



The Stochastic Man

Robert Silverberg

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In a not-too-distant future, the assassination of an all-powerful New York City Mayor has plunged the five boroughs back into a dangerous cesspool of crime, drugs, and prostitution. Professional prognosticator Lew Nichols joins the campaign team of a fast-rising politico running for the city's top office, and is introduced to a man who privately admits to being able to view glimpses of the future. Lew becomes obsessed with capturing the man's gift and putting it to use for his candidate, but struggles to accept the strict terms he arranges with his mentor ... and the unforgiving predetermination of the future.

The Stochastic Man Details

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Author : Robert Silverberg

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From Reader Review The Stochastic Man for online ebook

Lyn says

sto·chas·tic st??kastik/

adjective: stochastic: randomly determined; having a random probability distribution or pattern that may be analyzed statistically but may not be predicted precisely.

First published in 1975 and nominated for the Hugo, Nebula and John W. Campbell Memorial awards, *The Stochastic Man* is one of Silverberg's darker novels.

Lew Nichols is a predictor of future events, following trends and forecasting popular inclinations for a New York politician with national ambitions. He is then confronted with a mentor who can make more exact predictions.

Similar to Stephen King's 1979 *The Dead Zone*, there is an air of impending doom reminiscent of King or Richard Mathieson. This is also comparable to Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* and *Messiah* by Gore Vidal, with an atmosphere of heady and tense proclivity to power.

Silverberg uses this setting as a vehicle to examine themes of free will determination, existential angst and acceptance of paranormal evidence.

Sandy says

Although his previous output had for several decades been nothing short of prodigious, by the mid-'70s, sci-fi great Robert Silverberg was finally beginning to slow down. The author had released no fewer than 23 sci-fi novels during his initial, "pulpy" phase (1954 - '65), and a full 23 more from 1967 - '72, his second, more mature, more literate period. And following 1972's *"Dying Inside"*--whose central conceit of a telepath losing his powers has often been seen as corresponding to Silverberg's self-professed, supposed diminution of his own writing abilities (not that any reader would ever be aware of it)--for the first time in the author's career, there were no new sci-fi novels for several years. But as it turned out, Silverberg still had two more major works up his sleeve before calling it quits in 1976 (before he came roaring back with his Lord Valentine series, starting in 1980): *"The Stochastic Man"* (1975) and *"Shadrach in the Furnace"* (1976). A look at the 1975 work will surely make readers wonder why Silverberg ever thought of taking a break at all, as the book is as imaginative, beautifully written and mind expanding as any other in the author's canon. Nominated for both the Hugo and Nebula Awards, the novel lost out, on both fronts, to Joe Haldeman's *"The Forever War,"* yet remains an eminently entertaining and thought-provoking work, now almost 40 years later.

The tale is told by Lew Nichols in the, uh, futuristic, cusp-of-the-millennia (December 2000) setting of a decayed and strife-ridden New York City, one that makes the urban rot of the mid-'70s seem like a Legoland. Nichols had enjoyed a very unusual occupation, doing stochastic projections for major clients. (I'll save you the trouble of looking it up: "Stochastic" simply means "involving chance or probability.") Using

mathematical formulae ("Kolmogorov axioms, Ehrenhaft games, Markov chains, the Pascal triangle," etc.), Nichols is able to make better-than-educated guesses regarding future events. Married to a beautiful Indian woman and residing away from the urban violence in his protected Staten Island enclave, life is certainly good for Nichols. And that life becomes even more exciting when he meets NYC mayoral hopeful Paul Quinn at a party and joins his staff. With Nichols' assistance, Quinn wins the election in a landslide and then sets his eyes on the presidency. Meanwhile, Nichols' stochastic gifts soon begin to seem like weak tea indeed when he encounters a little old man named Martin Carvajal, who has the uncanny knack of being able to look into the future with perfect accuracy, and who claims that that future is unalterable....

While "The Stochastic Man" is as gripping and entertaining a sci-fi tale as any fan might hope for, its underlying message of mankind living in an inflexibly rigid, deterministic universe is one that many readers might feel uncomfortable with. Not since Cornell Woolrich's great 1945 thriller "The Night Has a Thousand Eyes," perhaps, has such a bleak vision been presented to us, and even Jon Davis, host of the Quasi-Official Robert Silverberg Web Site, mentions that he finds the novel a bit "unpleasant." The book is a fairly serious affair, and almost completely devoid of humor. What little humor there IS to be found is largely of the black variety, such as Silverberg's descriptions of the extreme violence that transpires during a typical NYC week (the Harlem forces use Syrian tanks to attack Spanish Harlem; the Puerto Ricans retaliate, with the aid of three Israeli colonels, by firebombing the Apollo!), and the fact that most of Quinn's staff is comprised of Armenians--Missakian, Ephrikian, Mardikian...everybody, it would seem, except a Kardashians! (And yes, it IS a tad difficult at first to keep these names straight.) Silverberg, as usual, peppers his tale with any number of imaginative touches; thus, the powdered calcium bone that people smoke to get high; the new, faddish Transit Creed religion that Nichols' wife becomes infatuated with and that leads to marital discord; Carvajal's diagrammatic explanation as to just how his divining abilities might work. Typical for the author in this, his liberated second phase, there are numerous erotic--and even borderline graphic--sex scenes in the book; Silverberg, after all, to make a living between 1959 and '67, had also written around 150 sex novels, with such marvelous titles as "The Bra Peddlers," "Lesbian Love," "Lust Cult," "Passion Peeper" and "Dial O-R-G-Y." As in his 1968 novel "The Masks of Time," the raucous events surrounding the end of the millennium figure prominently. And as in his hallucinatory 1971 novel of the far-distant future, "Son of Man," here, the Earth of a billion years hence is imagined by Nichols in one surreal sequence ("Mechanical birds, twittering like creaky gates, flutter overhead"). "The Stochastic Man," good as it is--and if I have been remiss in stressing this, let me say right here that this IS Silverberg very near the top of his game, and that modern sci-fi doesn't get too much better than that--is not a perfect novel, and its author makes a few errors here and there. Nichols' hair, for example, is said to be "light" at the opening and "dark" around 100 pages later. In addition, Silverberg's own stochastic powers were a bit off as regards a NYC terrorist attack; it wasn't the Statue of Liberty that was obliterated, but rather another downtown landmark! And there was no Department of Health, Education and Welfare in the year 2000, as it turned out; it was reorganized after 1979. But these are minor matters. Nichols and Carvajal are wonderful and likable characters, the story is a fascinating one, the political machinations are realistically intricate, and indeed the book overall is fairly unputdownable. For an author who felt that his writing powers were on the wane, this book stands as a stark denial. One does not need any stochastic abilities whatsoever to predict a reader's great satisfaction after turning the final page of this wonderfully inventive piece of work....

Tom LA says

I just can't stop raving about Robert Silverberg. He is simply a phenomenal writer. His best known novel, *Dying Inside*, is about a US academic who was born with the gift of telepathy, and who in late middle-age finds it departing him. How do you cope with the loss of something that defines who you are? How do you

face the death of what makes you, you? That novel floored me. One of the best I've ever read.

Here, we have a very different question: What would it be like to know precisely your own future? Silverberg explored this idea in several short stories, to best effect in this 1975 novel.

Lew Nichols is a pollster and statistician in the futuristic America of 1999. He's one of the best, and he's tied his already risen star to a young politician named Paul Quinn who Lew thinks has the potential to go all the way to the White House. Lew's confident that nobody can guess the shape of the future better than he can.

The 1970's permeates Silverberg's near future narrative. New York City at the turn of the millennium is a degeneration of what New York looked like in the early 1970's.

Lew and his wife Sundara, a glamorous woman of Indian origin, live a very good life. Lew's stochastic firm brings in an enviable income, as does Sundara's art gallery. They attend exclusive parties where the elite mingle and choose sexual partners for later in the evening. A variety of legal drugs keep the party going. All very 1970's - in fact, Science Fiction is always inevitably a comment about the author's present.

"The terrors and traumas of New York City seemed indecently remote as we stood by our long crystalline window, staring into the wintry moonbright night and seeing only our own reflections, tall fairhaired man and slender dark woman, side by side, side by side, allies against the darkness... Actually neither of us found life in the city really burdensome. As members of the affluent minority we were isolated from much of the crazy stuff..."

In the first chapters, Lew Nichols, as first-person narrator, reveals most of the plot developments. Lew will become a consultant to the political campaign of the charismatic Quinn, who is the great hope of a city and country seeking to rejuvenate itself, but who Lew describes as "potentially the most dangerous man in the world." He imagines that American voters dream of being able to withdraw the votes that as Lew is telling the story they will not place for another four or five years.

And then comes the real strong point of the novel: the enigmatic character of Martin Carvajal, an elderly multimillionaire who goes beyond Lew's stochastic methods and is able to literally see the future.

Lew calls him a "wild card in the flow of time." Carvajal's resigned, passive nature comes from the fact that for him the future and history are one and the same.

Based on a very intriguing premise, ok, but this is clearly a difficult novel to write, to pull off - and Master Silverberg does it as wonderfully as always.

The tension between Carvajal's absolute determinism and Lew's wife's weird religion that drives her to behave in a totally erratic way builds up throughout the novel as a perfect metaphor for one of the Big Questions of human life: does free will really exist? And if so, to what extent?

The ontological polarity between freedom and destiny is at the core of the author's reflections. Silverberg's stance seems to be a pessimistic one, (and you could not be a Science Fiction author in the 60s and 70s without being a raging atheist) but in my opinion what transpires most vividly is the playfulness and the joy of crafting an inventive plot, rather than a desire to preach.

I also love the constant references to classic literature and ancient history that Silverberg always peppers his writings with.

A fantastic read. On to the next Silverberg book.

Victor Whitman says

Another good one from Robert Silverberg. He may not get much press but he definitely is one of the best around.

Richp says

I found this a bit difficult to rate, as my reaction ranged from just ok, but nothing much beyond routine, to the final third where I thought he pulled it together well. The premise addresses a classical philosophical question, the story selects one common answer and goes with it, but it does not go much into the questions that answer leads to. I found the story framework mostly dull, but this is Silverberg from his best decade, and enough of the writer who was one of the best in SF at the time comes through to make this worth reading.

Roberto says

Spoileraggio coatto della vita

Il protagonista del romanzo è uno studioso che usa il calcolo delle probabilità per fornire ai suoi clienti previsioni di supporto a decisioni di vario genere. La sua vita procede normalmente, fino a quando incontra una strana persona che, dotata della capacità di "*vedere il futuro*", gli passa informazioni sul futuro stesso e gli fa capire che il nostro mondo non è affatto governato dalle leggi probabilistiche.

Progressivamente il protagonista tralascia l'analisi stocastica ed inizia a fidarsi solo nel potere della veggenza, che nel frattempo lo strano uomo ha iniziato a "passargli". Tutte le cose che dice si fanno sempre più precise e pian piano si avverano.

Ma ad un tratto, e con angoscia, si accorge anche che la conoscenza del futuro non gli porta alcun vantaggio: perché nulla di ciò che "*sa*" può in alcun modo modificare l'andamento degli eventi. Il futuro è scritto e nulla e nessuno lo può modificare. Inutile resistere. Inutile combattere. Inutile intraprendere qualunque azione: il risultato è comunque il medesimo.

Il romanzo non è perfetto, il finale forse è un po' troppo frettoloso, alcune scelte si comprendono solo parzialmente. Ma due o tre capitoli, che contengono riflessioni affascinanti e tutt'altro che banali, valgono per me il massimo della valutazione.

E' un libro di fantascienza, certo. Ma l'attenzione del romanzo non è affatto sugli spunti fantastici, che sono poco visibili, bensì l'obiettivo è più che altro l'aspetto psicologico.

Il tema del futuro è trattato spesso nei film e nella letteratura, non solo quella di fantascienza. Un futuro che però è normalmente modificabile, in quanto è comunemente passata l'idea che il futuro non sia altro che un

insieme infinito di futuri possibili (mi viene in mente il film Ritorno al futuro). In questo caso invece l'ipotesi di futuro definito implica l'annullamento del libero arbitrio.

Significa che la vita non è altro che un copione scritto con inchiostro indelebile. Non hanno più senso i modelli probabilistici, la statistica, gli sforzi di miglioramento; le nostre azioni sono già state previste e non possono cambiare. Conoscere il futuro è come leggere un libro conoscendone in anticipo tutti i dettagli dello sviluppo della trama e l'epilogo o come guardare un film prima di andare al cinema. Perché comunque, inevitabilmente,

"Faccio ciò che mi 'vedo' fare"

Che senso ha vivere una vita già scritta?

Nils says

Ich hatte nicht realisiert, wie gut Silverberg sein kann. Sehr anders aufgebaut, als aktuelle Romane, aber meisterhaft erzählt und thematisch erschreckend aktuell.

David says

If one reads it as a novella (as a longer short story, that is), I think the denouement is very keen. If you read it as a novel, not so much. I'll recommend it.

Benjamin Thomas says

Every once in a while I like to read one of the Grand Masters of Science Fiction and this time it was Robert Silverberg's turn. He always provides a good ol' fashioned science fiction yarn, and doesn't forget to add the science. He's always good at playing the what-if question and then constructing a story around it, often including some intriguing concepts to ponder along the way.

The story here is about a man named Lew Nichols who uses stochastic methods to accurately predict outcomes and probabilities. He is so good at it that he is recruited by a team of people dedicated to electing the next mayor of New York, with the ultimate goal of getting their charismatic man all the way to the White House. Lew soon learns of another man who is even better at predicting events though...a man who is 100% accurate because he can "see" the future.

Silverberg uses the concept of alternate realities and parallel universes in a pretty cool way in this novel. His what-if scenario is, "what if our timeline brushed up against a parallel universe's timeline so we could "see" what's happening over there? Only that other timeline is flowing in the reverse direction..." So when we see into that other life we are seeing what is still to come in our own lives. A lot of questions arise in Lew's mind, including the inevitable questions of time paradox and what happens when one witnesses their own death, but Silverberg handles them deftly. Ultimately, he explores the idea of prediction leading to predestination vs. any sort of free will to change our own paths. Intriguing concepts to be sure.

This novel was written and published in the early 1970's and the plot takes place in the late 1990's. But just as Silverberg doesn't forget about the science, he also doesn't forget about the story and the characters, a problem that seems to routinely crop up in many science fiction novels I've read from that era. Curiously, for a novel about accurate predictions of the future, his own view of what life would be like in the late 1990's was way off. It's easy to look back from our vantage point now and smirk but much of what Silverberg postulated is similar from book to book and in common with other science fiction authors from that time.

This book was nominated for a number of awards including the Nebula, Campbell, Hugo, and Locus SF awards. I enjoyed it and look forward to reading a few more Silverberg novels that I already have on my shelf.

Hank Hoeft says

At first, I thought *The Stochastic Man*, published in 1975, was a typical example of a late New Wave science fiction novel, albeit a well-written one. What felt "new wave" about it is the assumption that the near-future (the story is set in the late 1990's and early years of the 21st century) would continue to see social and cultural changes as rapid and extreme as the changes of the 1960's and early '70's. Another aspect that struck me as typically New Wave was the negative, pessimistic tone the story maintained...at least until the final chapters. But I was surprised when the gloomy atmosphere brightens (sort-of). But then, heck, I shouldn't be surprised that Robert Silverberg crafted such a well-written story that didn't follow the usual or the expected.

prcardi says

Storyline: 2/5
Characters: 2/5
Writing Style: 3/5
World: 2/5

No science fiction writer disappoints me as consistently as does Robert Silverberg. If his books were worse I'd stop reading them or come to them with less hope. He's both too good and too poor of a writer. He shows again in *The Stochastic Man* that he's capable. Silverberg knows when to stick in some emotional indecision, an abrupt encounter, that troubling bit of news, or a major twist. The story follows the right structure of dips, rises, and plateaus. But it all comes down to nothing. There's no major point, no psychological insight, no technological implication, and no haunting dilemma. His template is that of a true writer, gifted with the novel format, but I never like what they develop into. *The Stochastic Man*, like others of his, starts with promise. It is there in the title: stochastic. I'm no math guru, but I immediately understood the potential, and Silverberg helped me along in those initial chapters. He had some probability textbooks at hand when he was writing those, and he was smart enough to understand what he was reading, to pick out from them what would make a good story, and frame it all with semantic acerbity. But it was just a leading device, something useful for a title and with a little intellectual pizazz. The same was true for the political procedural. Silverberg has just enough insight and has done just enough research to draw me in and get me looking forward to more before he lowers the curtain on the scene. The rest of the story is just going through the motions. Silverberg wrote, I read, the terms of the contract completed, and there's nothing more to the exchange. I leave with nothing more than I came with, and Silverberg goes off to his next hastily written science fiction work, carrying with him the same promises and frustrations he left this job with.

John Loyd says

Good/VG. I read the book in 2001 and didn't remember much of the plot so I skimmed through it this time. Lew Nichols is in the business of providing projections for the future and all is going well until he meets Carvajal who can see the future. Carvajal has totally given in to his deterministic view of the world and teaches Lew how to see the future.

The novel was runner-up for both the Hugo and Nebula probably because of the characters' struggle with determinism vs. free will. There were plot elements to make the story interesting. Lew helping Paul Quinn become mayor of NYC/future presidential candidate and his relationship with his wife.

Charles Dee Mitchell says

Robert Silverberg considered *The Stochastic Man* a valedictory offering. When he wrote the novel in the early 1970's he had already resolved to effect his second retirement from the world of science fiction. His first retirement came around 1958, the year the science fiction magazine world imploded due to over-saturation and the growing market for paperback books. Writer and editor Frederick Pohl brought Silverberg back into the sf fold in the early 1960's, encouraging him to write more thoughtful material than the pulp-influenced novels and stories he cranked out -- and Silverberg would not himself object to that characterization -- during the previous decade. But then, by the 1970's, Silverberg discovered that he was "on the wrong side of a revolution." He joined in with the new crowd of younger writers, J.G. Ballard, Thomas Disch, Samuel Delany and others, who were producing more literary and experimental fiction. ("Younger" is a relative term here. Silverberg himself was only in his thirties at this time, but he had been publishing since he was nineteen.) This period, from 1965 - 1974, is considered to be Silverberg's best, but he saw his readership drying up.

What was fun for the writers, though, turned out to be not so much fun for majority of the readers, who justifiably complained that if they wanted to read Joyce and Kafka they would go and read Joyce and Kafka. They didn't want their sf to be Joycified or Kafkaized. So they stayed away from the new fiction in droves, and by 1972 the revolution was pretty well over.

Silverberg also sites the pernicious influence of *Star Wars* and the craze for trilogies on the popular sf market. He considered himself out of the game and simply fulfilling contractual commitments when he wrote *The Stochastic Man* and , published in 1975 and 1976 respectively.

The Stochastic Man may not be the worst title ever given an sf novel, but forty years later it is unappealing, opaque, and dated. Silverberg gives a history and definition of the term in the opening chapter. It comes from logic and mathematics and figures in writing on computer theory. I associate it with the titles of text books and academic monographs filled with symbols and formulas I will never understand. On the practical level, it refers to using sophisticated sampling methods to gather a large enough pool of variables to proceed to an educated guess. Sexy stuff, right? In the 1970's it must have had buzzword novelty. I ran it through Google's

NGram viewer that tracks a term's popularity. "Stochastic" makes a steady climb from near total obscurity in 1950 to a high point in 1990 and then, after a period of stasis, there is a decline beginning at the turn of the century. In the 1970's it was definitely on the rise. Silverberg's novel takes place in the 1990's, so when Lew Nichols defines himself as a stochastician, he is using a trendy 1970's term to describe a profession that sounds very much like what we would call a consultant, no frills attached.

The 1970's permeates Silverberg's near future narrative. New York City at the turn of the millennium is the worst case scenario of what New York in the early 1970's was becoming. With the successful Disneyfication of Times Square and the city's declining crime rates it is hard to remember that forty years ago New York City was dirty, dangerous, and nearing bankruptcy. Silverberg and his wife were both lifelong New Yorkers, but they had, like many of their friends, decamped for the West Coast by the time he wrote this novel. In Lew Nichols's New York City, Puerto Rican and Black populations stage pitched battles. Large portions of the city are too dangerous to enter, and those who can afford them travel with protective devices that ward off attackers. The nice, new and safest buildings are on Staten Island while the Upper East Side is livable but crumbling. All but the finest restaurants serve artificial food.

But Lew and his wife Sundara, a glamorous woman of Indian origin, live the good life. Lew's stochastic firm brings in an enviable income, as does Sundara's art gallery. (Hmm, a wealthy man whose wife runs an art gallery. Silverberg got that one right.) They attend exclusive parties where the elite mingle and choose sexual partners for later in the evening. A variety of legal drugs keep the party going.

The terrors and traumas of New York City seemed indecently remote as we stood by our long crystalline window, staring into the wintry moonbright night and seeing only our own reflections, tall fairhaired man and slender dark woman, side by side, side by side, allies against the darkness...Actually neither of us found life in the city really burdensome. As members of the affluent minority we were isolated from much of the crazy stuff...

So what is this novel actually about? Reviewers need not worry about spoilers, since a dozen pages into it Lew Nichols, as first-person narrator, has revealed most of the plot developments. Lew will become a consultant to the political campaign of the charismatic Paul Quinn, the great hope of a city and country seeking to rejuvenate itself, but who Lew describes as "potentially the most dangerous man in the world." He imagines that American voters dream of being able to withdraw the votes that as Lew is telling the story they will not place for another four or five years. And there is the enigmatic character of Martin Carvajal, a milquetoast multimillionaire who goes beyond Lew's stochastic methods and is able to literally see the future. Lew calls him a "wild card in the flow of time." Carvajal's resigned, passive nature comes from not only the fact that for him the future and history are one and the same, but he is also aware of the exact moment of his rapidly approaching violent death. He wants to bring Lew on as a pupil in *seeing* the future, rather than simply making educated guesses about it.

Revealing all in the first chapter of a book, sets up a classic suspense structure where readers stay with the story to see how the inevitable works itself out. But Silverberg's profoundly pessimistic novel is not about keeping you on the edge of your seat. By revealing so much early on, the reader becomes, like Carvajal and increasingly like Lew, one that can only watch inexorable events unspool like the frames of a film. More or less knowing what's coming makes all the political machinations and messy personal relationships objects of detached interest rather than elements in an engaging plot. *The Stochastic Man* is a stylistic exercise that is likely to leave many readers cold, but I found it the most interesting though not the best Silverberg novel I

have read.

And what is this obsession with knowing the future beyond the ability to choose lottery numbers and hot stocks. Carvajal's resignation and depression should clue Lew in on the fact that foreknowledge does nothing but make you a passive agent of the inevitable. But like 17th century Puritans struggling with the paradoxes of predestination and free will, Lew cannot let go of his obsession with *seeing*. (Silverberg italicizes the term throughout the book.) At the end of the novel -- and this would be a spoiler except it too is described in the opening chapter -- Lew has inherited Carvajal's millions and used them to set up an institute to develop the talent for second sight in as many people as possible. He still thinks this is a meaningful project. I thought he hadn't read his own book.

(Biographical information in this review comes from Silverberg's *Other Spaces Other Times*.

Mark says

A thoughtful little book. Lew Nichols is, essentially, a statistician. He's very good at predicting (accurately) trends. This is valuable to lots of people, including politicians, who pay him lots of money for his skills.

But then Lew meets Carvajal, a man who really can see the future, and the thought experiment that ensues is worth the read. What would you give up to see the future accurately? Is it worth seeing your own death? Does knowing this change your own behavior? If the future can't be changed, what's the value in seeing it?

I thought Robert Silverberg didn't explore these themes as deeply as a man of his formidable story-telling skills might have. This story had such potential that it could easily have been a trilogy, so only three stars from me. But definitely worth the investment if you're a big Silverberg fan.

Jon says

Not exactly a title that says, "Pick me up and buy me," but I guess by this stage in his career, this author's name alone would sell anything he wrote. This is my first Silverberg, and he came highly recommended by a Goodreads friend. I have to admit that he is a vivid and vigorous writer. But this one essentially left me cold because of what seemed to me a massive and inescapable flaw in its conception. The premise is that past, present, and future have already happened, and that there is one man who has *seen* (always in italics) little snippets of what to us seems like the future. He co-opts the efforts of the narrator, repeatedly enlisting him to take apparently foolish and sometimes dangerous steps to ensure that the future will happen as it should. Therein lies the problem: if it has in some sense already happened, nothing the narrator does can either cause it to happen or prevent it from happening. In fact there can *ex hypothesi* be no suspense and no excitement. Only the gradual working out of the inevitable. Silverberg tries to obfuscate this by fuzzying up the theoretical details and writing with an air of great excitement and desperation, but it all seemed ginned up to me.
