

**Rendezvous with Utopia:
Two Versions of the Future in the *Rama* Novels**

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Introduction

Published in 1973, Arthur C. Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama* won the Hugo, Nebula, and John W. Campbell Awards (and also the Jupiter Award, voted on by the Institute of Science Fiction in Higher Education). Its impressive collection of awards, outstanding commercial success, and intrinsic interest make it one of the few truly iconic works of hard science fiction. It depicts the work of astronauts in space, and shows an obvious concern for scientific accuracy and logic. In all, *Rendezvous with Rama* seems like an unlikely candidate for a utopian novel, and that expression would, indeed, misdescribe it. Yet, it contains strong mythic, satirical, and utopian elements, which give it much of its interest.

Alas, many of those elements are discarded in the trilogy of novels that appeared much later as an extended sequel to the novel's action.

Rendezvous with Rama

Rendezvous with Rama is set in the year 2130, by which time our Solar System includes several main inhabited worlds: Earth, Luna, Mars, Mercury (whose inhabitants are referred to as "Hermians"), Ganymede, Titan,

and Triton. As background, we learn that much of northern Italy, including Venice, Padua, and Verona, was destroyed in 2077 by a huge meteor. This led to the establishment of Project SPACEGUARD to ensure that nothing similar could happen again.

Early in the narrative, a huge alien artifact, given the name “Rama” by astronomers, is detected by SPACEGUARD’s computerised radar system, based on Mars. A robotic probe demonstrates that Rama is an artificial object, a hollow cylinder fifty kilometers long and about twenty in diameter. Thereupon, a crewed spaceship, the *Endeavour*, is sent to study it. Rama is large enough to have its own internal landscape, ecology, and even weather – at least once it begins moving closer to the sun’s heat. Throughout the novel, various characters fear Rama as a potential threat. Leaders on Earth and the colonised worlds are, of course, keenly sensitive to the possibility of another disaster from space.

The main events involve exploration of Rama’s interior. Commander William Norton and his crew have limited time to investigate the alien artifact, make some sense of it, and establish whether it is dangerous. This gives the narrative a significant degree of tension, as do several crisis points when the characters must respond to immediate dangers. The human astronauts are dwarfed by the artificial world in which they find themselves – a world with hurricanes, electrical storms, its own sea, high cliffs, and giant waves. There are also bizarre partly robotic, partly biological creatures (or “biots”) with a kind of ecology of their own. Rama’s environment continually tests the astronauts’ ingenuity, and the artifact itself defies human knowledge and understanding to the very end. A crisis occurs when the Hermians attempt to take matters into their own hands by positioning a nuclear missile and threatening to attack Rama. This, however, is foiled by the astronauts.

Much of the novel’s strength lies in its concern for plausible detail – *getting it right* – whether in the descriptions of the internal landscape of Rama, the technology required for space travel, or the procedure for defusing a nuclear weapon in space. This is seriously “hard” science fiction, with an emphasis on rigour in the depictions of science, technology, and technical procedures. However, there is more to *Rendezvous with Rama* than its technoscientific realism. Peter Brigg points out that Clarke’s stories and novels generally “contain combinations of hard extrapolation, humorous vignette, and some gesture in the direction of metaphysical possibilities.”¹ For Brigg, what distinguishes *Rendezvous with Rama* from precursors in Clarke’s body of fiction is the “beautiful cohesion” of all the “hard” elements.² Clarke provides us with impressive details about Rama that are resolved as their purpose is revealed. Also, the mystery of Rama conveys

what Briggs describes as a metaphysical element in the novel.

We need to be careful when we discuss the mythic, metaphysical, or mystical (as it is sometimes described) element in Clarke's fiction. As I have argued elsewhere,³ Clarke's extensive body of science fiction, published over several decades, contains little real mysticism, if this refers to the portrayal of some kind of spiritual reality that transcends physical nature. His work also has little to do with metaphysics; however, it frequently contemplates, with wonder, the immensity of the universe in space and time. Sometimes it depicts the radical transformation or supersession of humanity. I prefer to discuss all this as a mythic element: it has much to do with the actions of intelligences whose powers dwarf those normally encountered in human experience.

In the case of *Rendezvous with Rama*, the human characters are confronted by an enormous artifact that is beyond comprehension. It uses a space drive that no-one understands, and we never see its masters. The human encounter with Rama demonstrates not only the immensity of the universe but also what is made to seem almost like contempt for human actions and defiance of our attempts to understand its purpose. Rama simply enters the Solar System, then leaves again, making no effort to contact us. After tapping matter from the sun to refuel – the description of this is precise, yet awesome – it heads off in the direction of the Greater Magellanic Cloud, beyond the Milky Way, leaving behind no real clues as to its purpose. As far as we are shown in *Rendezvous with Rama* itself, Rama's voyage has nothing to do with humanity or Earth. As Brigg puts it, "The very fact that Rama has paid man no attention whatsoever during his brief invasion is a stunning reminder of man's tiny place in the scale of the universe."⁴ He adds, quite plausibly, "This concrete evocation of the mystery of the universe is Clarke's finest blending of the elements of his fiction."⁵

Though Clarke conveys a sense of mystery and the numinous, this mythic element conflicts in no way with a scientific materialist worldview. Rama may seem godlike in the power that it reveals and in the inscrutability of its concerns, but there is nothing supernatural about it. Indeed, *Rendezvous with Rama* may be read as a demonstration that a purely naturalistic worldview, based on science, can enthrall and inspire. Nor does the mythic element conflict with Clarke's technological meliorism and his positive attitude to humanity's future – more specifically, his advocacy of technological innovation, social flexibility, and a curiosity that will take us into space. The mythic element is also consistent with a gently satirical thread. Rama's mysterious incursion provokes varied human reactions, bringing out latent propensities in various individuals and groups. Some interpret the artifact as hostile. Others see it as an ark sent by God for "those worthy of salva-

tion.”⁶ There is considerable satirical treatment of international (or, in this case, interplanetary) diplomacy – and of the workings of bureaucracy in general. At the same time, the social mores of 2130 are presented in a way that is indirectly critical of our own assumptions about how human societies must work: they are very different from our own, yet are presented sympathetically. At a more cosmic level – and this fits precisely with its mythic vision – the novel may be said to satirise our confidence in the possibility of fully explaining and understanding the universe.

The Utopian Element

However, Clarke’s social vision is more utopian than satirical. The emphasis in *Rendezvous with Rama* is not on extrapolation and mockery of current social tendencies, in the manner of Pohl and Kornbluth’s *The Space Merchants*, for example. Rather, Clarke presents a society that has reacted in logical ways to changing technological, economic, and environmental circumstances. He paints a generally attractive picture of how a future space-going society might reasonably operate. Despite its diplomatic squabbles and machinations, the Solar-System-wide human civilisation of 2130 is generally depicted sympathetically. The Hermians do try to destroy Rama, but that is a maverick act not typical of the future civilisation that Clarke portrays. We learn that the various worlds have their own individual cultures, and that the culture of Mercury is especially harsh and philistine because of the difficulty of colonising such an inhospitable planet, but even this is not conveyed in especially disapproving tones. The Hermians are the closest thing to being ‘bad guys’ in *Rendezvous with Rama*, but they are not demonised. Indeed, we are told that they have responded to the conditions on Mercury by building “a spartan and in many ways highly admirable culture.”⁷

I am not suggesting that this novel gives us a “thick,” or detailed, account of daily life in the civilisation of the future, but we are shown enough to understand some of the ways in which it differs from contemporary Western societies. Most obviously, sexual mores have clearly changed, partly in response to space-faring. Norton has two wives on different planets, and a total of three children. His families are described as being “on excellent terms with each other,” and it is apparent that sexual jealousy does not play the same role as it does in current societies. Similarly, two other male characters on the *Endeavour* are involved in what seems to be a gay relationship, as well as sharing a wife back on Earth. Near the end of the book, Norton makes love with his ship-board friend Laura, after Rama has gone and their mission has ended in triumph. The implication seems to

be that sexual relationships are commonly “open” in this society – since this incident is treated quite matter-of-factly by the characters directly involved, as well as by the omniscient (and sometimes intrusive) narrator. The further implication is that the novel endorses a relativist, or at least highly tolerant, approach to sexual morality.

We also learn that some people remain in active employment though over a century old. One character, Dr Bose, is 115 years old, “in perfect health,”⁸ and still working on the Rama Committee of the United Planets Science Organization. The narrator complains that elderly, conservative scientists continue to dominate science administration,⁹ but with no suggestion that this problem is any worse than ever. Bose himself is somewhat disheartened at working for the same people decade after decade, but would not want “to put back the clock” of medical progress.¹⁰ The civilisation of the future seems to have achieved considerable sexual equality – perhaps more than our own society, and undoubtedly more than was the case when *Rendezvous with Rama* was first published. The Rama Committee and the *Endeavour’s* crew each comprise a mix of men and women, though the mix does seem rather top-heavy with men, and there is undoubtedly room for feminist critique of Clarke’s success in depicting a truly equal society, if that was his intention. Still, the presence of women in such positions is clearly taken for granted. More surprisingly, the human crew members of the *Endeavour* are joined by “superchimps” or “sims”: genetically engineered monkeys (not chimpanzees, we are told¹¹) with prehensile tails and very high intelligence, trained to do menial work.

In describing Clarke’s civilisation of the future as utopian – or having a utopian element – I do not, of course, claim that all of the features to which I have referred are self-evidently desirable. However, the novel appears to give them an implicit endorsement. Such features of the future civilisation as changed sexual mores, extended longevity, and the engineering and practical employment of genetically modified animals are presented as logical and socially functional developments. Substantive moral arguments can doubtless be put against each of them, whether or not the arguments are ultimately successful. Perhaps Clarke has underestimated the depth of sexual jealousy as a component of human nature, failed to understand the social problems that might be brought about by extended longevity, or described an abuse of intelligent animals that resembles slavery. Be any of that as it may, he has imagined a fascinating and plausible civilisation of the future, set himself the challenge of showing how human beings might live and work in such a civilisation, and succeeded at one of the most important tasks of any serious science fiction author – that is, he has contested the apparent immutability of current aspects of social functioning:

sexual mores; the normal cycles of life, aging, and death; and the relationships between human beings and non-human animals. Works such as *Rendezvous with Rama* throw all of this open for debate.

Here, then, is a major genre author thinking conscientiously about how a future civilisation – in different environmental, technological, and economic circumstances from our own – might reasonably function. *Rendezvous with Rama* is an exemplary work of science fictional speculation.

The *Rama* Trilogy

After *Rendezvous with Rama*, Clarke wrote three sequels in collaboration with Gentry Lee: *Rama II* (1989)¹²; *The Garden of Rama* (1991)¹³; and *Rama Revealed* (1993).¹⁴ These books, collectively known as the *Rama* trilogy, are set farther in the future, and they form a largely self-contained opus with a new cast of characters. Robin Reid notes differences between these books and Clarke's fiction, as a whole, such as a greater focus on sex, an emphasis on religious beliefs, and less optimism about the possibilities of human development.¹⁵

The *Rama* trilogy reveals that the advanced, space-faring civilisation depicted in *Rendezvous with Rama* was subsequently destroyed by economic collapse. This resulted from a period of narcissistic greed and excess, triggered by the psychological impact on human civilisation of the contact with Rama.¹⁶ The trilogy offers an entirely different picture of the future, one with social arrangements much more like our own. For example, it no longer seems common for people to live extended lives (though, confusingly, we are told that medicine is one field that is more advanced than in 2130).¹⁷ Moreover, the benign developments in sexual and familial arrangements shown in Clarke's original novel have apparently been forgotten. The collapse of the civilisation portrayed in *Rendezvous with Rama* allows the authors of the *Rama* trilogy to present far more conventional characters and motivations.

Rama II deals with events in 2200 when another Rama artifact appears in the Solar System. Much of the plot resembles that of the original book, but exploring a Rama artifact proves to be a far deadlier occupation than it did the first time around. Unlike *Rendezvous with Rama*, *Rama II* is full of melodramatic confrontations, grandiose speeches, and lengthy passages of expository material. Written with all the hallmarks of an attempted best-seller, it deals in multiple subplots, forbidden secrets, and evil characters, notably the beautiful but villainous Francesca Sabatini, whose status as a bad woman – a soap opera “bitch” – is coded by her direct sexuality and the fact that she has an abortion without qualms. There is less empha-

sis on science, and the authors even appear to have forgotten that Rama gravity is supposed to be only point six of a gee. In familiar Hollywood style, many of the crew on the space ship sent to check out the second Rama are astonishingly unprofessional (certainly when compared to the competent, well-trained, and dedicated astronauts of *Rendezvous with Rama*).

The Garden of Rama involves a voyage to the Node, an alien facility for refitting Rama ships (as we must call them by this point of the overall narrative). It tells the story of three characters, one female (the main character, Nicole des Jardins) and two male, after they have been stranded on the second Rama. This is accompanied by endless sexual complications – and endless un-Clarkelike *angst* about them – that underline the fact that humanity has forgotten or abandoned the changed mores described in *Rendezvous with Rama*. In *The Garden of Rama*, the Ramans establish a whole society of two thousand people on the second Rama ship, allowing them to observe the social interactions of human beings in microcosm. The ship becomes a tough frontier world in which crooks take over government.

Rama Revealed, the final novel of the trilogy, describes the continuing conflicts on the second Rama, both among the humans and between the badly-led humans and aliens referred to as octospiders. The artificial intelligences in charge have to sort out the horribly degenerated situation. Another example of how the civilisation described in *Rendezvous with Rama* has been forgotten is that Nicole is shocked when it is revealed that her one-time lover, Michael O'Toole, is still alive at 120. It transpires that the intelligences behind the Rama ships are involved in classifying and studying life forms, particularly space-faring ones, in our part of the galaxy. Ultimately, a religious explanation is given for the aliens' activities, and this is largely accepted by the characters, though some minor doubt is cast on it. It seems that God is attempting to get universes to develop into states of harmony, and is experimenting with what is required. Everything we have been shown, involving the activities of the Rama ships, has evidently been part of God's will.

Conclusion

Though vivid and suspenseful, and perhaps successful in their own terms, *Rama II* and its sequels are very different books from *Rendezvous with Rama*. They rely on such formulaic blockbuster elements as passionate confrontations between characters who are supposedly on the same side, forbidden secrets, scheming women, and sexual intrigue. They retreat from many of the impulses behind Clarke's original novel, including its strong emphasis on the functioning of an attractive future civilisation with

social arrangements different from our own. The authors of the *Rama* trilogy have seemingly felt the need to efface that civilisation to allow for the trilogy's far more melodramatic narrative. What should be inferred from this, if we are interested in the relationship between utopian thinking and science fiction?

It is, of course, dangerous to generalise from one case study, but consideration of *Rendezvous with Rama* confirms a familiar and plausible point – that hard science fiction, and related forms such as space opera, blend well with a certain kind of utopian impulse. The emphasis is likely to be placed on positive images of technocracy and the idea that the mores of society are mutable. In particular, social mores may be shaped by technological change. By contrast, the elements of a familiar “best-seller” style that I have identified in the *Rama* trilogy appear to be inimical to utopianism.

The stock character types and clichéd passions of such works depend on a background of social arrangements that are recognisably similar to our own, however far in the future, or however distant in space, they may be set. Such melodrama requires certain obvious distortions: for example, professionals such as astronauts must act with an extraordinary level of incompetence, conflict of interest, and indulgence in emotional excess. These same distortions, however, rely on widespread anxiety or cynicism about how things “really” happen in our own world. All of this would be out of place in a society that is presented as transformed for the better from our own, with citizens who are socialised in totally different ways.

In short, a comparison of *Rendezvous with Rama* and the *Rama* trilogy suggests that utopianism of a particular kind is compatible with hard science fiction and related forms. It does not appear so compatible with the formulaic elements of the blockbuster best-seller novel. The blockbuster style may be successful in exciting passions, and in validating fears about the corrupt ways in which social institutions, powerful individuals, and beautiful women “really” operate. One thing it cannot do so readily is provide the literary vehicle for a rendezvous with utopia.

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NOTES

- ¹ Peter Brigg, "Three Styles of Arthur C. Clarke: The Projector, the Wit, and the Mystic", ed. Joseph D. Olander and Martin Harry Greenberg, in *Arthur C. Clarke* (New York: Taplinger, 1977), pp. 15-51, 41.
- ² Brigg, "Three Styles", p. 42.
- ³ See Russell Blackford, "Technological Meliorism and the Posthuman Vision: Arthur C. Clarke and the Ultimate Future of Intelligence", *New York Review of Science Fiction*, 159 (November 2001), pp. 1, 10-12.
- ⁴ Brigg, "Three Styles", p. 44.
- ⁵ Brigg, "Three Styles", p. 45.
- ⁶ Arthur C. Clarke, *Rendezvous with Rama* (London: Orbit, 1991), p. 112.
- ⁷ Clarke, *Rendezvous*, p. 205.
- ⁸ Clarke, *Rendezvous*, p. 27.
- ⁹ Clarke, *Rendezvous*, p. 16.
- ¹⁰ Clarke, *Rendezvous*, p. 27.
- ¹¹ Clarke, *Rendezvous*, p. 60.
- ¹² Arthur C. Clarke and Gentry Lee, *Rama II* (London: Gollancz, 1989).
- ¹³ Arthur C. Clarke and Gentry Lee, *The Garden of Rama* (London: Gollancz, 1991).
- ¹⁴ Arthur C. Clarke and Gentry Lee, *Rama Revealed* (London: Gollancz, 1993).
- ¹⁵ Robin Reid, *Arthur C. Clarke: A Critical Companion* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997), pp. 40-1.
- ¹⁶ Clarke and Lee, *Rama II*, pp. 20-3.
- ¹⁷ Clarke and Lee, *Rama II*, p. 28.