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Listen Up! Aliens Lurking Behind the Cosmic Noise

James Turner, Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

SIGNAL TO NOISE

By Eric Nylund

Avon Books

371 pp., \$23

Bad novelists exploit clichs. Good novelists use them to build great stories.

In the hands of a lesser writer, the plot devices of "Signal to Noise" might have turned into a standard science-fiction potboiler. After all, dystopian cyberpunk societies full of virtual reality, advanced technology sent to us by seemingly beneficent aliens, and grand space battles are nothing new to science fiction. What makes Eric Nylund's novel so wonderful, however, is that he uses these genre clichs as a tool to investigate many of modern society's most profound challenges.

Jack Potter is a university professor who moonlights for the National Security Office (NSO). Trying to earn tenure in a world of corporate infighting and McCarthy-style paranoia, he sets out to disprove a rival's theories by showing that code-breakers sometimes find messages that aren't really there. Imagine his surprise, when he starts finding secret communications hiding in the background noise of cosmic radiation.

Before you can say "first contact," Potter's encounter with aliens has him going in three directions. He forms a corporation to market technology from his new alien friends, flees to Europe pursued by the NSO, and escapes Chinese agents trying to recruit him.

"Signal to Noise" is a fine adventure novel in the cyberpunk tradition. But it's what Potter discovers along the way that makes the novel so telling. First-world ethnocentrism is neatly skewered by Nylund, as Potter discovers that America, home of the free, is actually a repressive corporate dictatorship where human rights are an inconvenience and virtual reality is used to control the perceptions of the intellectual elite.

In the same way, Nylund attacks free-market economics by turning it on its head. Potter and his friends use a corporation-friendly legal system and assorted dirty business tricks to get ahead, but are shocked to discover that their alien partner is capable of equally ruthless tactics.

Nylund also introduces an interesting subplot regarding alien technology that condenses the human genome, removing all the imperfection and dead wood of evolution. After taking advantage of the treatment, Potter and his friends find themselves intensified. The smart are smarter, the manipulative more manipulative.

"Signal to Noise" is a strong novel, not only for its biting social satire, but also for the compelling and fast-moving plot, and richly textured characters. We follow Potter through a kaleidoscope of fear, paranoia, betrayal, and finally desperate hope, as he tries to survive in a world more like our own than we might like to

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* James Turner is on the e-Monitor staff.

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