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BOOKSHELF

Internet-Free And Glad of It

By PAUL BOUTIN

Anathem

By Neal Stephenson

(*William Morrow, 937 pages, \$29.95*)

Is Google making us stupid? Intellectuals fret that the Internet's instant-answer machine may be making us dumber, as we learn to solve problems without applying long-term mental effort. "I'm not thinking the way I used to think," worried technology pundit Nicholas Carr in a recent *Atlantic Monthly* article. After 10 years of Internet immersion, Mr. Carr finds that when he attempts to read a book his concentration wanes after three pages. A lit-major friend of his commiserates: "I used to be a voracious book reader. What happened?"

The threat of digital dumb-down has prompted science-fiction author Neal Stephenson, in "Anathem," to concoct a deliciously nerdy alternative world, one populated by characters who possess what he calls "attention surplus disorder." The 937-page novel isn't a cautionary tale; it's an escapist fantasy for readers who miss the joys of studious immersion in math, science and philosophy. What if, Mr. Stephenson wonders, the world's most earnest intellectuals cloistered themselves, shunning any thought of Internet video or quarterly results, to focus on 1,000-year projects? If word problems got you excited in school, this is the novel for you.

The tale -- set far in the future, on a planet called Arbore -- is told by Erasmus, an 18-year-old member of a monk-like sect, the Convent of Saunt Edhar, that has been walled off from the "saecular" outside world for 3,000 years. Barefoot in only a robe and a belt, Erasmus spends his days studying and his nights geeking out with friends. When he's not calculating celestial mechanics, he's participating in meticulous rituals that hone his ability to handle complex systems in his mind.

Here's the catch: None of St. Edhar's male and female devotees uses any sort of computers or electronics. They do their math by hand, scratching out equations on paper that lasts for millennia. They memorize their world's knowledge rather than using a search-engine crutch. Instead of arguing sports or breaking into fistfights, Erasmus's teenage friends pour their hormonal energies into heated philosophical jousts and stylized combat maneuvers. They consume oversize books as eagerly as the less-educated *slines* outside their walls feast on fast food and porn.

But to be clear, the Convent of Saunt Edhar isn't a religious order. Erasmus and his fellow *fraas* and *surrs* (brothers and sisters) revere visionary scientists and intellectuals from their past. Religions are regarded as intractable fads among the foolish *slines*. Deadly sins at Saunt Edhar's are flawed logic and sloppy methodology.

Mr. Stephenson's inspiration for the world of "Anathem" is something called The Long Now Foundation, a project led by computer scientist Danny Hillis to encourage long-term thinking instead of the pursuit of short-term results. The foundation is building a clock meant to run 10,000 years without electricity. Mr. Stephenson centers Saunt Edhar's around a 500-foot mechanical timepiece that can run for 100 years without winding. That's important, Erasmus explains, because every few

centuries, anti- intellectualism on Arbre grows strong enough that Saunt Edhar's is sacked by an angry mob of idiots. The clock marks time until humanity wises up again.

But as "Anathem" unfolds, the outsiders come to Saunt Edhar's looking for help after a world-threatening menace appears. No, I won't tell you what it is. One of Mr. Stephenson's best skills -- as he has showed in "Quicksilver," "Cryptonomicom" and other novels -- is his ability to present a puzzle, piece by piece, in such a way that the reader can gradually arrive at a solution along with the book's narrator. He is science fiction's Agatha Christie, placing a shocking revelation in full view but revealing it one small clue at a time.

A publicity-shy history and science buff, Mr. Stephenson cranks up the bookworm factor as he builds his story in "Anathem." He adapts a standard sci-fi plot as an excuse for lengthy ruminations on big-think topics of philosophy and cosmology. By explaining highbrow concepts about the nature of consciousness and the universe entirely within his alternate universe, he's able to cast them as new and interesting ideas.

He plays with language, too, giddily lacing sentences with an alternative vocabulary that makes the Russian slang in "A Clockwork Orange" seem trite. If you get lost -- even though "Anathem" is crafted as a solvable puzzle -- there's a story timeline at the front of the book and a 20-page glossary at the back.

Mr. Stephenson's own attention surplus disorder is what separates him from lesser sci-fi authors. He's able to hold together the sprawling world of "Anathem" with uncanny consistency. It helps that the book has a Hollywood movie's three-act structure. The first few hundred pages are a whimsical tour through the solipsistic world of Saunt Edhar's computer-free society. It's a sort of Amish-genius paradise, safe from the morons who've overrun the Internet. Even when the outsider kids gang up on the geeks, their brute force is no match for precision martial-arts training.

The novel shifts gears when the real world draws Erasmus into its *saecular* maw. Here, the author's contempt for celebrity culture, self-serving bureaucracy and mindless multimedia entertainment is poured slowly across the frozen northern landscape of Arbre. Compared with, say, the giddy parody found in "Gulliver's Travels," it's a colder, drier condemnation. "I was struck by their intelligence, their polish, and how much stuff they owned," Erasmus says of the outsiders. "But there was nothing underneath. They knew many things but had no idea why. And strangely this made them more, rather than less, certain they were right."

The third act, in which Erasmus and friends suit up to save the world, is a throwback to classic sci-fi. It feels like literary red meat and comes as something of a relief after so much cerebration. But the lasting satisfaction of "Anathem" derives not from the action but from Mr. Stephenson's wry contempt for today's just-Google-it mindset. His prose is dense, but his worldview contagious. Three hundred pages in, I fervently resolved to shut down my blog and spend the next millennium reading books.

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