



The Probability Broach

L. Neil Smith

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Denver detective Win Bear, on the trail of a murderer, discovers much more than a killer. He accidentally stumbles upon the probability broach, a portal to a myriad of worlds--some wildly different from, others disconcertingly similar to our own. Win finds himself transported to an alternate Earth where Congress is in Colorado, everyone carries a gun, there are gorillas in the Senate, and public services are controlled by private businesses.

The Probability Broach Details

Date : Published December 12th 2001 by Orb Books (first published December 12th 1979)

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Author : L. Neil Smith

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From Reader Review The Probability Broach for online ebook

Ethan says

Even if I were an Ayn Rand-style libertarian, which I am not, I would still hate this book. In fact, I would hate it a lot more for being such a crappy book claiming to represent my ideas. As it is, I think Ayn Rand is almost completely wrong about everything, so this book didn't personally offend me. It's just an awful book with cardboard characters, stilted dialogue, and a silly plot.

Elliott says

Perhaps I'm being cynical here, but Smith's novel seems to physically collapse when faced with plausibility as if it were it's very own version of kryptonite. Gorillas with guns, Dolphin scientists, Robert Heinlein an admiral, and Thomas Jefferson ending slavery, using the exact compromise that failed in OTL. All of these and more succeed without fail (there is no racism, no randomized violence, no real poverty, etc. etc.). What emerged was not a possible world but quite simply libertarian porn, and ultimately for all Smith's posturings: propaganda plain and simple. After all the villains are heinous, the heroes brilliant, the world perfect. Compare this to our own world and the point is made. While reading this I was unable to forget for a moment that the author was going far over the top to sell me something, and quite simply while I don't believe in any of the possibilities that Smith promises, I also find the libertarian ideology inherently flawed as it is. Smith merely became through the course of this book a car salesman trying to dress up the clunker in the warehouse. A better author could have accomplished this same task better, with more depth, less alienation, and with quite a bit more subtlety, not of course that the message would have been any more realistic, just less annoying.

Sarah says

LOVED this book. Sci-fi alternative history, experiencing an anarchist America... all because of one additional word in our Constitution. Very interesting! Definitely more of a fun read than intellectual, easy to get through. Though provoking though!

Michael Battaglia says

I'm sure that someone out there has already titled a review like this "Ron Paul's favorite SF novel!", which would be funny except a) it probably isn't and b) something tells me he doesn't read a whole lot of science-fiction anyway.

If that poor attempt at a joke didn't clue you into what you're in for, or for those coming into this via a book that has the front and back cover and the introduction torn out entirely, L Neil Smith is a SF writer that hails from the Libertarian political party, something he is quite proud of, and honestly the party seems proud to have him. For those who possess an intact copy of the book, the front trumpets it as "the quintessential Libertarian science-fiction adventure" while the back cover comments that he's the foremost Libertarian SF

writer today. Meanwhile the introduction is written by the president of a publishing company of libertarian literature and basically talks about how Smith went and created the best world ever.

The short version of this: if you're aligned politically with this, you're going to feel right at home joining in all the congenial backslapping going on here while if your politics tend to fall somewhere toward the leftward side of things you may yourself yelling at an inanimate object on occasion, or being very cross with a book that won't let you argue back at it. As an aside, one thing I found amusing is that while the cover copy notes that Smith won the Prometheus Award for best Libertarian fiction (three times, to be exact), it doesn't note that he established the award himself and while I'm sure he recused himself from voting on his own book that is kind of like me creating an award called "The Best Books Written in My Style" and being astounded when I turn out to be the best candidate around for the book.

But enough background . . . how is the book? It's actually quite entertaining in an earnest and breathless kind of way. Denver police detective Win Bear is investigating a murder in his own world where the ideas of those rotten liberals have been given free reign, thus trapping everyone in a nanny state where cigarettes are wink-wink contraband and it's illegal to hurt someone's feelings. It's of course the most miserable place ever so it's to his benefit that in the course of that investigation he winds up being triggering a probability broach and is transported to another Earth, one where the US has been replaced by the North American Confederacy, every single person is armed to the teeth, the government is happy to be perfectly useless, individuality is paramount and thus everything is indeed, awesome. There he encounters that world's version of himself, a hot girl with a healing touch and an old lady who is like your grandmother in that she's always right but unlike your grandmother in that she never buys treats. But she is armed, baby. In a world where George Washington was executed during the Whiskey Rebellion and thus depriving us of President's Day auto sales, together they have to stop a conspiracy involving people who are mad that nobody listened to Alexander Hamilton and instead went with that old buzzkill Thomas Jefferson . . . there's a plan to invade and a lot of gunfire is exchanged, while in between the old lady explains to Win why this world is so much better than his despite the fact that both worlds lack "The Bachelor" and are thus cultural black holes.

In case you haven't figured it out, there's an awful lot of wish fulfillment going on here and if you listen closely enough you can hear the sound of heels constantly clicking together while the author whispers "There's no place like home, please let this be home". While I can sympathize with some aspects of the Libertarian Party they aren't where I hang my hat politically and that makes me either the target audience or absolutely not the target audience. Unfortunately, as a tract to convince people that the foundations of Libertarianism are the best means to run a country, it falls a bit short . . . while converts may nod in appreciation every time author mouthpiece Lucy speaks, in a world where intelligent gorillas and dolphins are the norm you're not exactly going to be greeted by stunning realism and even if he was writing a strictly realistic version of the real world he'd run into the same problem that Ayn Rand (who is President at some point) had . . . just because everything works out perfectly in your fiction doesn't mean your ideas are right, it just proves that when you write the story, things tend to work out the way you want them.

Fortunately Smith does bother with an actual plot in between careening through the Libertarian Party's greatest hits, and it's the kind of story that works purely on momentum alone, where it seems like everyone is constantly running or shouting, preparing for imminent danger or escaping from peril, where every line of dialogue is delivered breathlessly while over the shoulder. The breaks for chapters seem more for the reader's benefit than anything else. Meanwhile, everything is progressing so rapidly that there's barely any time for characters to develop, with Win mostly acting confused as he tries to figure out the rules of the world, the hot girl falling for him despite the fact that his more in shape twin is right there all the time (wish fulfillment in itself, especially since she basically throws herself at him despite their introduction to each other coming after him proving that he's no good at dodging bullets . . . but he's the hero so that's cool) and everyone else

falling into the camps of either being Libertarian and awesome or backing Allie Hams and thus trying to federally reserve you a coffin.

It reminds me of nothing more than a Heinlein novel in that period where his novels were transitioning from the juveniles to his own well tailored brand of libertarianism (q.v. "The Moon is a Harsh Mistress") and Smith's novel features many of the tropes that Heinlein practically invented, an Everyman hero who is able to survive in an unfamiliar place based on his wits and pluck, a world run by controversial values where everything is amazingly better than here and of course the grizzled yet awesome old person who knows all and is never wrong and acts as the mouthpiece for the author, explaining to the hero how everything he believed is wrong and everything they believe is true without question. In the midst of this the plot is almost secondary to the grand tour of All Libertarian All The Time and there are moments where the balance between "telling us a story" and "telling us how to fix the country" is very wobbly and he doesn't always fall down on the right side.

Better people than me can chime in on whether what the author feels is Hamiltonism actually relates to things Hamilton believed. Still, it makes for a grand fantasy (his amazing world of many guns and no government seems to work perfectly as long as things like racism or poverty or, um, people with disabilities don't exist) and it definitely wants to be the kind of thing you either read in your early twenties that shapes your worldview forever or the book you read in your thirties and forties when you want to be reminded of all the cozy values you feel this country has forgotten . . . and while it works to a great extent it also comes across as watered down Heinlein, perhaps lacking some of his crazier excesses but also lacking the "whoa did he just go there?" swaggering verve that made "Starship Troopers", "Stranger in a Strange Land" or the aforementioned "The Moon is a Harsh Mistress" such necessary reads even if you didn't agree with the politics (of course that approach also gave us stuff like "Farnham's Freehold" which takes "did he just go there" to somewhat disturbing heights). Here, for the most part the story is a vehicle for the politics where he gives us a premade world without depicting any of the blood or sweat or disagreements or compromises that got this alternate world to that point . . . everyone in the world is so sure of themselves and never doubts, which as we know in the real world from past experience, it'd be nice if people making big decisions once in a while stepped back and said, "Gee, is this really the right thing to do?" By giving us a world that lacks the mess of the real world, it delivers a nice pulp story but underneath the gleaming sheen everything is so smooth and polished that without the friction to make it stick, all the important stuff the author wants to convey just lands in a gooey puddle on the floor. You can study it, you can nudge it with your foot, but it doesn't necessarily convince you that you want to get any of it on you.

Rupert Gilliland says

While the actual prose is well-constructed, the book itself is such a glaring work of libertarian propaganda that it was impossible for me to enjoy it as a piece of fiction in and of itself.

I must admit that I am biased in this matter, being so strongly opposed to most of the libertarian ideology.

The best I can say about this novel is that the author seems bent on portraying his view of a libertarian utopia and is passionate about the world he has created - as glaringly full of holes and inconsistencies as it is.

The book did give me much to think about, but all that I thought of was how much I disagree with the ideas expressed within. If L. Neil Smith intended, in writing The Probability Broach, to actively turn people away from libertarianism - then well done; he has succeeded admirably.

Unless you are already strongly libertarian, I suggest passing over this book in favor of something, anything, better.

Edward Becerra says

Loved it, and got to meet the author in Denver while attending the 2010 and 2011 StarFest conventions.

He generously autographed my first edition paperback, and signed a copy of the graphic novel, as well!

Michael says

A very conflicted three-star review:

I've read so many alt-history books that I sometimes wonder if there are any worthwhile new (to me) ideas to explore. I like Smith's idea. I liked the idea (a one-word difference in the Declaration of Independence leads to a libertarian utopia) enough to burn through this book relatively quickly. If you're a libertarian, I'm sure you will love this book. You've probably read it already.

None of this can make up for the COMPLETELY SHITTY DIALOGUE or WEAK DIME-NOVEL PLOT. The dialogue was so bad that it made me angry. Every time the narrative would roll into one of those fannish aw-shucks moments, I got angry. When I felt by the end that I was reading an L. Ron Hubbard novel, I got angry. I wish that I could do 2 1/2 stars in reflection of these moments. I enjoyed the story, and the ideas, and I was entertained for the most part. Reader beware. There is much dopiness here.

As a side note, Smith seems to really dislike Denver (my home). I assume that in 1980 Denver was a lousy place to live due to pollution and crime and general sprawl. The snide comments coming out of the characters are pretty obvious (even if neither setting in the book is "my" Denver).

Later: I changed the rating to 2 stars because every time I think of this book, I get angry.

Manuel Antão says

If you're into stuff like this, you can read the full review.

Rehashed SF: "Probability Broach" by L. Neil Smith

(Original Review, 1980)

As for me, conflict of all kinds is a most important part of what I look for in a story. This certainly includes

good (or even just "passable") vs evil, so I agree with most people to that extent. But denigrating FOUNTAINS OF PARADISE because it was a classic "engineer vs problem" story seems to show an awfully limited set of preferences. There certainly is conflict in the "engineer vs problem" story; it's just not "person vs person" conflict. The real world (being neither evil nor good) can interfere with the best laid plans, and this conflict, and its resolution, can fascinate me for hours.

[2018 EDIT: This review was written at the time as I was running my own personal BBS server. Much of the language of this and other reviews written in 1980 reflect a very particular kind of language: what I call now in retrospect a "BBS language".]

Aaron Schiffer says

It was a wonderful Libertarian fantasyland. I'm sure people take this a little more seriously, or want to believe it could happen in their heart of hearts, but just enjoying it as a fantasy is enough for me.

Stephen says

I've been meaning to read this one for a while, and it didn't disappoint. A great combination of libertarian philosophy and fast paced action. Finished it in about three days, with lots of notes along the way.

Jon gold says

There are people who thinks and act for themselves with the proddings of government or corporation. It is interesting to peek into a future where individuals are ultimately responsible for themselves, and government and corporation alike must respond to the true will of the people, not just what they market to the people. It is fiction, but this book and the sequel tweak soul and ask you what would have happened if the US had rebelled against its first government the second they tried to implement taxation.

Made my week!

Greg says

Award winning libertarian science fiction. Parallel histories, one of which evolved from different post-1776 events into utopian libertarian society. Thought-provoking & entertaining.

Checkman says

I was twelve when I first read this novel. It was 1980. I missed the fact that Smith had written a Libertarian tract disguised as a science-fiction novel. I did understand that he was very pro-second amendment. I

remember being concerned that 1987 was going to be pretty rough. And finally I really enjoyed the book. Well that was 1980 and I was twelve. I read it again when I was fourteen. That time I around I was aware of a definite political/sociological tract running throughout the story, but I just figured it was set on an alternate Earth so it was no big deal. Of course things were going to be different. Once again I failed to understand that the author had a political axe to grind.

Okay. So I read this book (again) a couple years ago. Now I agree with some aspects of the Libertarian philosophy, but I'm not a true believer. There are problems with any belief system. I look at them as being a tool box. You take what works out of them. *The Probability Broach* is pure propaganda and nothing more. It's entertaining, but Smith has set up a Utopia and Utopias do not work in the real world.

Smith wrote this book in the seventies when he was in his twenties. The twenties are an odd time in a person's life. You are now an adult, but you haven't seasoned yet. There is still aspects of the single minded teenager hanging around during your twenties. As a result sometimes ideas and attitudes are more simplistic. It isn't until later that we get more cynical and realistic about things. *The Probability Broach* was his first novel and Smith has become a better writer. He still pushes the Libertarian line pretty hard, but he's gotten more subtle about it. In TPB he's hitting the reader over the head with a hammer. The book is rather clumsy in that respect. But what it lacks in sophistication it does make up for with sheer exuberance. And it's this enthusiasm and go for broke attitude that earns it three stars. Sometimes youth and energy can cover other shortcomings.

Despite being a propaganda piece it's fun. So three stars it is.

Peter Tillman says

Alan Brown's sort-of review:

<https://www.tor.com/2018/09/27/throw-...>

Lisa (Harmonybites) says

I agree with the reviewer who said this book is for niche tastes (although given I do to some extent fit the niche, my rating is correspondingly higher.) This is libertarian science fiction--indeed it could be described as libertarian porn: that kind of book where you, if you're inclined that way politically, rather revel in the rare experience of seeing your ideas (or at least the ideas you've debated with fellow libertarians) brought to life. There are works of libertarian science fiction, or works labeled as such, I think mainstream readers can enjoy--and not even notice the political tilt. I would describe myself as having been politically a typical liberal in my teens when I discovered Robert Heinlein, but I loved his *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* completely oblivious to any libertarian message until I found it listed as libertarian science fiction when I became involved in the movement. Similarly there are works by Poul Anderson, Vernor Vinge and James P. Hogan called libertarian science fiction which I'd recommend to non-libertarian friends as good yarns, imaginative and well-written, that don't hit someone as overly polemical.

I can't imagine that being the case with *The Probability Broach* as much as I personally enjoy it. The book reads to me as one big in-joke in its alternate history and its anarcho-capitalist armed society. I can't see this book as sparking off a conversion experience. I can't imagine anyone who wasn't already exposed to these

ideas taking them seriously enough to enjoy them--or even lightly enough to enjoy them. Nor do I think the uninitiated are even going to "get" such things as William F. Buckley and Ayn Rand's cameos in this book. As it is, this book ascribes to a version of libertarianism even most self-described libertarians would consider extreme. That said, did I find it fun? I admit I did. Except darn it, my city of New York didn't get where it did because of political pull--Alexander Hamilton's or anyone else's. I have three words for you: Deep water port.
