



A Song Called Youth

John Shirley

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In a near-future dystopia, a limited nuclear strike has destroyed portions of Europe, bringing the remaining nation-cities under control of the Second Alliance, a frighteningly fundamentalist international security corporation with designs on world domination. The only defense against the Alliance's creeping totalitarianism is the New Resistance, a polyglot team of rebels that includes Rick Rickenharp, a retro-rocker whose artistic and political sensibilities intertwine, and John Swenson, a mole who has infiltrated the Alliance. As the fight continues and years progress, so does the technology and brutality of the Alliance... but ordinary people like the damaged visionary Smoke, Claire Rimpler on FirStep, and Dance Torrence and his fellow urban warriors on Earth are bound together by the truth and a single purpose: to keep the darkness from becoming humankind's Total Eclipse - or die trying John Shirley was cyberpunk's patient zero, first locus of the virus, certifiably virulent."-William Gibson. An omnibus of all three novels-revised by the author-of the prophetic, still frighteningly relevant cyberpunk masterpieces: Eclipse, Eclipse Penumbra, and Eclipse Corona. With an introduction by Richard Kadrey and biographical note by Bruce Sterling.

A Song Called Youth Details

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From Reader Review A Song Called Youth for online ebook

Peter says

War is gripping the world, but that's not the real danger. The real danger is that it's being used by secretive powers to promote a new wave of racist fascism, where 'undesirables' can be accused of being enemy agents, terrorist sympathizers, or security risk, and systematically eliminated from power... and, eventually, just eliminated. However, there are forces working for freedom, the New Resistance, often struggling just to stay alive and to expose the villains for who they are. But it's harder than ever, especially in a world where, if you fall into enemy hands, their machines can extract every secret and even turn them to their side.

A Song Called Youth is actually a collection of three late-80s, early-90s cyberpunk novels: Eclipse, Eclipse Penumbra, and Eclipse Corona, collected in an omnibus under a new title for the 21st century. For the sake of my reading challenge, I considered just marking down and reviewing each book separately, despite reading it in an omnibus, but I decided not to when I read the first mention of Facebook, in a book written in the 80s. I'm pretty sure this doesn't signify that John Shirley has precognitive powers, but rather that, in collecting all three novels, he also "updated" them to reflect current concerns (I had my suspicions before Facebook was mentioned that this was happening, but that sealed it). It's impossible for me to be sure of what elements were unique to this update and which were in the original story, so I must review the omnibus on its own merits.

I don't have an objection to such updating, incidentally (although it is a case where I'd love to not only have both versions in ebook, but also a function where I could flip back and forth to the equivalent page in each just to see how things changed), it just depends on how it works. And, largely, it works better than you'd think. Sometimes there's a reference that's a bit jarringly out of date, but most of the time I can ignore it and pretend it's an extrapolation of today, not of the 90s... although it does feel retro in some areas, particularly in the focus on music. Still, the ideas about creeping fascism, subtle propaganda in mainstream media, and racism are timeless and perhaps even more relevant and timely than ever, and on those it reads as almost chillingly plausible.

For enjoyment, though? There's a bit too much of stuff that's just me, the military aspect of the resistance didn't interest me nearly as much as the space station or the worries about the extractors, and it also seemed the least plausible given the level of surveillance that not only the world of the book has, but also that we have... any such organized armed resistance would seem to be easy to squash out, if the enemy had the will and resources that these obviously do. There are ways for resistance groups to work around it, I believe, but it doesn't work for me as written. And, in part because of the resistance elements that don't interest me, but not exclusively so, the book felt a bit like a slog to me. There were moments I was riveted to the book, but not often, mostly I was just getting to the next good part.

Breaking it down by section, I think the middle one was the strongest, but for one glaring flaw (where people who know that the enemy machines can turn a loyal friend into a traitor, and know that a certain person has been in enemy hands, nonetheless refuse to believe that he could now be an enemy agent and take simple precautions). Still, it was the sub-novel that I enjoyed the most.

I'm rating it three stars, which means "I liked it", while the truth is I'd probably describe it as "ok"... it gets the extra star because it's one of those rare books that I'm glad I read despite it being a slog, despite not enjoying it on a pure pleasure, because I think it has some important ideas that'll stick with me.

Roger says

This was a good one.

Back in my youth (no pun intended), I devoured Gibson's novels and so considered myself an ardent fan of the genre. And yet, I must not have been much of one because I never even heard of John Shirley before seeing this doorstep of a volume in the store a year or so ago. Intrigued, I bought it, brought it home, stuck it on my TBR shelf because I was in the middle of some other large master piece at the time (some Hamilton space opera, most likely), and forgot about it until now.

First published in the mid to late eighties, with updates by the author for this edition (Facebook and iPads are mentioned, as well as the Arab Spring as something positive. I wonder if Shirley regrets that last one), the book's anachronistic qualities are equal parts attractive and disturbing.

Attractive because it's fun to read a 25 year old sci-fi story to see how the the present and near future jibs with the author's view of the future two generations past the time it was written in. I have to say, Shirley hits the mark more often than he misses in that regard.

Disturbing because, despite all of the positive events that have moved the world closer to freedom and equality for all in the last 25 years, the current political climate is such that it is very easy to see how we could end up in the world of 2040 he envisions.

Kelly says

An amazingly prescient and insightful read. Up there with the great dystopian novels of the 20th C by the likes of Burgess, Huxley, Orwell et al.

August Bourré says

4.5

One hell of a thing. Intense.

Johnkober says

Simply put, this book changed cyberpunk, and it changed my views. Eerily close to modern day this book is not only wildly entertaining, and gripping, but as important a read as any science fiction book that is around today.

W Craig says

Well I had heard about John Shirley and had started this trilogy in my teens, but I loved it, it contains some of the most quintessentially 'cyberpunk' moments of anything in the genre I've ever read.

Chris says

Loved this book. Got this off a discount shelf and was intrigued. From the start I enjoyed the plot, intrigue and characters. The descriptions that Shirley provided, details about places, events and references to the past really bring the ideas of this book to life and make it seem as if the stark reality of this future could be possible if certain events happened. I loved the depth of the characters and the point of views shown throughout the books, giving insight into the minds of characters and how certain events along the way changed and defined them. A book I know I'll keep and be reading again in the future.

John says

The Definitive Cyberpunk Trilogy from One of Its Greatest Practitioners: John Shirley

What was cyberpunk? Compelling near future high tech science fiction tales replete with characters hooked up to the internet, getting their minds stimulated via drugs or some kind of biotechnology (such as computer chip brain-interfaces), and most likely, all three. Engrossing tales about those revolting against “the system” (“The Man” or “The Woman”) enriched by an almost paranoid dystopian vision of the near future, written by science fiction writers who were – and in many instances, still are – among the finest literary stylists ever to work in this genre, worthy of comparison with mainstream Anglo-American fiction’s greatest literary talents: William Gibson (who coined the term “cyberspace”), Bruce Sterling, Lewis Shiner, Pat Cadigan, and Michael Swanwick. However, none of these great writers epitomized science fiction’s most important literary movement since the 1960’s New Wave like John Shirley did; none of them lived the very lives which John Shirley depicted vividly for many of his cyberpunk protagonists; none of them wrote and performed punk rock songs; none took drugs to the extent that he did; in other words, none acted like a real-life rebellious cyberpunk protagonist.

William Gibson’s “Cyberspace” (or “Sprawl”) trilogy “Neuromancer”, “Count Zero”, “Mona Lisa Overdrive”), may have succeeded in introducing literary audiences to an internet-dominated near future, but it pales in comparison with John Shirley’s “A Song Called Youth” trilogy (“Eclipse”, “Eclipse Penumbra”, “Eclipse Corona”) for offering a frighteningly realistic, dystopian vision of the near future; a vision that now, more than ever, seems all too probable in its “kaleidoscopic mix of politics, pop and paranoia”, to quote Sterling in his glowing assessment of Shirley’s trailblazing epic cyberpunk trilogy. In its present, slightly updated, Prime Books-published incarnation, “A Song Called Youth” is not only the definitive cyberpunk trilogy ever written, but the one that should resonate strongly with mainstream literary audiences familiar with the contemporary sociopolitical movements sweeping across the United States (and elsewhere globally). It deserves a wide readership since Shirley’s compelling vision of the near future should be familiar with anyone who has read Don De Lillo, William Gibson, Rick Moody, and Thomas Pynchon; this is not just the definitive cyberpunk trilogy, but also one of the most important works of contemporary fiction written by an American writer. If science fiction is viewed as a genre-based mirrored exploration of our present quite capable of producing high literary art, then I can think of no better “mirror” than “A Song Called Youth”.

In the waning months of the “Third World War”, in the immediate aftermath of a Western European invasion by “New Soviet” Russian armies repelled by NATO forces with limited tactical nuclear strikes, an American private security corporation, the Second Alliance, seeks to restore law and order in the desolated cities of NATO-liberated Western Europe. Only a relative few, the “New Resistance”, realize that the Second Alliance’s aims are far from benign, seeking instead global domination via Fundamentalist Christian totalitarian dictatorships, and whose genocidal plans for much of humanity are far worse than anything dreamt by Adolf Hitler and his fellow fanatical Nazis. Against impossible odds the New Resistance wages a guerilla war on the Second Alliance and its Western European regimes, uniting a motley crew composed of a has-been punk rocker (Rick Rickenharp), an idealistic Democratic Socialist (Dean “Hard-Eyes” Torrance), a poet-philosopher (Jack Brendan Smoke), and the daughter (Claire Rimpler) of the founder of FirStep, humanity’s first orbital space colony, committed to making a final stand against humanity’s “Eclipse”; the Second Alliance’s nightmarish futuristic vision for mankind.

Rocia says

Europe is invaded by the New Soviets. At the same time racist nationalism is sweeping the Western world. A sinister organization, the SA, promises security and stability behind the NATO battle lines. The SA is a quasi-Christian cult that has plans to wipe out all non-whites. The protagonists are the New Resistance, or NR, who are a ragtag group of rebels fighting in a desperate attempt to save the world.

It's full of awesome ideas about how a near future world could occur. It's packed with insight into politics, subculture philosophy, technology, neuroscience, information technology and the media. Dissidents must wrestle to overcome the lure of fascism that diseases the mind and soul of humanity.

Maddi Hausmann says

Ah, a nice meaty SF novel with lots of politics and spying and high tech, lots of things for me to enjoy. John Shirley sees this as a pre-nuclear holocaust novel. Given all the international stresses and wars going on in it, it's amazing nobody dropped a nuke on anyone else.

I have to give it four stars rather than five because the bad guys are a little too cartoonish. The best novels are those where all the characters are complex, not just the good guys. While Shirley brings us many, many, MANY points of view in many locations, the people on the "bad guy side" (who are literally Nazi-type racists with a dishonest overcoat of Christianity that really isn't what it seems) with the most interesting struggles are those who end up questioning their ideology.

While I found the behavior of the large governmental organizations all too believable, we don't have any POVs there, just the people in either the Second Alliance (the Nazi analogues) or the New Resistance (the Coalition of Everyone Against Racist Jerks) or fence sitters forced to choose one or the other. We have government writ small on a space colony that is slowly being taken over by the SA, enforcing their worldview via strong-arming, bullying, and economic repression. The struggle between the two groups goes in wildly different directions in different countries, so there is plenty of excitement. And like George RR Martin, John Shirley is willing to kill viewpoint characters you've come to appreciate.

Shirley also makes good use of both musical performance and social media engineering as political tools. Some of the technology he posits for this 21st century world is intriguing, some seems built on wishes and nonsense. But I was willing to go with it all. And this was a book I was sorry to finish, because I wanted to stay with some of these characters a little longer, just to see if all they fought for would be successful.

Jim says

I read the original trilogy years ago and enjoyed it. What I found in the omnibus is that John Shirley has actually gone back and refreshed the novels with events and technologies from the past 15 years to bring it into the 21st century. What is truly shocking is how little he had to edit, and how bang on his future imagining has turned out to be. We are not far off from the new militant racism that he portrays in our near future. Some the the other elements, like the orbital habitat, are less likely, but he nails the new religious fundamentalism perfectly. The evolution into surveillance society where public opinion is blatantly tampered with seem also eerily prescient.

A must read for the cyberpunks out there - this one really is the original ancestor.

Allan says

A dark future told by the best. This book has everything in it (music, tech, espionage, love, death). Who could ask for more. Having all three novels at you finger tips is great. Once you start reading you will not be able to stop. And if you are like me, even when finished, I was hoping for more.

Josh Bancroft says

Loved it. It's an anthology of three books, which took longer to get through than I expected (a bonus IMO). Came to it via a recommendation from Neal Stephenson or Bruce Sterling (can't remember which). It's a story rooted in punk rock, democratic ideals, and personal relationships. Apparently the version I read (Kindle) was updated to tweak some of the technology references so they sound more modern. Some people hate that, but it didn't impact the story for me, and made it a little more relatable. There's always a gap in sci fi - that's part of the fun.

I'd highly recommend this one to fans of cyberpunk, and it's very timely with all the hate, strife, and conflict going on in the world today. A good reminder to seek and protect the good in all people.

7thTrooper says

Att läsa "A Song of Youth" är på något vis som att öppna en tidskapsel och se en spegel. Av alla cyberpunk-författare (och Shirley är en av de som både inspirerade och deltog i rörelsen) är nog John Shirley den som bäst förutsåg hur världen skulle komma att se ut och den effekt som teknologin skulle ha på den. Speciellt då medias roll och hur den påverkar folk och den alltmer växande extrem-högern. Trilogin känns, trots alltmer

överdrivna sci-fi grepp, mer än allt annat RIKTIG. Inte så mycket teknologin i sig som den effekt den har på människor och hur det i slutändan är just med medias hjälp som protagonisterna till slut lyckas vinna. Med mycket våld, absolut, men Shirley var väl medveten om medias betydelse. Språket är bitvis briljant och speciellt action-scenerna (och en eller två av sex-scenerna iof) glänser med riktigt briljant prosa. Bäst är den nog när Smoke irrar runt i ett urbombat Amsterdam i början. Karaktärerna är tillräckligt starka utan att vara briljanta. Roseland är väl undantaget och jag hade verkligen föredragit att han introducerats tidigare. Allt är förstås inte perfekt. De romantiska förhållandene som uppstår bara landar i ens knä utan att byggas upp och det hela blir ibland lite väl överdrivet i tredje boken. SA var som bäst i de två första innan det blev fullt ut med hemmabyggda virus och genmanipulerade valp-människor. Samma med Witchers förräderi som kommer ur ingenstans. Men i slutändan är detta en fantastisk bok som i sina bästa stunder, och det finns flera, griper tag om läsarens ryggrad och klämmer hårt.

Fortfarande skrämmande relevant, dessutom.

Ja, den här boken är en av författaren själv reviderad utgåva så jag kan inte säkert säga vad som är nytt och vad som fanns med i originalet. Men det spelar på det stora hela liten roll.

Stefan says

Probably the best cyberpunk book I've ever read, possibly even surpassing "Shockwave Rider" and "Neuromancer". It's a brutal, dark work, where some of the people you want to survive do, but no one walks away from this unscarred.
