha, the old friend of Knox's who has compromised his idealism in the pursuit of entrancing technology; Galina, another old acquaintance of Knox, a tragic figure whose love for children is brutally matched by her inability to have a child of her own, and who, unknowing of Grishin's fell motives, is the primary technological brain behind his endeavours; and Mycroft, a.k.a., Dr Finley Laurence, the super-analyst and cybernautics genius to whom Knox turns when even his own analytical powers prove insufficient. Even Bonaventure's boss, the shoot-first-think-later bureaucratic numbskull Pete Aristos, has a delightful sense of realness to him. Only the character intended as our heroes' ultimate focus of dread, Yuri, Grishin's murderous sidekick, is a bit of a cypher; in essence, he's Jaws from the James Bond movies but without any of the redeeming characteristics. Grishin likewise seems to have been drawn from Central Casting.

Perhaps Yuri in particular epitomizes the novel's weakness as a thriller. The thug-dodging and general hijinks are all perfectly competently done, but they lack the marvelous originality of the rest of the novel: you find yourself aching for each "exciting bit" to be over so you can back to the *really* exciting stories being told — the next link in the scientific chain, or what's happening in the *faux pas*-strewn mutual circling going on between Bonaventure and Knox. As implied above, it's because of the enormous strength of these aspects — the scientific and the emotional — that the novel swings grippingly along at the high pace that it does; the relative weakness of the adventure aspects, their resorting-to-the-default aura, becomes more or less irrelevant.

The back of the book bears a stack of cover quotes from noteworthies: Kevin J. Anderson, David Brin, Kip Thorne, Greg Bear and Anthony Olcott. Unusually, I found that I agreed with just about everything they said; for once their enthusiasm isn't merely mega-inflated hype. With one exception. Anderson says: "*Singularity* juggles Clancy, Crichton, and *The Da Vinci Code*." The comparison with Crichton is justified, although DeSmedt is by far the better novelist of the two. The comparison with Clancy *may* be justified: I've never been able to get beyond about twenty pages of any of Clancy's writings, so rely for my knowledge of them on the rather jolly movies. But *Singularity* has no connection whatsoever with *The Da Vinci Code*; the comment is quite simply absurd — a thoroughly egregious example of the base art of rent-a-quote. In the ordinary way I'd not bother mentioning this piece of folly, but *Singularity* is something, well, a bit special. Shame on Per Aspera for so cheapening the treasure they've published.

Throughout this review I've been describing *Singularity* as a technothriller. As will be evident, though, it can also be approached as hard sf. In that context, too, it's eminently successful — in fact, it's the most readable piece of hard sf, by a quite significant margin, that I've come across in quite a long while, and, enlivened as it is by its glorious characterization (or, to be waspish, by characters at all), should be recommended reading for most of the authors currently working in the subgenre.

However, matters of categorization are best left to the Dryasdusts and Panglosses: technothriller or hard sf, who really cares? It's purely as a work of imaginative fiction, classification be damned, that *Singularity* should be assessed. Well, put it this way: this is a book you'll want to own in hardback. Even if your more usual taste is for fantasy (well, perhaps not if it's for generic fantasy-by-numbers), you're almost certain to enjoy this one. DeSmedt is a wonderful newcomer to the field, and his debut one of great significance to it. I cannot believe otherwise than

that his voice will be given the attention it so emphatically deserves in the years to come. — *John Grant*

Barnes & Noble Explorations

Hard science meets science fiction in Bill DeSmedt's dazzling debut novel — an edge-of-your-seat thrill ride that revolves around a submicroscopic black hole deep inside the Earth's mantle.

Reminiscent of novels by science fiction masters like Robert A. Heinlein, Larry Niven, Arthur C. Clarke, and Isaac Asimov — authors who based their stories on hard science — Bill DeSmedt's debut novel, *Singularity*, is an edge-of-your-seat thrill ride that revolves around a submicroscopic black hole in a decaying orbit deep inside the Earth's mantle that will persist until it has de-voured the entire planet!

The story begins on June 30, 1908, in a remote Siberian area known as the Stony Tunguska Basin. There, something crashes into Earth and topples forests over an area half the size of Rhode Island. Was it part of a comet? An alien spacecraft? A solar plasmoid released from the sun? After nearly a century of conjecture, it remains the “cosmic mystery of the millennium.”

But Jack Adler, an American astrophysicist, thinks he has it all figured out. Furthering a much-ridiculed 1973 theory known as the Jackson-Ryan hypothesis, which supposes that a black hole — smaller than an atom and heavier than a mountain — was responsible for the Tunguska Event, Adler believes the black hole didn't exit the planet as Jackson and Ryan surmised but remained inside Earth. Meanwhile, rookie government agent Marianna Bonaventure and an unassuming analyst, Jon Knox, are thrown together as they try to figure out why a powerful Russian industrialist is secretly gathering scientists and spending billions on alleged WMD research.

With a cast of engaging characters, highly inventive and witty prose, and enough intriguing plot twists to keep readers in a state of perpetual shock until the very last page, *Singularity* is easily as entertaining as any Michael Crichton or Greg Bear thriller. Equal parts hard science fiction adventure and mainstream technothriller, *Singularity* is arguably one of the best debuts of the year. — *Paul Goat Allen*

Amazon.com Editorial Review

Bill DeSmedt should be on the bestseller lists with Tom Clancy and Dan Brown. DeSmedt's ambitious and exciting debut novel, *Singularity*, mixes a post-Cold-War conspiracy with cutting-edge quantum physics and a century-old mystery to create a terrifying techno-thriller.

A secret US government agency, CROM, fights terrorism by apprehending or terminating post-Soviet scientists before they sell the technology of mass destruction to terrorists. A rookie CROM agent, Marianna Bonaventure, and a brilliant consultant, Jonathan Knox, find themselves on an undercover mission to locate a missing Russian physicist. Instead, they discover a secret far scarier than terrorists with nuclear weapons.

The famous “meteor” that devastated Siberia's Tunguska wasteland in 1908 was no meteor. It was a microscopic black hole that entered the earth's crust — and never exited. Trapped, it may eventually devour the earth. But a small, clandestine group has developed secret technology to capture the black hole. If the conspirators succeed, the world will be enslaved by a dictatorship made omnipotent by the black hole's quantum effects. If the conspirators fail, they will accelerate the black hole's destructiveness — and guarantee the Earth's immediate annihilation. Bonaventure and Knox rush to stop the conspirators — but they may already be too late. — *Cynthia Ward*

Edge Boston

First time novelist Bill DeSmedt ably blends a mixture of science fiction technology and ideas with international thriller ass-kicking action and the inevitable romance between a reluctant hero and a female secret agent who is more than ready to rumble with the bad guys.

The story starts in Siberia in 1908, when something slams into the Earth, flattening a forest but leaving nothing in the way of an impact crater. Curiously enough, an astronomer notes the approach of something with a powerful magnetic field in the days before the impact, but when he trains his telescope at the area where the object should be, he sees nothing at all. His readings continue to show that something big — or at least powerful — is approaching the Earth, right up until the moment of impact: then his instruments read only magnetic silence.

DeSmedt has not made this up. It really happened, and it is called The Tunguska Event. Scientists and speculative fiction writers have toyed with a variety of ideas in the near-century since the event — “The X Files” made a two-part episode out of it (that dastardly black oil!), and fringe types claim the object that fell to Earth was an alien space ship powered by antimatter that vaporized upon impact. The strange thing is that no indication of actual impact exists, though hundreds of square miles of flattened forest clearly indicate that something big happened. A couple of physicists in the 1970s thought up the idea of a tiny black hole drilling the planet, but this idea has not been met with acceptance. As Carl Sagan put it, there were no reports of anything exploding out of the Atlantic Ocean an hour or so later, as would have happened if a miniature black hole had penetrated the Earth’s crust.

Bill DeSmedt has cut through the fence here with a simple, if chilling, idea: what if the thing that nailed Earth in 1908 really was an atom-sized singularity — and it’s still in there? What if it never shot up through the Atlantic Ocean, but instead took up orbit inside of our planet?

Using this speculation as a springboard, and taking advantage of the Siberian impact site and his experience as a student of Sovietology, DeSmedt has fashioned a hefty, complex tale that puts a brilliant, intuitive analyst named Jonathan Knox together with a courageous, if green, agent for a post-9/11 National Security organization called CROM (kind of like James Bond’s MI-5, complete with nifty laser rifles and other hi-tech toys) and then pits the two of them against a Russian ideologue with a dangerous, possibly world-altering plan for how to put the singularity to his own uses — and reanimate the Russian Bear in the process. (He also has a super-villain flunky of the best sort: stolid, good at killing, and completely invested in his job ... a smoothly lethal working stiff who bears the well-earned nickname of The Wolf.)

This is, among other things, a good old-fashioned Cold War thriller though it boasts a hefty dose of the modern: cutting edge technology, daring new science ideas that verge on the fantastic realm of science fiction, and a coolly appreciative take on the mysteries of intuition and human consciousness. A perfectly balanced blend of the flamboyantly outsized and the compellingly minute, setting spy novel conventions like super-yacht bases for well-heeled Russky villains against an all-too-possible scenario that physicists and laymen alike can appreciate, this book offers food for thought and washes it down with plenty of wry humor and Tom Clancy-ish black ops panache. This is such a nearly perfect novel in so many ways you might wonder just how a debut novelist knows so much — and what else he might have tucked up his sleeve. — *Kilian Melloy*

Writers Write

In 1908, a mysterious event occurred in Siberia which leveled 60 million trees in the forests of the Stony Tunguska Basin. The explosion was so loud and so bright that people one thousand miles away could read a newspaper at night without candlelight. To date, no one has conclusively solved the mystery of what happened

at Tunguska that day. Theories of the cause of the blast include a comet, an asteroid, aliens, and a submicroscopic black hole. The leading theory (an asteroid impact) seems unlikely, because there is no impact crater at Tunguska. Debut author Bill DeSmedt takes this puzzling event and uses it as the basis of an exhilarating SF thriller that will resonate with readers of Michael Crichton, Greg Bear and Dan Brown.

American astrophysicist Jack Adler has new evidence that proves the 1973 Jackson-Ryan hypothesis, that it was a submicroscopic black hole smaller than an atom and heavier than a mountain which caused the Tunguska Event. Dr. Adler manages to wangle his way onto a Russian expedition to the Tunguska Basin where his instruments confirm his worst suspicions: that the black hole never exited the Earth and is still in orbit inside the Earth's mantle. If the black hole's orbit starts to decay, it will spiral towards the center of the earth, eventually devouring all the matter on our planet.

On the other side of the planet, consultant Jon Knox has been strong-armed into helping government agent Marianna Bonaventure investigate the disappearance of one of many Russian scientists whose skills at creating weapons of mass destruction are in high demand by terrorists. Marianna is a brilliant analyst, but this is only her second assignment in the field. Marianna and Jon inveigle their way on board the megayacht of Russian billionaire Arkady Grishin. Grishin is hiring Russian scientists with unusual specialties and is suspected by the U.S. government of conducting WMD research. He also seems to be interested in the Tunguska Event. But what Arkady Grishin is up to goes far beyond the worst suspicions of the Feds. It will be up to the team of a rookie agent, a cynical analyst, a computer expert, and an astrophysicist to stop Grishin's obsessions from destroying the planet.

Technothrillers are notoriously difficult to write — first, the author needs a “big idea.” Then, he's got to find a way to turn that idea into a great story with characters you want to spend time with. Bill DeSmedt scores big on all counts in his debut novel, which reads like it was written by an old pro. DeSmedt delivers a lightning-paced plot, with fascinating scientific issues, likeable characters and crisp prose that speeds the story along to its shocking, and somehow very satisfying conclusion. — *Claire E. White*

Sci-Scoop

If you liked *The Da Vinci Code* you'll like Bill DeSmedt's *Singularity*. A superficial plot synopsis shows why: a female agent gets a male analyst involved in a search for something or other, and together they go on the run as they attempt to solve a puzzle, all the while being persued by a menacing, unstoppable loose cannon of a bad guy employed by the consortium which is guarding the earth-shattering mystery. There's a bit of James Bond thrown in — the female lead is an agent for a secret department of the government, and the bad guy (who comes up with some of the most *unusual* ways to kill people!) has some odd dental work that brings Bond's Jaws to mind. The book also reminded me of David Brin's *Earth*, because the mystery involves a primordial black hole that entered Earth in the Tunguska impact of 1908. But similarities to any other books aside, the book stands on its own as a fun, thrilling piece of science fiction.

Synopsis:

Marianna Bonaventure is an agent for a secret branch of the U. S. Department of Energy, and her assignment is to keep tabs on former Soviet scientists — making sure they don't start selling their talents as WMD experts to the highest bidders. When she drafts an unwilling Jonathan Knox to help her in tracking down Galina Mikhailovna Postrel'nikova, an old friend from his days as a student in the Soviet Union, they end up posing as lovers on a Russian luxury yacht. Marianna attempts to investigate the science labs on the ship, while in Tunguska the Texan physicist Jack Adler is attempting to prove his cockamamie theory that the Tunguska Object is a micro black hole. Yuri Vissarionovich Geladze, a sure candidate for the Bad Guy's Hall of Fame, is after them both. What secret is

his employer protecting?

Evaluation:

I just can't resist listing other parallels to *The Da Vinci Code*, which include: Knox runs away from pursuers in a museum (the Smithsonian, not the Louvre!); Knox and Bonaventure flee to the luxurious country estate of an eccentric friend of Knox's; the bad guy tracks them there using a method which they never thought about being used (although in *Singularity*, I must add it's something no one would ever have thought of!). And something that got on my feminist nerve (you know, the one without a sense of humor! <g>) in both books, that I don't recall having seen anywhere else lately, is the habit of using the man's surname and the woman's given name in the same context. Why would any writer refer to their two lead characters as "Marianna and Knox" (or "Sophie and Langdon")? Why not "Bonaventure and Jon" (or "Neveu and Robert") for that matter? I'd like to see consistency — either all surnames or all given names, thank you very much!

OK, so I've made my point that there are a lot of parallels with *The Da Vinci Code*. (What else can you expect when, like most secondary school students, I spent a lot of time in my teen years comparing and contrasting two works?!) But let me assure you, *Singularity* is not the Mad Libs school of novel writing. I think a lot of these common threads are there just because they're exciting to read about, and both the books are exciting.

One strength of *Singularity* is the female characters. (Ah, the feminist nerve is appeased!) Bonaventure is a well-rounded action hero. She's described as beautiful ("drop-dead gorgeous" is Knox's first impression), and yet, when was the last time you saw an action hero look at herself in the mirror after putting on a bikini, and not be entirely pleased with what she sees? She lives life boldly and makes some real great mistakes. And Galina Mikhailovna Postrel'nikova is easily one of the most compelling minor characters I've encountered in a long time. Based on her role in the book, in the hands of a less assured writer she could easily have ended up merely a noble victim of suffering. But DeSmedt transcends a two-dimensional portrayal of her.

There are some real nice nuggets of writing in the book, too. Here's a description that made me smile: "The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts illuminated the humid Washington dusk like a king-sized bug-zapper, the oranges and blues of its floods luring in all manner of lepidopterous nightlife, resplendent in chitinous tuxes and diaphanous evening gowns." And Knox's deadpan thought, "out of the frying pan, into the thermonuclear holocaust." I enjoyed the book and I'm looking forward to more from DeSmedt. — *Linda Tamm*

Wigglefish

First time novelist Bill DeSmedt was watching a rerun of Carl Sagan's epic PBS science series *Cosmos* on Saturday afternoon when Sagan started discussing the so-called "Tunguska Event" of 1908. Something fell to Earth on June 30 of that year, impacting a forested area of Siberia that still exhibits fallen trees in a miles-wide radius played outward around — nothing. No crater, no meteorite fragments — nothing. A whole minor industry in speculation about the event has sprung up. Was it an ammonia ice comet that exploded just above the Earth's surface? Was it a hunk of antimatter, or maybe an alien starship powered by antimatter? Or was it perhaps a microscopic black hole, a remnant of the unimaginable violence at the moment the universe was born, that plunged to Earth? Sagan dismissed all theories except the ammonia ice comet, reserving for the black hole theory the comment that nothing was observed plunging up from the Atlantic Ocean later that same day, as one might have expected from a black hole tunneling its way straight through the planet. DeSmedt sat up with one of those terrific What Ifs that characterize the best speculative fiction ideas.

What if the atom-sized black hole proposed by the so-called Jackson-Ryan hypothesis didn't come bursting out

of the Atlantic because it was still inside the Earth? What if a tiny black hole has been orbiting the Earth's core for nearly a century?

The result of that stroke of inspiration is the fast, fun, and scientifically too-plausible-for-comfort new novel *Singularity*. DeSmedt has pulled every last stop in writing this book: he has drawn on his experience as an "Information Engineering" consultant, his experiences in Russia as a Sovietology exchange student, and his avid avocation as an amateur physicist to put together a first-rate blend of wittily written international intrigue and science fiction that lies so close to science fact that DeSmedt raises your hackles and tickles your funny bone, often in the very same paragraph.

The espionage part of the book is recognizable from the genre-setting work of LeCarre and Ludlum, with a dash of Fleming, by way of Clancy and all his hi-tech, just-this-side-of-tomorrow gear. But that's only part of the story — the most superficial part, to be sure, if also the most fun. There is also an authentic understanding of Russian life, and a tightly-wound set of science fictional premises that are original, strange, and profound.

It's hard not to rave about this juicy debut, but to say much more would be to spoil surprises tucked inside of surprises. Suffice it to say that like any good singularity, this novel will suck you right in and refuse to let you go.

—*Kilian Melloy*

