

WE HAVE MET THE ALIEN . . .

“[He] was fully fifteen feet in height and, on Earth, would have weighed some four hundred pounds. He sat his mount as we sit a horse, grasping the animal’s barrel with his lower limbs, while the hands of his two right arms held his immense spear low at the side of his mount; his two left arms were outstretched laterally to help preserve his balance, the thing he rode having neither bridle or reins of any description for guidance.”

John Carter’s initial encounter with Edgar Rice Burroughs’s olive-green Martian thark was my first memorable introduction to the concept of an alien life form. Tars Tarkas contributed much to my early thinking about extraterrestrials. It made sense that they would at first seem dangerous and deadly—Burroughs further describes Tarkas as a “huge and terrific incarnation of hate, of vengeance and of death”—but that we might realize they were decent once we understood their point of view. After all, Tars wasn’t such a bad guy once you got to know him.

And though I loved the incomparable Dejah Thoris and brave Thuvia, Maid of Mars, even as a child I found Tars Tarkas’s strangeness much more believable than Burroughs’s humaniform aliens. For the most part, whether they were beautiful or bug-eyed, I didn’t find aliens that wanted to mate with us very convincing.

As a teenager watching reruns of *Star Trek* episodes, I found the silicone-based Horta oozing its way around Janus VI terrorizing the mining colony in “The Devil in the Dark” far more plausible than Mr. Spock, the Klingons, Captain Kirk’s latest squeeze, and all the other bipedal aliens who usually populated the show. Fortunately, although, the Horta was also a misunderstood monstrous alien, Mr. Spock’s mind meld gave us humans a clear insight into its issues.

But even Tars Tarkas and the Horta shared some common ground with humanity. It took Terry Carr’s ground-

breaking story about “The Dance of the Changer and the Three” to make me realize that Burroughs’s Martian and the Horta might be no more realistic than *Star Trek*’s dancing green girl. In the Carr story, another hapless mining colony has a nasty run-in with an alien species, but this time there seems to be little likelihood that either group will ever come to an understanding of the other. Carr tells a beautiful story about an alien culture that is unfathomable to us simply because it is alien. This highly rewarding tale deserved its Hugo and Nebula nominations, but it intentionally gives us virtually no insight into the alien condition.

Clifford D. Simak, one of SF’s most distinguished writers, implied in an interview with Darrell Schweitzer that no author was capable of fashioning a story about a truly *alien* alien. Simak said, “We can only think in human terms. What we try to do is twist human concepts into strange, distorted shapes. They seem alien, but all they are are distorted human concepts. You don’t know how many years I have tried to develop a true alien. I have never been able to. Terry Carr came awful close . . . but he wasn’t quite successful. I think probably it’s very close to impossible to do it.”

Yet, though it may be a Herculean task, the challenge doesn’t prevent creative authors from coming up with entertaining extraterrestrials. I think the best of these are not humanoid in their appearance, but authors have to be cautious when setting about crafting such characters because they run the risk of producing something ridiculous. Burroughs describes the tharks as having eyes “set at the extreme sides of their heads . . . [they] protruded in such a manner that they could be directed forward and back and also independently of each other . . . permitting [the tharks] to look in any direction or two directions at once without the necessity of turning the head.” Preview

images of Tars Tarkas in Disney's new film, *John Carter*, seem to have deemphasized this detail—and that's probably a good thing. Formidable as the giant Martian is, it's hard to take seriously the vision of his eyes swiveling backward and off in multiple directions simultaneously.

Many authors apparently circumvent this problem by keeping the alien off stage. Sometimes the aliens are only to be found in the ruins of their civilization. Though the aliens are mysterious and long gone, we learn something about them from the artifacts left behind. From H. Beam Piper's "Omnilingual" to Arkady and Boris Strugatsky's *Roadside Picnic* this is an idea I seldom tire of—perhaps because there are so many ways in which it can be handled. These stories often leave us with no clear image of what the alien looked and acted like before they became extinct or departed to another plane. We can make assumptions about what mattered to their civilization, maybe pick up some FTL or other advanced technology, but we don't have to try to form a three-dimensional conception of what they looked like when they were at home.

Keeping the alien invisible, communicating with a story's human characters through some form of telepathy, is another way to avoid writing a physical description of an extraterrestrial. Sometimes these aliens are pure energy. Other times, they inhabit a different dimension or occupy another universe. We can't really know them, but if we listen carefully, we may be able to absorb some aspect of their philosophy. The authors of these stories can avoid turning the alien into some kind of distortion of the human form, but, being only human, they can't avoid modeling the alien thought on some aspect of the human mind.

So we have met the alien and he is us. Still, no matter how hard it is to create a plausible alien, the implausible ones are often lots of fun to play with. Imaginative authors may never show us exactly who or what to expect should SETI someday receive an answer of some sort through its telescopes or probes, but stories about aliens may give us an insight into the minds and hearts of the humans who take ET's phone call.