

Review of *Polostan*

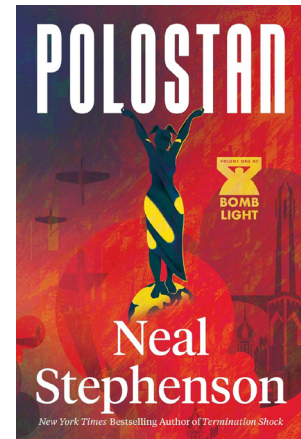
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Stephenson, Neal. *Polostan* William Morrow and Company, 2024.

In the summer of 2000, I happened upon the newly released paperback edition of Neal Stephenson's *Cryptonomicon*; fresh off qualifying exams, I was looking for a fun read, nothing too heavy, to slowly enjoy after the frenetic pace that gutting books requires. The marketing materials suggested *Cryptonomicon* would fit the bill, so I picked it up.

It changed the direction of my career. I roared through it in two or three days and knew that this novel would have to find a place in my dissertation alongside works by Thomas Pynchon and Ismael Reed, and I began picking up more of Stephenson's body of work, starting with *Snow Crash* and *The Diamond Age*. *Cryptonomicon* was nothing light, of course, and for those who've ventured into the similarly deep waters of The Baroque Cycle, *Polostan* will resonate along similar frequencies. It is a promising opening to the Bomb Light Cycle (a sequel has not yet been announced), and certainly worth seeking out. I came to like the novel more and more as it progressed, a good sign for a promised series.



That said, *Polostan* does not stand quite as high as the works mentioned, but it is a welcome return to historical SF form from the Tom Clancy-esque thrillers Stephenson has been releasing of late (*Reamde*, *Fall*, *Termination Shock*, e.g.), with a bifurcated plot that jumps back and forth in time and place quite rapidly. However, it is a slow boil of a story, coming together piecemeal as protagonist Dawn Rae Bjornberg, known as Aurora in her father's Soviet Union, comes to find herself under the control of Lavrentiy Beria, head of Stalin's secret police

Dawn holds American and Soviet passports; born in the US but taken to Revolutionary Leningrad by her father, she returned to her mother in Wyoming as a girl and learned to ride horses there. A skilled polo player and ardent Communist, she then works for her father, observing American troop movements among the disaffected veterans of the Great War in Washington in the early 1930s, coming into contact with such young officers as George Patton, Dwight Eisenhower, and Douglas MacArthur (himself a character in *Cryptonomicon*). In Washington, she takes possession of a Thompson machine gun in a violin case, and she gains knowledge of a large cache of guns and ammunition being smuggled in from Chicago on the trains.

In Chicago and in Russia, she witnesses the dawning of the Nuclear Age as physicists attempt to release weather balloons to the upper atmosphere to observe cosmic rays and potentially unlock the structure of heavy nuclei, how stars emit x-rays and other forms of radiation, and what might be done to harness such powers. Aurora also bears witness to the human costs of such experiments. Where the next volumes of *Bomb Light* may go along these lines will be intriguing—much like his exploration of the creation of digital computers through the needs of cryptology in *Cryptonomicon*'s World War Two sections, Stephenson is laying the foundation for potentially fascinating steps towards Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the development of the Hydrogen Bomb in the US and the USSR in *Polostan*.

Still a teen but on the run from Federal Agents, Dawn makes her way to the Soviet Union, where her life changes quite suddenly. Unlike a nascent literary critic, her awakening does not happen in a bookstore, but in rather more torturous circumstances. Under Beria's direction, Aurora becomes "Svetlana" and then "Katya" as she works to report on foreign reporters for the OGPU.

Dawn's next steps are eagerly awaited—unlike such protagonists as YT and Nell in *Snow Crash* and *The Diamond Age*, respectively, she is not overtly sexualized in *Polostan* even as she takes a lover, and while she is clever and opportunistic, Dawn differs from Eliza, Duchess of Qwghlm in *The Baroque Cycle*, in that she is not driven to collect economic resources and political power—she needs to survive to the next moment.

Polostan is recommended as a slow-burning iteration of Stephenson's great powers as a storyteller. There are fewer prose pyrotechnics than in earlier novels here and it is not the hard science fiction of such recent works as *Seveneves*, but it is a compelling read.

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