

Books in Review

John Scalzi

Head On: A Novel of the Near Future

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Getting Your Head on Straight—or Not: John Scalzi’s World after a (Fictional) Pandemic

This review offers a critical examination of prolific science-fiction author John Scalzi’s novel *Head On: A Novel of the Near Future* (2018). While my focus will remain on this book, I will refer to two earlier novels in what I’m terming the Lock In series: the appropriately titled *Lock In: A Novel of the Near Future and Unlocked: An Oral History of Haden’s Syndrome*, both published in 2014. I found it rather surprising to discover several novels, some science fiction, with central characters affected by locked in syndrome (LIS), including Alexandre Dumas’ *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1844), Bernard Werber’s science fiction novel *The Ultimate Secret* (2001), and Sharon McCone’s *Locked In* (2009).

Scalzi is perhaps most well-known for *Redshirts: A Novel with Three Codas* (2012) and the *Old Man’s War* series of novels (2005-2015). As a voracious reader of science-fiction for more than forty-five years now, I only found my way to *Redshirts* relatively recently. Finding that novel humorous and intelligent, I moved on to Scalzi’s *Android’s Dream* (2006) and am currently reading *The Dispatcher* (2017). I fully expected the Lock In books to offer me the same well-crafted narrative, interesting and individualized characters, rapidly paced plot, and witty dialogue, all thoughtfully intersecting with popular culture. While some of those elements remain in *Lock In* and *Head On*, they struggle to emerge in rather ponderous stories.

Both of these novels are set in a near-future United States where a biological pandemic has affected a significant portion of the population with locked-in syndrome (LIS), a real medical condition in which traumatic brain injury, stroke, or brain stem lesions leave the sufferer cognitively undamaged but almost completely paralyzed and unable to move or speak.

We learn in *Lock In* that because First Lady Margaret Haden contracted the disease, popular awareness of LIS rose and the disease became known as Haden’s. As the series opens the reader discovers that, with massive government financial support, researchers and scientists have designed and implemented artificial neural networks which can be implanted in the brains of Haden sufferers. This supplementary web makes it possible for sufferers of LIS to pilot what Scalzi describes as “personal transports,” popularly known as “threeps.” In a graceful gesture of refusal, Scalzi never explicitly describes a threep, allowing the reader’s imagination to construct the appearance of this robotic transport. From brief comments, the reader gleans that threeps are humanoid, marketed and sold by a handful of companies, and, like cars, have recognizable models, some more expensive than others. Although the reader is never certain whether threeps fall under the category of robots or androids, that blank space is automatically filled by pop culture robot imagery, especially that from science fiction. It’s not surprising then that threep is a term derived from “Star Wars” iconic robot character C3PO. I will expand on this remark shortly.

As in *Lock In*, *Head On* once again pairs the Washington D.C. FBI agents Chris Shane, a Haden’s sufferer, or Haden, with veteran female agent Leslie Vann. The plots of both novels revolve around investigating the mysterious deaths of those affected by Haden’s, either directly or indirectly. Shane accompanies his partner in a threep, while his physical body remains in his wealthy parents’ home, tended by nurses who monitor the various tubes, fluids, and medications that keep his immobile body alive.

The title *Head On* in part refers to the scene of an

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alleged crime, a Hilketa field. This sport consists entirely of two teams of threeps whose offense racks points when they pull off the head of the opposing team's goalie. Shane and Vann are deployed to investigate why one of the players dies in puzzling circumstances. So the themes of competition, opposition, hostility, a triad of nouns linked to fragmentation and collapse, are introduced almost immediately in *Head On*. More specifically, the deliberate fracturing of the threeps on the sports field introduces an appropriate motif for Scalzi's continuous wrestling to balance the genres of police procedural/mystery with near-future science-fiction. Rather than deftly interweaving the two genres, in the manner, for example, of Richard Morgan, Connie Willis, or Liz Williams, Scalzi inadvertently places the thriller in opposition to the underlying science fiction narrative. For example, in both *Lock In* and *Head On*, any rhythm or pace which the story might accrue comes to a screeching halt multiple times when secondary characters insert themselves merely to provide background. As a reader, I found this tiresome, and rather lazy on Scalzi's part. In contrast to other Scalzi novels, the dialogue is often stilted, and overstuffed with explanation and background story. It's as if Basil Exposition from the "Austin Powers" movies had taken permanent residence in the books.

Both novels in the *Lock In* series are written in the first person, from Shane's viewpoint. As the ostensible main character struggling with Haden's, the reader would expect this protagonist to emerge as multi-faceted and rounded, evidencing change and emotional growth. Not so. Scalzi writes Shane as a mere compilation, a two-dimensional mosaic of attributes: wealthy, son of a basketball player, Haden sufferer, FBI agent, housemate of other Hadens.

While the origin of Scalzi's new noun "threep" as a derivation of C3PO is clever, it's also problematic: recall that "Star Wars" presented C3PO, as a source of laughter and comic relief, a kind of jester always seeking to maintain the dignity and gravitas that his golden metal body and English accent suggested, but never quite achieved. The classic robot of science fiction is both beautiful and monstrous and pos-

sessed of the capacity to exercise the power of both virtue and evil. But the term "threep"'s reference to the bumbling C3PO introduces an ongoing note of gentle mockery, a thumbing of the nose at the entire cultural encyclopedia of robots, androids, and automata, programmed and perfected machines often in uneasy alliance with humanity. Where does the often vacant and motionless, mutable *and* muteable threep-container fit in the history of mechanical men from *I, Robot* to *Robocalypse*? While the *Lock In* series does grapple with serious social, cultural, institutional, and economic issues, the silhouette of C3PO reminds us that Scalzi is not rewriting *War of the Worlds*, where titanic voracious robots stride amidst helpless humans. Rather, the threeps are literal vehicles for the very imperfect humans who animate them.

Like other Hadens, Shane has access to the "agora," a kind of glorified social media sphere in which those locked in can design and virtually inhabit a personal space. Scalzi reminds the reader again and again that Shane's site resembles the Bat Cave. However, as much as Scalzi teases parallels between Shane, scion of a wealthy family fighting crime in his role as an FBI agent, and Bruce Wayne/Batman, this potentially interesting pop culture reference quickly evaporates. The trope of a virtual world or cyberspace, often existing on an endlessly malleable electronic or computer-mediated platform, is a favorite setting for generations of fantasy, horror, and science fiction writers, ranging from Roger Zelazsky, Stanislaw Lem and Philip K. Dick to William Gibson, Neal Stephenson, and Cory Doctorow, to name but a few. Just as Scalzi chooses not to develop the Bat Cave analogy, he misses the opportunity to make his agora a more robust and complex structure where *Neuromancer*'s "cyberspace cowboy" would happily dissolve his consciousness. In fact, rather than fashion his agora space/place as a fantasy terrain which couldn't exist in a world bound by logic and physics, Shane's cave, as the noun suggests, serves him merely as a kind of retreat, in a way that replicates the way in which his physical body is shut away in a featureless bedroom.

As I wrote earlier in this review, *Head On* is thematically built on opposition and conflict. This theme

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of destruction and fragmentation is enacted by our erstwhile protagonist Shane, who exhibits a troubling penchant for violent altercations in his pursuit of justice, resulting in the destruction of several threeps. Scalzi presents Shane as almost as robotic as the threep-containers he inhabits, a barely changing, static personality. Shane's regular cycling through threeps is framed as humorous, but after enduring this behavior in two novels, I couldn't help but perceive Shane's actions as compulsive, sadly the only really noteworthy aspect of his thin personality. Nevertheless, Shane's repeated bouts of self-harm, or rather threep-harm, enact a narrative symmetry by echoing the more commonplace compulsions/addictions of his partner Vann, who finds all the usual ways to soothe herself. I'll return to Vann momentarily.

What quickly develops as some of the *Lock In* novels' major contrasting themes are Haden's sufferers/non-Haden's sufferers, threeps/humans, mobility/immobility, machine/the organic, body/immateriality of mind, to note just a few. All of the ideas embedded in these antithetical pairs participate in the much larger discourse of disability and disabled bodies. What arises as perhaps one of the most troubling aspects of *Lock In* and *Head On* is the storyline's rendering invisible of the actual physical bodies of Shane and other Haden sufferers. Disabled bodies in the narratives are messy and awkward afterthoughts to be visited periodically, but quickly pushed out of the visual field, banished from sight to a literally closeted space. The physical characteristics of the Haden affected bodies, everything from gender and race to eye color and the shape of the nose, are removed from view and consideration. As a disabled woman, I came away from the *Lock In* series in confusion: am I to look forward to a future where any physical issues I suffer from MS are rectified with a robotic transport that liberates me to walk, run, jump, skip? But should I welcome that future if my actual body becomes a source of embarrassment, a medical mistake from which people should turn away, lest they be (and I be) reminded of how my flesh failed?

Both *Lock In* and *Head On* repeat several times that Shane is biracial. Yet, that attribute never finds

a place in the story. How can it? Shane's actual disabled, locked in body, his skin color, his hair texture, etc., only inhabits the visual and tactile field of his caretakers, and occasionally his mother, himself, and his housemates. In a short passage, Shane recounts gazing at his body in its "cradle," and experiencing a dizzying double vision, or more precisely a doubling of his sense of his body's orientation, balance, and posture. This proprioceptive impairment (and here I'm riffing on a terminology that Shane shares with the reader) plays a role in phantom limb syndrome; Shane apparently finds himself troubled by "phantom body syndrome." Yet, he apparently feels no real connection to his organic, imperfect, disabled self in favor of his multiple--and apparently endlessly replaceable-- threeps. Scalzi really misses an opportunity to probe Shane's sense of physical and psychological uneasiness as the latter gazes at himself. The story introduces conflict and continuous pressure here again if we define Shane's self as his actual corporeal body, which his neural network's electronic impulses always seeks to overshadow. Perhaps Shane's compulsion to destroy his threeps might testify to that desire to interrupt the threep aided performance of himself, a phantom (biracial) body never at rest.

A major grace note in both *Lock In* and *Head On* is the character development of Shane's partner, Vann. By *Head On*, she bursts forth as fully rounded and three-dimensional, gifted with sarcasm and dry humor that enlivens every page in which she appears. Clearly, she's a latter-day version of the Mickey Spillane private eye, emotionally bankrupt, disenchanting, wreathed in smoke and one-liners. Vann's physical body creates a simple, but lovely contrast with the mechanical presence of Shane in his shifting threeps. By the same token, Vann's feminine corporeality is tainted by more than a hint of misogyny: all of her leisure and pleasure activities draw attention to sensation, to touch, to basic bodily functions that are not conducted by sterile tubes: vaping, drinking, sex. Vann threatens to topple into an incarnation of traditional femininity as a collection of orifices and mindless sexuality. Nevertheless, some of the most successful passages of either novel remain the dialogue

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between the two partners: the terseness and muscularity of Scalzi's prose achieves an almost musical rhythm as both Vann and Shane perform a rapid-fire kind of call-and-response

The *Lock In* series introduces many intriguing ideas from the science fiction universe that simply don't have room to develop. Much is sacrificed at the altar of crime drama/police procedural demands. Scalzi is a talented writer who never lets his attention stray from detail while keeping a keen eye on the story. The murder mysteries at the center of both *Lock In* and *Head On* are imaginative, intelligently plotted, and more than well-stocked with memorable suspects, both Haden and non-Haden. The best sections in the novels maintain a balance of narration, action, and dialogue, which generate a momentum on which the reader can easily surf. But as I mentioned before, because background or exposition in the Hadenverse needs so often to be detailed, forward motion ultimately slows.

I suspect that Scalzi tried to remedy the problem of Basil Exposition through writing *Unlocked: An Oral History of Haden's Syndrome*, a short addendum to *Lock In* and *Head On*. Published the same year as *Head On*, the novel is a collection of fictional interviews with doctors, scientists, reporters, and Haden sufferers who offer more robust details of the history of Haden's, the scientific breakthrough which allowed victims of LIS to pilot threeps, the social and political divisions among the Haden community, etc. Although *Unlocked* is not structured like a standard novel, in some ways it's the most successful of the three novels of the Lock In universe. Scalzi permits himself to indulge in a more focused exploration of the Hadenverse which in turn encourages the reader to share his delight in building a world, or at least a United States, coping with the aftermath of a pandemic. What could be better reading in the second year of COVID-19?