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Anathem

Built For A Thousand Years

Brian Caulfield, 09.12.08, 6:00 PM ET

SAN FRANCISCO, CALIF. -How's this for an implausible premise for a novel: Sci-Fi author Neal Stephenson's latest book, *Anathem*, revolves around cloistered groups of nerds who live in a far-off world and think long term--really long term.

As in thousand-year spans.

The book was inspired, in part, by the thinking behind the Long Now Foundation, which this week organized an event to launch Stephenson's latest book. Author of *Snow Crash* and *The Diamond Age,* Stephenson specializes in tales that connect computing with history and humanity in surprising ways.

It's a body of work that has won Stephenson plenty of fans. Hundreds turned out for an event that included a reading by Stephenson and several performances drawn from his work. There were singers adorned in brown monk-like robes like those worn by Stephenson's cloistered thinkers and a demonstration of a pseudo-martial art--dubbed Shovel Fu--inspired by the book.

In other words, it was a down-home geekfest. The event lasted a few hours--just a blink of an eye compared to the time it will likely take the average reader to get through all 937 pages, including the smattering of mathematical puzzles in the appendix.

But despite the book's deeply geeky themes, many of the ideas behind the book aren't so impractical, says Peter Schwartz, a member of the Long Now board. "Look at Apple, they're driven by Jobs' vision and not the share price--period, end of story--and we love it," Schwartz says.

Schwartz, who led a study undertaken by Royal Dutch Shell of businesses that have lasted for hundreds of years, can rattle off plenty of organizations that have endured the test of time--including Sweden's Stora Enso, founded in 1347.

But while business can be built to last, geeks are growing increasingly concerned that their work won't. Douglas Carlston, co-founder of Brøderbund Software and another Long Now board member, frets that as storage formats and hardware evolve, the work of software coders and others committed to digital form will become less accessible than the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The solution? The characters in Stephenson's book resort to primitive media, such as chalk, paper and stone, to record human knowledge, even while living in a society whose technology is vastly more advanced than our own.

The lesson: Don't confuse mastery of the latest gizmo with real knowledge.

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