A Fantasy World With Dully Familiar Outlines

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Thursday, September 11, 2008, C03

THE LAST THEOREM

By Arthur C. Clarke and Frederik Pohl

Ballantine/Del Rey. 299 pp. $27.

Although "The Last Theorem" is being touted as the final novel by Arthur C. Clarke, it was written mostly by Clarke's friend and fellow science-fiction icon, Frederik Pohl. In recent interviews, Pohl has said that Clarke, who died in March at the age of 90, "got bogged down" because of poor health and sought a collaborator, a role for which the now 88-year-old Pohl volunteered. Clarke had produced 40 or 50 pages of manuscript, with an equal number of pages of notes, some of which were so vague that Clarke couldn't recall what he had meant by them. Pohl, in turn, can no longer type and had to write longhand, resulting in his own indecipherable scribbles that had to be translated by his wife.

These age-hampered travails inspire sympathy for the authors, but they don't excuse the annoying mess of a book they have foisted on their fans. "The Last Theorem" reads like a dog-eared album of favorite themes from yesteryear. We find Clarke's preoccupation with humans' first contact with aliens, familiar to readers of "Childhood's End," "Rendezvous With Rama" and, of course, "2001"; his old concept of a space elevator that would supersede our currently limited method of ferrying materials into space, already explored in "The Fountains of Paradise" and elsewhere; even his fondness for the idea of sailing spaceships on solar wind. Pohl returns to his beloved theme of the human-machine hybrid, explored especially in "Man Plus," and his enthusiasm for campy aliens.

Most of the rest of the ideas in the book, if not already used by Clarke and Pohl, have been circulating through science fiction for decades. "The Last Theorem" features a group of omnipotent aliens, the Grand Galactics, in a galaxy far, far away (all the way back to 1950s movies). They discover that the inhabitants of a certain blue-and-green boondocks planet -- inhabitants not known for their kindness toward their own or other species -- have developed nuclear weapons. Throughout the glacially creeping story, the Grand Galactics' minions, races called the Nine-Limbed and the One Point Fives and the Machine Stored, are zooming toward Earth, determined to eradicate a dangerous infection before it spreads. Yawn. It's sad to have to say that this was all done just as well 50 years ago. These sections read like a high school student's late-night notes for a first story; one alien is even nicknamed Bill.

Not that the humans are drawn with any more attention to detail than their potential exterminators. Rilke said that in Cézanne's paintings every part seems to know about every other part. In this novel, few parts seem to know what on Earth the rest of the parts are doing. For example, early in the book, its hero, a