



Frontera

Lewis Shiner

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Ten years ago the world's governments collapsed, and now the corporations are in control. Houston's Pulsystems has sent an expedition to the lost Martian colony of Frontera to search for survivors. Reese, aging hero of the US space program, knows better. The colonists are not only alive, they have discovered a secret so devastating that the new rulers of Earth will stop at nothing to own it. Reese is equally desperate to use it for his own very personal agenda. But none of them have reckoned with Kane, tortured veteran of the corporate wars, whose hallucinatory voices are urging him to complete an ancient cycle of heroism and alter the destiny of the human race.

Frontera Details

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Author : Lewis Shiner

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From Reader Review Frontera for online ebook

Cyndy says

"All because the corporation didn't have the booster stages to slow them down any other way." Shiner, Lewis. Frontera (Kindle Locations 52-53). Subterranean Press. Kindle Edition. --- Interesting tale of life in the combined (American, Russian, Japanese) colony on Mars. The combined colony was the result of the fall of governments on Earth, where corporations are now in control. Two corporations (one from Houston and one from Russia) send separate teams to Mars in a race to acquire the technology that may have been invented there. Each of the separate teams that travel to Mars have their corporate agendas that the individual team members may not know.

Kamil Muzyka says

A work of cyberpunk without cyberspace. Yet still there is a lot of the cyberpunk world building. Recommended for those who like to see a space based cyberpunk.

Alex Kobyakov says

Bunch of neurotics going to a space adventure.

There are some good ideas, but the heroes are dull and monochrome, storyline is pretty much straight and anecdotal "Russians" pictured in the book are laughable 30 years later.

Not recommended.

J says

potentially interesting but had to give up on it.

Brent says

What would an semi-cyberpunk future look like from the Martian frontier, far from the mega-cities of Earth?

If the corporations that govern the world sent you an unstable, augmented mercenary to search for highly profitable secret technology, you just might find out.

(spoiler alert: they did)

Jim Cherry says

It's hard to know how to review *Frontera*, as a debut novel? It is Lewis Shiner's debut novel but it was originally published in 1984, and is part of the definitive editions Subterranean Press is publishing of Shiner's work. So, do I take into account Shiner's later work to give the novel context? Or should I review it as any literary debut?

Lewis Shiner is categorized with cyberpunk writers like William Gibson. I really don't see it, *Frontera* and the other science fiction that Shiner has written seems like hard sci-fi more in the mold of Heinlein. Shiner is of the generation of writers that came to the forefront in the early 80's, that may account for the categorization. Whatever label you want to slap on Shiner's work what you're getting is good solid writing.

The world of *Frontera* could be tomorrow. All the world's governments have collapsed leaving the corporations to take over. *Frontera* is a colony on Mars that is assumed lost by those on Earth until Pulsystems, which is the corporation that has taken over the U.S., starts receiving mysterious messages from Mars about a machine with quantum possibilities. A slap-dash reconnaissance mission is thrown together to see if the colony has somehow managed to survive. The mission is led by Reese, an aging astronaut who was the first person on Mars and his only other option in life is drinking himself to death. Kane is a Pulsystems VP and former soldier sent with a mission that is obscure even to himself and pushes him to the edge of insanity. When the mission discovers the *Frontera* colony alive, if not totally well, they discover there is a secret on Mars that the colonists aren't willing to share.

If you've already read Shiner's later more mature writing you'll see *Frontera* as a starting point. You can see some of the theme's Shiner will later adopt and adapt more fully in later works, such as contentious relationships between fathers and sons. In *Frontera*'s case, between surrogate father figure and son relationships. Older readers of Shiner's will be able to create the context it belongs in and the evolution of Shiner as a writer. If you're new to Shiner's work, it's the natural starting point and a literary debut that will lead you to the next book and the next.

Adam says

Ambition drove their dreams, blinding them to the price others would pay.

10 years ago governments around the world collapsed. In the chaos, communication with the Martian colony, *Frontera*, was lost. Ten years later the world's most powerful companies have decided to mount an expedition to Mars. Even dead, the colony is an important step towards reclaiming the stars. But when they arrive the crew find *Frontera* alive and well, and in no mood for visitors. Tensions mount as secrets come to light, forcing everyone to question who they can trust.

Audiences are thrown into an adventure already underway, with very little to guide them.

Frequent flashbacks help to fill some of the gaps, but information is always carefully managed, doling out answers a few at a time, ensuring audiences always have a question to drive them forward. Crisp scenes compete with dry summaries that force audiences to slow down. The temptation to hurry on is palpable, almost every segment ends on a cliffhanger, but those who rush will miss out on most of the story, which lies buried under the words on the page.

Brief references hint at a deeper meaning, as each character struggles between their individual dreams, their obligations to others, and the grim, graphic realities that no one wants to face. Unfortunately it's just too much. The story tries to do it all, but while the writing is sharp, there just isn't enough time to properly "show" who the characters are, and simultaneously build up to a proper catharsis. The story is forced to rely on flashbacks and inner reflections to blatantly state what should be left for audiences to infer on their own.

- +Strong Pacing through information management
- +Challenging writing
- *Complex but under-utilized characters
- Overly hurried narrative
- Overuse of Summary

2.5/5

David Tindell says

An accessible cyberpunk novel. Enjoyable read, but won't change your life.

Bill says

I believe I found this book on a list of essential Cyberpunk reading, and I can see why it could make a cyberpunk list, but I would personally categorize it as SciFi. It was a fine story, but I doubt that it will stand out in any significant way over time.

Melinda says

Shiner shows us an Earth where unchecked capitalism has left our cities in ruins and our people crushed under the heel of monolithic corporations. Nationalism is dead, but it's been replaced by the same greedy bastards that once used Nationalism to line their pockets.

Did I mention this was written in 1984? I suppose there's a reason that science fiction published in 1984 resonates so strongly right now. I try not to think too hard about it because it makes me want to throw up. In fact--hang on a sec--

OK, I'm back. Now that they've divided the Earth into equal shares, the world's five corporations have turned to the Mars colony, which was left on its own when the world governments fell. Mars has its own problems, the least of which is that it's run by a governor who's gone mad with power and isolation, who watches all of his own citizens day and night and makes people who disagree with him "disappear".

The plot in this book moves. All of the present-day action takes place in about two days. The characters are well-drawn and interesting, including the women, which is awesome. I don't think writers who give us good women are praised enough, so just let me repeat that: LEWIS SHINER WRITES AWESOME WOMEN.

There's some sprinkles of mythology throughout, which I didn't enjoy as much, but it doesn't get too carried

away. I wish it had been longer and given us more time to spend with the people in this novel. Overall, though, this was a great read, one of those books that gets better the more you think about it. Highly recommended.

Greg says

Published in 1984 as a near-future science-fiction novel, the technology described in it is very much rooted in the early 1980s. Only the existence of a human colony on Mars, the attendant interplanetary space travel between it and Earth, and the occasional use of lasers as weapons, are significantly futuristic (apart from a new technological discovery that takes place in the course of the book). Thus, there are no references to mobile phones, CD-ROMs, flash drives, DVDs, computer games, MP3/MP4 players, flat-screen TVs and monitors, and so on, anywhere in the text. Although the World Wide Web was not invented by Tim Berners-Lee until 1991, a virtual-reality version (the Matrix) had been predicted by William Gibson in his novel, *Neuromancer*, which was published the same year as *Frontera*. However, while people use computers in *Frontera*, there is no concept in the novel of the Web as a global communication system. These computers, referred to as CRTs (p. 2 et seq.), use diskettes (spelled in full rather than as 'disks') (p. 14), though these are almost obsolete today, and they also use green monitors (p. 150) instead of the now ubiquitous colour screens. Films are shown 'in the flickering light of the projector' (p. 39) rather than on videotape (despite the existence of this technology in 1984), or in digital formats like MPEGs and AVIs, while audio recordings of communications chatter are stored on cassette tape rather than digitally (p. 48).

On the other hand, Shiner did foresee a kind of laptop/notebook/iPad in the form of a folding keyboard (pp. 115/121) as well as the widespread use of video surveillance cameras (pp. 48, 78). About the latter, he makes the interesting comment:

'Curtis's regime reflected the man's personal sterility and lack of humor. Reese had seen the cameras that tracked him as he walked, the sort of obsessive power icons that became venerated when true power was slipping away.' (p. 109)

He also predicts the growing importance of data as a measure of wealth when one character states that 'the gold standard is dead, and we're on the data standard now' (p. 51).

In other respects, his use of contemporary 1980s technology remains relevant to the early 21st-century reader, such as the Shuttle Orbiter, *Enterprise*), which transports a team of astronauts to the Mars Mission Module in orbit. It is only two days ago (21 July 2011) that this early 1980s technology ceased to be used with the completion of the final shuttle mission. A couple of sentences eerily remind one of the *Challenger* disaster in 1985:

'The orange shell of the shuttle's external tank seemed unlucky to him....' (p. 52)

““Roger. Main throttle at 104%. All three main engines go at throttle up.”” (p. 54)

The latter is similar to the last message received from the *Challenger* before its fuel tank exploded.

Technology aside, Shiner's novel predicts a post-Cold War world, which had emerged from a global economic collapse that had taken place some years before the events in the novel. This economic collapse prompted a brief war in Africa, the demise of national governments and their replacement by multinational corporations. The fabric of cities like Houston and Clear Lake City, in Texas, is depicted in terms of crumbling or collapsed highways and over-passes, riot-damaged shops and burned-out houses, industrial wastelands and considerable depopulation (pp. 34-5, 41-3). Yet symbols of former prosperity remained, such as the Johnson Space Centre, where some buildings are maintained by a multinational corporation, Pulsystems, and relics of earlier space travel, such as the Saturn V third stage booster, 'now rotting in drydock by the visitor's [sic] parking lot', still survive (p. 46). Meanwhile, the former Soviet Union collapsed and a civil war was fought between its constituent republics (p. 102), although the comments of one Russian seem a little clichéd:

“‘Ah’, Blok said. “How Russians love a purge. *Chistka*, they call it. [Shouldn’t this be ‘we call it’?] The cleaning. Out with socialism, the god that failed! In with western corporations! Blue jeans! Rock and roll!”” (p. 102)

I recall how jeans and popular western music, both of which Russian youth tried hard to acquire in the 1970s and 1980s, were treated as icons of western ‘decadence’ by the Russian state. But is this more of a western preoccupation with the totalitarian regime in the USSR? Did many Russians really care that much whether they could wear jeans and listen to rock and roll or not? There is also something of the old hostility towards the USSR, mixed with admiration (or jealousy) for its technological accomplishments, which typified western (especially American) perceptions of the Russians in the 1960s and 1970s in some of Shiner's text:

The Russians had ‘been perfecting their soft landings while the U.S. was still dropping their Geminis and Apollos in the ocean – even if some of those landings had been blatant fiascos, like the *Voskhod-2* mission where Leонев and Беляев sat all night in their dead spacecraft, two thousand miles off course, fighting wolves and snow’ (p. 103). Similarly, Col. Mayakenska, a female Russian astronaut who arrives at the colony of Frontera, had previously served as ‘one of the higher ups in the Institute for Medium Machine Building, the Russian equivalent of NASA’. She was:

‘too valuable, the [Communist] Party told her, to be risked in the cosmonaut program. There were simply not enough high-ranking women to serve as examples of the Party’s mythical lack of sexism, and far too many disasters in space’ (p. 118).

(view spoiler)

One thing I liked about the novel was its references to the Mutch Memorial Station. This is the site of the *Viking 1* landing on Mars and it was named after Thomas A. Mutch, who had been the NASA associate administrator that led the *Viking 1* imaging team in the 1970s. The location of this space heritage site, relative to the fictional colony of Frontera and other features of the Martian landscape, is pinpointed on a map of Mars (opposite p. 1). Towards the end of the novel, a character named Ian is recalled having ‘been on a solo rover expedition to the Mutch Memorial Station, site of the first Viking landing, where he’d snapped

off the soil sampling arm and brought it back as a trophy' (p. 157). This is not unlike my brief cautionary tale of a space-suited tourist family visiting the Carl Sagan Memorial Station – the landing site of the *Mars Pathfinder* – where one of the children in the family accidentally snaps the spacecraft's aerial mast (see *Digging Holes in Popular Culture: Archaeology and Science Fiction*, p. 112). It is my concern that should space tourism on the Moon and Mars become a reality, then the heritage of human space travel – such as the Viking and Pathfinder craft – could end up being destroyed or seriously damaged by souvenir hunters and/or industrial developers.

Overall, I enjoyed this book partly as a realistic look at near-future interplanetary space travel and settlement from an early 1980s perspective and also for its vision of post-national governance by multinational corporations. It was also a reasonably good story, although I felt that Col. Mayakenska's actions towards the end of the story did not seem to fit her personality or role as a significant figure in the post-Soviet organisation that sent her to Mars, even if she liked listening to jazz (p. 121)! Also, while it is his first novel, I feel that Shiner was overly cautious in terms of foreseeing future technology – one thing I like about science fiction is reading about new concepts and ideas in society, economy and technology, even if they never leave the realm of science fiction.

Sardinicus says

I got this book as part of a bundle, and started in without knowing anything the author, or the fact that it is from 30+ years ago. I can only imagine that many of the better reviews here relate more to seeing the book in that context, but reading this simply as an SF novel in 2016, it is hard to recommend.

I gather that Shiner would come to be associated with the Cyberpunk sub-genre, but there is little of that here; rather there is a straightforward melodrama with the trappings of ships-and-suits SF.

The writing style borders on noir but the level of internal angst undercuts the hard-boiled approach. There are a lot of movie influences here; in retrospect the influence of *Blade Runner* and *Outland* is clear, as well as the most overt possible channeling of Joseph Campbell's theories on the Hero's Journey and father-son relationships (all the rage after *Star Wars*).

The female characters are differentiated mainly by hair color; several of these are involved in a silly set of implausible and awkwardly-written sexual trysts that seem to exist only to drive home the link to the mythological archetypes. The world-building is actually excellent but the story placed on this framework is rather clumsy and preposterous.

Moving into SPOILERS territory:

So we have an antimatter generator (in one portable circuit board!) AND a stargate developed by the mutant-genius children and grandchildren of the original colonists; this double MacGuffin is used to both drive the story and set up a sequel (was there ever one? If not Reese's story sure ends with a whimper). We have the aforementioned love triangles and daddy issues, persecuted by people who are supposed to be coming off of a months-long space journey that they barely survived. Decades after a Mars base has been established, we have people picking up corded phones and reading green text on black computer screens (apparently Shiner's crystal ball only looked at the geopolitical realm). We have inscrutable Japanese crewmates and droll Russian agents escalating the action (fair enough of an extrapolation for the '80s) and a megalomaniac leader who, in a matter of hours, comes up with a counter-threat straight out of a Dan Brown book. Finally, and

most insanely, we have a GUN FIGHT (with Colt revolvers, no less) between FULLY HARD-SUITED characters on the SURFACE OF MARS. Those must be some amazingly thin gloves. This makes it sound like more fun than it actually is, really, since it's all handled in such a self-serious and ponderous way.

This is a reasonable diversion and perhaps interesting if you are following the author's career, but not something I'd go out of my way to obtain.

Brian says

Ideas presented in this novel much more interesting than the characters, nevertheless still an enjoyable read if you can ignore the arch typical Russians that remind me of vaudeville villains with long twisted mustaches and evil laughs.

Allan Dyen-Shapiro says

I love Lewis Shiner's later work and his short fiction, so I picked up his first novel. This is the one that got him lumped in with the cyberpunk crowd. Yes, there is augmentation of humans with computer hardware. Yes, it is dystopian. And yes, fans of cyberpunk (me included) would enjoy it.

But it's much more. It's also traditional science fiction that hearkens back to the Golden Age. Quick turning plot, set on Mars, physics as the driving force behind societal progress.

And it's a period piece projecting the future of politics from before the fall of the Soviet empire. The complete collapse of all nations, followed by the rise of powerful corporations, followed by a resurgence of nationalism was prescient when it came to Russia. May still be prescient when it comes to the US, China and Japan, not really looking that way. But very interesting historical vision.

And it's what Shiner excels in, strong, very cool characters. Chapters are written from five different points of view, with POV characters as different as he can make them. All have the readers sympathy, even in their conflicts. And the ones who don't get a turn as POV character are the enigmas I would have wanted to know the mind of, especially Curtis and Verb.

And he even throws in a strong literary bent--the way he played with mythology added a truly fascinating dimension to what was happening to the POV character at the time (don't want to spoil it for you).

This kept me turning the pages, had me admiring the character development, and satisfied the hard science fiction type in me with the gripping portrayals of the Martian landscape (although the physics was in the realm of science fantasy).

Excellent.

Jrubino says

Another novel in need of a serious editor.

I can easily ignore the occasional typo, but the repetitive wording, the shallow characters, and the blunt plot line is too much. Stopped after 40 pages.
