

Sacks". And can he write? Over his life, Sacks has filled 1,000 notebooks and journals, not counting journalism, medical notes and a lost suitcase full of photographs and notes — written in bars and restaurants, up mountains and in airports. He has more than a dozen books in print. Harold Pinter wrote a play inspired by his second book, *Awakenings* (HarperPerennial, 1973); Penny Marshall directed the film. *Awakenings* also inspired a ballet, and Peter Brook directed a French theatre production of *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For A Hat* (Summit, 1985). Michael Nyman wrote an opera on the same work.

Some of *On The Move* feels ripe for a US heavyweight such as the novelist James Baldwin. Other parts are untidily told, padded with extracts from letters home or the young adventurer's first attempts at writing. It is not quite clear how that youthful, ready-for-anything

"This is a compelling front-line dispatch from half a century's wonderful exploration of brain, mind and nervous system."

medic metamorphosed into a distinguished professor. We piece the story together from anecdotes of foolhardy adventure and episodes of clinical encounter. Sacks writes about people with

migraines, Tourette's syndrome or Parkinson's disease, autism, epilepsy, colour blindness, serious mental illness and the post-encephalitics of the Beth Abraham Hospital in the Bronx, New York, who are the subjects of *Awakenings*. These are the stuff of his books: not just medical cases, but warm, quirky and aware.

This is another compelling front-line dispatch from half a century's wonderful exploration of brain, mind and nervous system. It is a valedictory memoir, and one with a tentatively happy ending. At 76, this lonely writer ("it has sometimes seemed to me that I have lived at a certain distance from life") found enduring love. But the book's text was handed to the publisher before Sacks, now 81, was diagnosed with cancer of the liver. He has just written about that in *The New York Review of Books*, and of — in the words of Friedrich Nietzsche — "a reawakened faith in a tomorrow and the day after tomorrow". Here's hoping there may yet be an epilogue. ■

Tim Radford is a former science editor of *The Guardian*, and author of *The Address Book: Our Place in the Scheme of Things*.
e-mail: radford.tim@gmail.com

SCIENCE FICTION

After the cataclysm

John Gilbey delights in a vast, technologically charged tale from a science-fiction supremo at the top of his game.

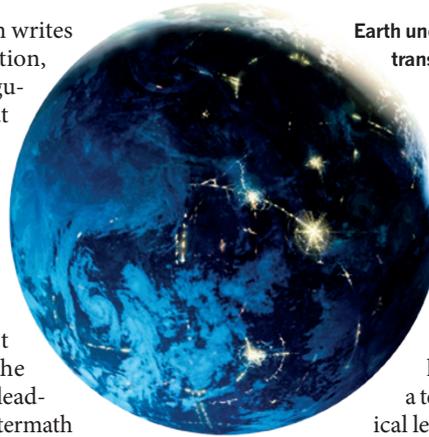
Neal Stephenson writes big science fiction, literally and figuratively. Weighing in at some 900 pages and stretching nearly 5,000 years into humanity's future, *Seveneves* is no exception.

It traces an epoch in which humankind and the environment change profoundly. The bulk of the novel is the lead-up to, and immediate aftermath of, a stunning cosmic event that leaves humanity teetering on the edge. The remainder describes a renaissance with only faint echoes of what we recognize as human culture.

The cataclysm is the destruction of the Moon by a mysterious agent. As Earth is assaulted by a rain of debris from the shattered satellite, the vast majority of the human population faces oblivion. The core of the story relies on current, or currently anticipated, technologies — weaving a plausible tale of how a tiny number of survivors, the "seveneves" of the title, might secure a future for our species. Stephenson imagines the rebirth as a division into seven races, based on the genetic profiles of the founders. The future cultures have both old and new social problems, but also fresh insights and resources with which to address them.

The epic injury to Earth looms in the very first sentence: a masterful attention-grabber. Stephenson maintains tension and energy, as well as a remarkable technical complexity, both literary and scientific. I repeatedly found myself sketching parts of the dramatically scaled mechanical constructs that enable later stages of the story — such as whip-like machinery to capture high-flying gliders and transfer them to Earth orbit — to judge whether they were feasible. They were.

Comparisons with other sci-fi epics are inevitable. The Culture series by Iain M. Banks carries similar social and sexual complexities, massive terraforming



Earth undergoes a catastrophic transformation in *Seveneves*.

machinery and off-world habitats, and shares Stephenson's delight in clever characterization and off-beat humour. Arthur C. Clarke's *The Fountains of Paradise* (1979) embodies related technical solutions, and has a postscript that makes a temporal and socio-biological leap of the same scale. Olaf

Stapledon's classic *Last and First Men* (1930) paints a similarly portentous picture of genetic manipulation, cosmic cataclysm and the potential future forms of humanity — albeit with a massively larger scope and extending forwards for millions of years. But what distinguishes *Seveneves* for me is Stephenson's handling of the characters. There is an almost Malthusian detachment in how he introduces, builds, then violently dispatches characters who in novels with less robust reasoning would be saved by a clever plot device.

This is hard sci-fi in a real and welcome sense, ruled by unremitting physical laws, unlike the negotiable rules of the action thriller. People die because their deaths are inevitable, and many pass unremarked because the disaster's scale is so vast. Their sacrifice is tied to the theme of engineering the survival of the human race. Science fiction often suffers from a disparity between the impressive scale of the scenery, and the size of the characters and how they are developed. Stephenson balances these aspects well, avoiding cookie-cutter scientists and the all-too-common characterization of technologists as brilliant but conflicted renegades.

I did find myself mulling over the casting for the film that is sure to follow. Someone needs to talk to Morgan Freeman's agent, that's all I'm saying. And an almost throwaway early scene is never quite resolved, making it clear that there is significant scope for sequels. I very much hope that Stephenson is working on them. ■

John Gilbey is a science and science-fiction writer. He teaches in the department of computer science at Aberystwyth University, UK.
e-mail: gilbey@bcs.org.uk



Seveneves
NEAL STEPHENSON
William Morrow:
2015.