

Rendezvous with Rama

Arthur C Clarke, 1972

>> Stephen Baxter explores a gigantic alien starship...

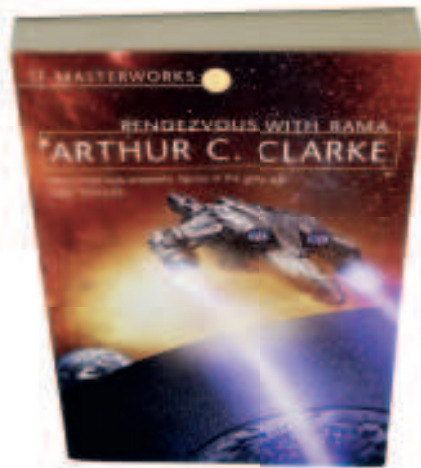
"In the clear, cold atmosphere of Rama, the beam of the searchlight was completely invisible. Three kilometres down from the central Hub, the hundred-metre oval of light lay across a section of that colossal stairway. A brilliant oasis in the surrounding darkness, it was sweeping slowly towards the curved plain still five kilometres below; and in its centre moved a trio of ant-like figures, casting long shadows before them..." (*Rendezvous with Rama*, chapter 12).

In the year 2131, something sails out of the dark towards the sun. Astronomers label it Rama, after a Hindu god. Rama is unwrapped before our eyes, growing from a star-like telescopic object to an obviously artificial cylinder some 50 kilometres in length. And when Captain Norton of the Space Survey lands his ship Endeavour on Rama's axis, we find that this huge spacecraft contains a world, ripe for exploration.

After the release of *2001: A Space Odyssey* in 1968, Arthur C Clarke was probably the best-known science fiction writer on Earth. And having delivered a movie and novel which to many defined the future, in his next novel he turned to a much older form of storytelling. In 1976 he said, "In *Rendezvous with Rama*... I was trying to prove that the traditional adventure story can still carry everything I want to say. In that sense Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* is a model of what I mean."

In fact *Rama* derives from an even older pre-science fiction tradition of fantastic voyage stories, dating from the age of exploration. That's why Norton's Endeavour was named after Captain Cook's flagship, and why Rama has human-friendly features like breathable air and "staircases as high as the Himalayas". Rama is one of Cook's discovered islands; it is Hawaii transplanted to the sky.

Certainly as an adventure story *Rama* is huge fun. In this artificial landscape Norton's crew are like tiny folk crawling through a huge house. At one point they explore a sort of dry canal that turns out to be a monstrous light fitting. It's all a



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bit like the late '60s TV show *Land of the Giants*.

But there are grand ideas here too. For example, Rama doesn't need a crew. Rama may seem to be a classic Big Dumb Object, like Larry Niven's Ringworld (see Book Club, *SFX* 150) but dumb it most certainly ain't, as we learn as it wakes in the sunlight. In 1966 Clarke had pointed out that "ultra-intelligent machines" would be "highly suited for interstellar flight... I suggest they won't come in spaceships, they will be spaceships." And when Rama finally passes on out of the solar system, having ignored humanity

entirely, there is a desolating sense of loss and insignificance.

Clarke's books are routinely criticised for their thin characterisation. Well, it's true that Norton's crew show no sign of inner depth or interpersonal conflict. And the plot seems unpromising too, when baldly stated: chaps land on object, muck about a bit, and go home. But characterisation isn't the point here, and nor is plot complexity. *Rama* shows Clarke in absolute control of his materials, and he does what he set out to do, delivering cosmic wonder through his story's deceptively simple frame.

Rama's lasting legacy comes from its first few pages, showing an asteroid impact which helped inspire real-world space-rock-watching programmes, and from its very last line: "The Ramans do everything in threes", a hook for sequels fulfilled by Clarke and collaborator Gentry Lee with *Rama II* (1989), *The Garden of Rama* (1991) and *Rama Revealed* (1993). There has also been a successful computer game, and ongoing talk of a movie project involving Morgan Freeman.

Rendezvous with Rama sold shed-loads and scooped all the major awards (the 1973 Nebula, and the following year's Hugo, John W Campbell, Jupiter and Locus awards – all for best novel), which reflects Clarke's storytelling achievement in this book. And that image of humans in a splash of light, bravely working their way across a landscape of unseen alien wonders, may sum up Clarke's entire career.

All that and cliffhangers too. **SFX**

Stephen Baxter has co-authored two books of the "A Time Odyssey" series with Arthur C Clarke. The third, *Firstborn*, will be published by Voyager later this year.

Like this? Try these!

Eon by Greg Bear (1985)

Rama's conceptual descendant. A hollowed-out asteroid arrives in the solar system. It contains seven chambers, and the last, TARDIS-like, is infinitely long... like *Rama* on acid.



Helix by Eric Brown (2007)

The latest in the pantheon of Big Dumb Objects – a wonderful journey across the surface of a spiral-shaped world. This is due for release in June from Solaris Books (www.solaris-books.co.uk).



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>> "Rama has suffered more for the reveal than for the mystery. It worked because it was a window on a completely alien way of life. In a way it's the archetypal BDO novel." jedi

>> "Amazing book, yet another reason that along with Stephen Baxter, Clarke's the best high-concept sci-fi writer." timeslip

>> "I felt about this a lot like the way I did when I read *War of the Worlds*: the description is good, but not a lot happens." Kixxykat

>> "I feel that it lacks 'soul' – too clinical and sterile." ottie

>> "Many lesser authors ignore an inconvenient piece of real science for the sake of narrative flow, but not Clarke: everything is accounted for. There are moments of sheer brilliance – this is science fiction with the emphasis on science but enough fiction to please technophobes." DocSavage

>> "Nice and mysterious." darkman

>> "Clarke's description of the interior is a remarkable feat. Mystery after mystery is unveiled but solutions are tantalisingly few. Rama's goals remain a mystery, its builders unknown – someone said this was a cop-out, but this is the point. Clarke doesn't want to give us answers as any answer he could conceive of would not match the majesty of the mystery presented to us." Werthead

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>> In *SFX*157 Geoff Ryan will be discussing Joe Haldeman's *The Forever War*. Read it with us! **NEXT ISSUE:** Jon Courtenay Grimwood looks at Gene Wolfe's *Shadow of the Torturer*.