

Tales from the Edge of Space (February 2020)

Les Johnson's February Newsletter

Welcome to Les's not-as-regular-as-he-would-like newsletter. In this and future issues, I'll try to be informative about space or space-related topics, provide news about my latest books, magazines, or articles, and share my sometimes-off-the-wall-thoughts ...

Science Fact

2019 was a BIG year for solar sailing, with The Planetary Society and China launching test sails into space, NASA nearing completion of the Near-Earth Asteroid Scout sailcraft, and selecting a new solar Sail project called Solar Cruiser (formerly "Kon-Tiki").

The Planetary Society successfully launched and flew their LightSail-2 solar sailcraft in Earth orbit, demonstrating controlled deployment and successful navigation. The LightSail, measuring 32 square meters (~344 Square feet), successfully unfurled on June 23, 2019 and, as of this writing, is still in space – sail on!



Yes, that's me, Carol, and Bill Nye "The Science Guy" at the International Solar Sail Symposium (Kyoto, Japan) in 2017. Bill, as you know, is the spokesperson extraordinaire for The Planetary Society and their LightSail solar sail, shown on the right. For the record, Bill calls the picture of the sail in space "The Money Shot."

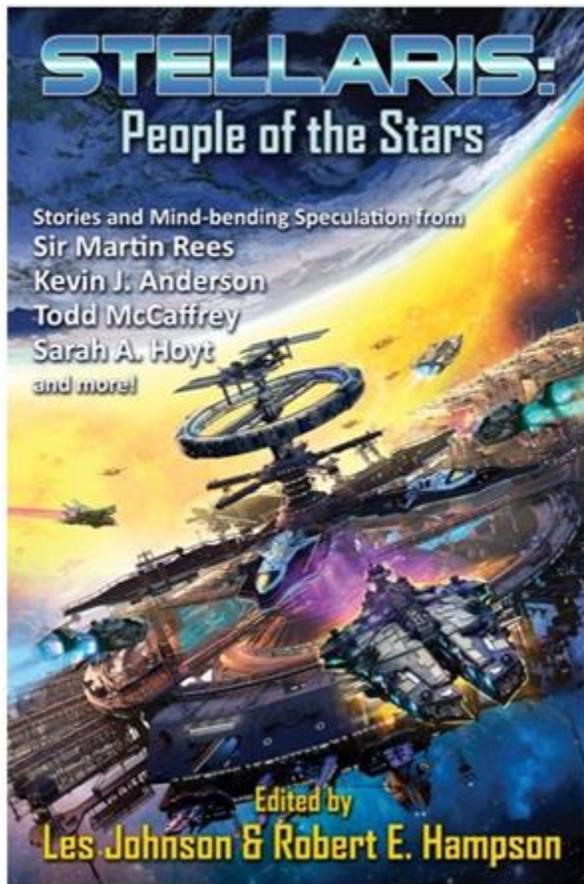
China's Shenyang Institute of Automation (SIA) launched that country's first solar sail, SIASail, in late 2019. Details are scant, but it appears that their sail was tested from a small satellite in Earth orbit and successfully completed its mission demonstration.

Meanwhile, NASA is nearing completion of the Near-Earth Asteroid Scout mission which will use an 86 square meter (~925 square feet) solar sail to send a small spacecraft to survey an asteroid to which we might someday send people. The space agency also announced that another solar sail mission, the Solar Cruiser with its 1600

square meter (~17,000 square feet) sail, was selected for further study and is one of two mission candidates to fly in space by 2024. A final decision about Solar Cruiser (whether it will fly), is expected in late 2020.

You can download my latest technical paper on Solar Sailing by going [HERE](#).

New Releases

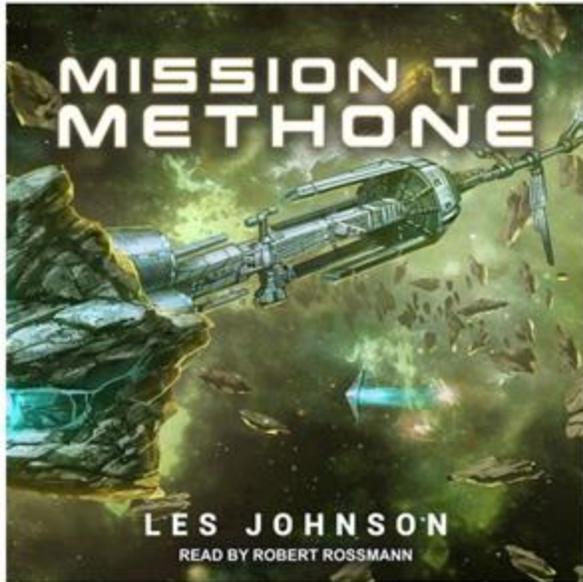


STELLARIS: PEOPLE OF THE STARS is a collection of original science fiction stories and nonfiction essays speculating about humanity's far-term expansion into the universe beyond the limits of our solar system—with an emphasis on the changes humans will undergo as a species as we make this happen. Is interstellar travel so far beyond our current imaginings that it will take a fundamental transformation of humanity in order to make it possible? And, if so, will we remain *Homo sapiens* or become a new and unique species—*Homo stellaris* (the People of the Stars)?

Within are original science fiction stories by award-winning authors such as Kevin J. Anderson, William Ledbetter, Todd McCaffrey and Sarah A. Hoyt, supplemented by accessible nonfiction essays describing the science behind the fiction from people who should know—Sir Martin Rees (Astronomer Royal of the United Kingdom), Mark Shelhamer (Chief Scientist for the NASA's Human Research Program), and more.

[Click here to read more or purchase](#)

And a first for me – audiobooks! I learned last summer that Baen Books signed an agreement that would result in my novels being made available in audiobook format and the first two are now available: [Back to the Moon](#) and [Mission to Methone](#).



Chris Holt, working in his office at the Space Resources Corporation, discovers that one of the asteroids he is surveying for mining is not an asteroid at all but a derelict spaceship.

What he don't know is that across the galaxy, a war has been underway for millennia. A war between alien civilizations that have very different ideas about what should be done about emerging spacefaring civilizations like our own. The artificial intelligence resident in the derelict Holt discovered has been in our solar system since before the dawn of human civilization, watching, waiting and keeping quiet lest the interstellar war return and wipe out the sentient race that now resides there – humanity...

[Click here to learn more or purchase](#)

Writing Projects in Work

Travis Taylor and I are busily working on a new book series with the working title, *Saving Proxima*. It is to be a three-book series from Baen Books, and we are nearly finished with Book 1. This is an entirely new universe and not related to our previous collaborations, *Back to the Moon* and *On to the Asteroid*. I'll share the release date as soon as I know it!

I have a short story, *The Confession*, in an upcoming *Founder Effect* shared universe anthology edited by Rob Hampson that will be published by Baen. Baen's also publishing one of my science essays in the upcoming *Give Me LibertyCon* anthology honoring the late Richard "Uncle Timmy" Bolgeo (June 2020). Uncle Timmy was LibertyCon's founder, my friend, and the man who kept me in fandom.

Finally, I am working on a new novel, also for Baen, that will be a bit of new territory for me. I'm trying my hand at a good, old-fashioned space opera that I hope will keep you on the edge of your seats and afraid to stop reading because you think you might miss something if you do. No release date yet – I need to finish it first!

Upcoming Events

- March 20-22, 2020 [MidSouthCon](#) (Memphis, TN)
- June 12-14, 2020 [LibertyCon](#) (Chattanooga, TN)
- September 4-7, 2020 [DragonCon](#) (Atlanta, GA)
- August 25, 2020 Mass market paperback release of [Stellaris: People of the Stars](#)

Finally, I've been thinking a great deal about the arc of history and our connectedness...

How *Star Trek* Led to the Election of President Barack Obama

I'm a big believer in serendipity.

Most people wonder about the decisions they've made in life and ponder the possible outcomes if different choices had been made. For example, "What would have happened had I not taken that job?" or "How would my life have been different had I married my high school sweetheart?"

I contend that even the slightest change would be significant and have outcomes that stretch beyond our wildest imaginations - impacting not only our lives but perhaps the lives of others -- perhaps nations. To make my point, consider the election of Barack Obama. I assert that his election was a direct result of *Star Trek* and its creator, Gene Roddenberry.

For clarity, I am not going to make the case that the positive interracial future envisioned by Roddenberry was the cause. You know what I mean - many have written about the positive cultural impact of Lt. Uhura, Sulu, Chekov, and Mr. Spock in raising our awareness of cultural diversity and equality. That's not what I mean - *Star Trek*'s racially and culturally diverse casting had an impact, yes, but that isn't the case I'd like to make here.

President Obama was first elected in 2008 when everyone thought that the Democratic nominee for President was to be Hillary Clinton. After all, she had been a significant name in the nation's politics since her time as First Lady to President Bill Clinton in the 1990s. Instead, a young, charismatic senator from Illinois named Barack Obama was the person selected who went on to win the White House.

But how did then-Senator Obama get the nomination? Well, he certainly deserved it and worked hard to get it. But many potentially good politicians do the same and most we've never heard of or we simply forget with the passage of time. How did this particular

senator gain the notoriety that would eventually allow him to become the leader of the Free World?

Obama was the Keynote Speaker at the 2004 Democratic convention - largely because he was a gifted orator and it elevated his visibility in a hotly contested US Senate seat in Illinois for which he was running. Millions saw him speak and the notion of him becoming a leader in national politics was born.

His opponent in that Senate race was Republican Alan Keyes. But Keyes was not the person selected to run in the Republican primary election. No, he was a substitute candidate, recruited after the extremely popular Jack Ryan had to withdraw from the race. Ryan, before he withdrew from the race, was widely seen as the front runner and was all-but-certain to be elected. Had he won, it is possible, perhaps likely, that then-candidate Obama would have faded from the public consciousness like many other state politicians of which we've never heard.

Why did Jack Ryan drop out of the race for Senate, paving the way for Barack Obama to win? Because he was embroiled in a bitter and embarrassing divorce from his wife, actress Jeri Ryan. Various salacious allegations against Ryan forced him to withdrawal from the campaign.

His wife, Jeri Ryan, is best known to Star Trek fans as Seven of Nine, from Star Trek Voyager, which ran on television from 1995 to 2001. Her involvement led to significant press coverage and public attention - causing Jack Ryan to withdraw from the Senate race.

Star Trek Voyager was one of many sequels to the original Star Trek series created by Gene Roddenberry. Seven of Nine was one of the show's most popular characters, giving actress Jeri Ryan wide popularity and name recognition.

Now you have it. A chain of events that began in 1966 with the airing of the original Star Trek, when Barack Obama was 5 years old, led directly to his election as President in 2008.

If Roddenberry hadn't created Star Trek, then there wouldn't have been a Star Trek Voyager. (In fact, if there hadn't been Star Trek, many other things in our modern world would be very different indeed - perhaps this can be the topic of a future blog...) If there had not been Voyager, then the public might not have heard about Ryan's predilections since his wife might not have been a famous and popular actress, drawing public attention to the sordid episode. If there had not been a public uproar, then Ryan might have remained in the race and won it - as the then-polling suggested he would. Had he won it, then an Illinois politician named Obama probably wouldn't have been selected as the Keynote Speaker at the 2004 Democratic Convention and would therefore not have received the national attention he needed to launch his own presidential campaign a few years later - and in 2008 he probably would not have been elected President of the United States.

Until next time...

What decisions will you make today?

Les Johnson

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