



His Master's Voice

Stanisław Lem, Michael Kandel (Translator)

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Twenty-five hundred scientists have been herded into an isolated site in the Nevada desert. A neutrino message of extraterrestrial origin has been received and the scientists, under the surveillance of the Pentagon, labor on His Master's Voice, the secret program set up to decipher the transmission. Among them is Peter Hogarth, an eminent mathematician. When the project reaches a stalemate, Hogarth pursues clandestine research into the classified TX Effect--another secret breakthrough. But when he discovers, to his horror, that the TX Effect could lead to the construction of a fission bomb, Hogarth decides such knowledge must not be allowed to fall into the hands of the military.

His Master's Voice Details

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Nick says

An epic book, in scope, if not in length. Just short of a philosophical treatise on the origins and future of mankind, Lem weaves together a true arsenal of science fiction tropes and scientific knowledge of the day to paint a eerily realistic scenario that follows a discovery of an extraterrestrial signal. The book starts out a bit slow - with the narrator explaining to the reader why he is the one who is narrating the said book - but it picks up from there and the plot has a steady ramp-up to the somewhat anti-climactic conclusion. With this book though, the pleasure is in the journey.

Thegurkenkaiser says

Das ist ein sehr faszinierendes Buch. Vieles was über die Humanwissenschaften und an gesellschaftlichen Auffassungen da verbreitet wird, finde ich zwar schlichtweg falsch, aber das philosophieren über die bedeutung der alien-botschaft und das aufstellen und verwerfen von hypothesen, das ist richtig mitreissend. auch wenns stellenweise schwer zu lesen ist und zeitweise in naturwissenschaftlich-technischm gebrabbel versinkt. eigentlich gefällt mir vieles an dem buch nicht. aber man muss es lesen. volle punktzahl!

ich hab das hier mal weitergedacht: <http://zweitgurk.wordpress.com/2012/0...>

Sean says

The story of a strange message from deep space and the scientists who attempt and fail to decipher it. Plenty of Lem's interesting theorizing, but totally lacking in the humor his other books have. Very slow and dreary. It's a short book, and still the story doesn't feel like it starts until it's half over. If I had a sharp stick, I would poke this book in the eye with it.

BlackOxford says

Signal as Noise

As is typical with much of his other work, Lem explores a perennial philosophical issue in *His Master's Voice*: How can we know that what we think we know has any claim to reality? Lem's use of a very Borgesian pseudo-factual account of a mathematician's encounter with a cosmic intelligence is brilliantly apt. Plato knew the problem well; Kant re-stated it ad nauseam; and Trump confirms its significance on a daily basis. Don DeLillo's *Ratner's Star* has a similar theme (See: <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>). *HMV* is, therefore, in a sense timeless and a persistent literary trope; it deserves a place in every thoughtful person's bibliography.

Here is a sequence of numbers: 1415926535. Could you say with certainty what the next number in the sequence will be? It is in fact 9. But unless you already knew that the sequence is composed of the decimal

units of the transcendental number pi, it is unlikely you would have a greater than 10% chance of getting the right answer. As an irrational number, pi can be expanded to an infinite number of decimal places without ever repeating the sequence. But obviously if one knows that pi can be calculated to any degree of precision required, the number in any decimal place is known with little effort.

This trivial exercise summarises a fundamental problem in information theory: how does one know that apparently random noise isn't really a communicative signal? The sequence above, for example, could be analysed endlessly and yet no pattern, no meaning would emerge from its very real randomness. Unless of course one already has the key to the code, namely pi. The discovery of meaning, in other words, requires the presumption that there is meaning to be found. All of science, actually any inquiry from the interpretation of literature to forensic investigation, must start there. Put another way, meaning depends on a receptivity to communication, which means a high tolerance for listening to nonsensical noise in order to find the signal buried within.

The rub is that it is very difficult to prevent a hopeful presumption of meaning from transforming into an article of faith. When that happens, the result is... well, the X-Files, a mad obsession which cannot be satisfied until the presumption is 'fulfilled'. So, the Kabbalist finds hidden patterns in the sequence of letters in scripture; the believer sees clear signs of the end times in natural disasters; the conspiracy theorists prove their presumptions about the Kennedy assassination or Area 51 or the Deep State; and geniuses like Immanuel Kant come up with wildly erroneous conclusions about the invariable 'categories' of which the world is constituted. The human need to find meaning seems insatiable, even when - especially when - there is no equivalent to pi to be found, no key except that which we impose without sufficient reason in line with our obsession.

Lem doesn't solve the paradox of meaning of course; he merely documents it in a particularly interesting way. Perhaps there is no way out of the paradox, which makes the contradictions of quantum physics, for example, seem like a walk in the park. But that hardly matters when the writing is as intriguing as Lem's. And he does provide a handy pocket-guide to dealing with the problem: "*genius*," he says, "*is, above all, constant doubting*." This, I suggest, includes maintaining doubt even about the meaning of meaning.

Tom Tresansky says

Sort of like the anti-Contact (or, as it precedes Sagan's novel, maybe Contact is the juvenile, safe-for-kids rose-colored version of HMV).

Works much better as philosophy than as a novel. The psuedo-memoir structure adds nothing, and deletes any sense of urgency about the message; despite the final third attempting (unsuccessfully) to instill something akin to a generic scientists vs. military conflict. The opening took me 2 tries to get through, and seems fairly unnecessary having finished the book. The extended musings about the nature of the main character's character - somewhat interesting in their own right, but like the rest of the book, dense beyond dense prose - set me up for a very different kind of story than what arrived.

Lem's thought experiments lead in unique directions which will forever color my thinking regarding any other SF which uses the Message From Outer Space trope. The points Lem makes about organizational anti-competence and the nature of communication are worthy explorations. I wonder if anyone has ever thought as long and hard about the implications and possibilities of communication with alien life as Lem; it really seems to be the singular obsession of his fiction.

As a novel this book is a failure though. It was frequently boring (when it wasn't thought-provoking - as inconsistent a rollercoaster of worthiness I think I've ever encountered) and finishing it became a chore. I don't understand the purpose of *The Lord of The Flies*, given *Frog Legs*. The characters had little to do and I trouble remember which scientist was which - this might be a thematic point, but it made for dull reading. I supposed Lem warned us in the prologue that this wasn't a story of pulling back the layers of a mystery, but there wasn't nearly enough meat at the center of this story to build a book around.

On the whole: an dense misfire far better to have read than to actually read.

Gendou says

Stanislaw Lem is a good author.

But his science fiction reads more like philosophical fiction.

There is some good particle physics stuff in this story, which I greatly appreciated.

The writing style is elegant, sometimes gaudy, but the narrator's pompous opining gets old.

I found myself hoping for less talk, more action a lot while reading this book.

I feel like the author didn't have the balls to chose mathematical and cryptographic details for *The Message*, so he left them out.

I would have loved to hear about how *Frog Eggs* was decoded, in detail.

I would also have loved to hear the how main character's important mathematics worked.

But I guess those would require more knowledge and imagination on the part of the author.

In particular, the author seems not to know about Shanon's information theory.

Oh, and what ever happened to the noise layer on top of the binary signal from an early chapter?

It's never revisited!

Why don't they build a more sensitive instrument to read that second, buried message?

I think the author just forgot about it...

Someday I'd like to re-write this book, but change things to be more realistic.

The narrator would be less of a rambler.

The project to decode *The Message* would be explained in technical detail.

I'd take that opportunity to make the message more structured and interesting.

I reject the major lesson of the book: that humanity isn't ready to understand what aliens have to say.

In the end, the project fails to decode more than a few percent of the message.

This isn't consistent with the premise that the senders are nice aliens.

They would have put in a "ramp" for any recipient of the message to build up shared, cultural knowledge.

Lem makes a big deal about how we can't understand their language if we don't share culture in common.

We share enough universals in common to walk up a ramp of understanding.

From math, to chemistry, cosmology, geology, biology, etc.

Humanity may be warlike on the level of the nation state.

But we have the capacity for understanding and frank communication.

Especially given the fact that such communication poses no threat.

Carlex says

Lo siento, voy tan de c*lo que no puedo hacer comentario. Quedaos con que está muy bien.

Michael Battaglia says

While Stanislaw Lem was not known as a writing man of action, neither was he Samuel Beckett for the most part either. But my goodness there is such a thing as taking it to extremes. Fortunately, Lem was a thinker on such a ridiculously intense level that if you're the right kind of SF reader then this is come across like manna from heaven. If you're the kind of person who seeks out authors based on George Clooney's starring film choices, you're going to be in for a bit of a surprise, because this novel makes that one look like "The Fast and the Furious" from an action perspective.

Lem was always more concerned with ideas and telling stories that allowed those ideas to coagulate and circle each other and debate. He's a writer of sharp satire and criticism, and you can somewhat get the sense from several of his novels that a) he didn't think much of what was commonly accepted as SF "tropes" and b) he wished more people were doing what he did instead of writing stories where bare chested heroes wrestled with bug eyed aliens on completely illogical worlds. Though there's a place for that sometimes too.

The biggest criticism Lem seems to have of SF, and I only say this because it seems to crop up repeatedly in novel after novel, is that time and again there is a assumption that if we were to run into aliens we are going to be able to communicate and find some common ground. Lem seems to suggest in his novels that it isn't that easy and question where we're even smart enough to pull off such a task, even if the aliens practically gift wrap their message to us. It's almost like he perceives the human race as having a history of continually misinterpreting messages or signals and allowing rather unpleasant disasters to happen because of it. Oh wait, he's probably right.

So in this novel you get what is probably as close to a cliche as Lem will ever get, which is the Alien We Do Not Understand situation. A signal has been received from outer space from a certain constellation and the US government has tasked several scientists of various disciplines to try and decipher it and see if it's something useful, like recipes, or something completely dispensable, like reality TV or movies starring their version of Adam Sandler. As it turns out, the signal is neither of those things but the scientists aren't exactly sure what the heck it is and thus spend the entire book debating theories that say more about themselves than it does about the signal in question (dubbed "His Master's Voice" because somebody has a sense of humor) without ever actually figuring out what the signal means or if it's even really a signal sent out by aliens and they're just spending all this time attempting to decode a star burp as something intelligent.

Noting that they don't figure it out isn't really a spoiler since it's pretty much the culmination of every Lem novel that deals with aliens (plus it's noted in the first chapter) but what Lem does here is turn the book into an almost extremely meditative essay on the nature of science and its theories as well as the relationship between science and the outside world as well as the sometimes unwelcome influence of the military. The book is structured as a memoir of one of the scientists who is brought onto the project and throughout his recollections of the events that led up to them not accomplishing much of anything are numerous asides sprinkled about the other scientists and their relationships to each other as well as the government's attempt to get something useful out of all these brain trusts, preferably something that explodes (they do manage to synthesize a compound from the signal but if you think it leads anywhere vital this must be your

first day at Cranky Polish SF Authors 101).

This approach to the novel means that it's just nothing for first person recollections and musings for two hundred or so pages, subtracting all those pesky things like action and even dialogue for the most part . . . if Asimov could sometimes be construed as the narrative equivalent of ice water, this is probably closer to permafrost. There is a plot but the plot is almost about how there is no plot as everyone chases ideas down their own personal rabbit holes without actually coming to any real conclusions. Do not mistake this, however for a light beach read about physicist hijinks . . . for all its brevity it's a dense book and once you get the hang of the narration then the musings and ponderings and the process of trying to discover something unprecedently new while everyone around you is either falling prey to their own biases while insisting that isn't the case or the nice people in the uniform are dropping stronger and stronger hints that what they'd really love out of all this is a nice large bomb are actually quite fascinating. Lem is no slouch as a writer and knows how to keep the ideas flowing and also how to keep his target in sight at all times. While the book is most definitely a satire, it's even closer to a condemnation of how everyone pretends the scientific process is above politics when that clearly isn't this to anyone with a functioning pair of eyes and while he's not as savage as he could be in other novels, this isn't exactly the book you want to give someone who is looking forward to a career working in the government sponsored sciences, unless their goal is to be completely at the mercy of everyone in charge.

The format hamstrings the book slightly in terms of impact, as it mostly consists of someone describing not very exciting events a long time after the fact, but for those willing to dig into it there's quite a bit to recommend it as Lem clearly never stopped thinking, not only about the ideas his books presented but how those ideas as presented. In its own modest way it's successful and while it probably shouldn't be anyone's first choice (I'll go with the crowd on this and say "Solaris" and "The Cyberiad" are the go-to's, with the Pirx the Pilot stories a pleasant runner up), if you're willing to meet it on its own terms you'll find that it does what it sets out to do almost completely, and if the conclusions he draws aren't exactly cuddly, he states them so strongly it's worth questioning how close to the truth he is, and from there how we let it get that bad.

Mahyar says

His Master's Voice is the story of a brilliant mathematician, working on a Manhattan Project-like in an attempt to decipher a signal from space.

The attempt has only succeeded in deciphering a tiny fragment of the message (and that is not well understood). Thus the work fits in with Lem's many writings on the subject of the "alien" and how it may be impossible to understand something which is truly different from us.

These other works include "Fiasco", "Eden" and (most famously) "Solaris". "His Master's Voice" is the most realistic and the most philosophical in tone.

The tale is set in cold war America, and includes a fairly pedestrian plot line around the possibility the signal contains instructions for a weapon, but the bulk of the book consists of the narrator's fundamental observations on life and the universe.

I have always suspected Carl Sagan read this book before he wrote "Contact" as the high concept remains...

It is one of the best book I have read, and a book for those who love the struggle and satisfaction of a truly awe inspiring read.

Truncarlos says

Grande Lem.

Krzysztof says

G?os Pana

W pierwszej kolejno?ci trzeba sobie odpowiedzie? na pytanie dlaczego G?os Pana jest i powinien by? fascynuj?c? pozycj? dla fanów s-f. Moim zdaniem g?ówn? zalet? tej powie?ci jest jej ocieranie si? o to, co ja osobi?cie w s-f ceni? najbardziej. Mianowicie chodzi o pytania, podsuwanie odpowiedzi, niejednoznaczno?? i przemy?lenia dotycz?ce post?pu technologicznego, czy te? eksploracji kosmosu.

Z pocz?tku mo?na by? znudzonym lekko zbyt surowym hard s-f podanym w formie autobiografii uczestnika projektu Master's Voice. Opowiada nam on o swoim ?yciu przed, po wdro?eniu do projektu i po jego zako?czeniu. Przynajmniej oficjalnym. Jest to jedna z bardziej filozoficznych powie?ci Lema, gdzie stawia si? pytania na temat istnienia, kosmosu, obcych cywilizacji, tego jak postrzegamy ?wiat, jak odczytujemy sygna?y natury i co determinuje nasze pogl?dy. Serwuje nam znakomity intelektualny twist (nie w stylu "kto zabi??"?), który powoduje, ?e tak samo jak w przypadku Niezwyci??onego pokr?tnym sposobem my?lenia ludzkiego umys?u na tematy, o których tak naprawd? nie ma zielonego poj?cia. Cz?owiek jest zdolny do stawiania tez i prób wyja?nienia tego na setki ró?nych sposobów nie dopuszczaj?c do ?wiadomo?ci, ?e mo?e si? sromotnie myli?.

Fakt jest taki, ?e pocz?tek mo?e i nu?y, ale ma niebagatelne znaczenie w kontek?cie puenta, pyta? zadawanych przez autora, a tak?e sposobów interpretacji przez czytelnika. Oczami osoby trzeciej bardzo ?atwo nam zauważ?y? jak bardzo opisywane mechanizmy ludzkiego umys?u s? pokr?tne i jak tak naprawd? ma?o wiemy o ?wiecie.

Evan says

Here we have more of Lem's tragic scientists, deep characters whose interactions, as always with Lem, sometimes read like a novel of manners from another dimension.

His Masters Voice can feel like a series of disconnected essays on grand themes, but the whole thing adds up to a wrenching statement about the impossibility of knowledge and the human place in a vast universe. The patchwork of ideas in this book fuse with a weird, white hot intensity that will move you, despite yourself.

It's sad that the Nobel Prize eluded the author, who will surely be remembered as one of the great souls of his age. Reading his books informs people what it was like to be a sensitive, thinking person alive in the latter half of the twentieth century, even if most of his stories take place on other planets or in other dimensions.

Nigel Mitchell says

This is the story of Mankind's first contact with extraterrestrial life, but it's nothing like what you've seen before. I always felt that if the people who created the SETI Project to search for alien signals had read this book, they would have given up. That's because Lem's novel perfectly illustrates how impossible it would be for us to communicate with alien life. Think of it as the evil twin of "Contact," written twenty years later.

In "His Master's Voice," a group of scientists identify a repeating signal being sent through space. The signal is too organized to be random, leading them to determine that it's sent by extraterrestrial beings. The US sets up a secret project to analyze and interpret the signal in hopes of discovering why it was sent and what it means. The novel takes the form of a memoir written by one of those scientists, Peter Hogarth.

I don't think it's a spoiler to say that the project fails miserably, because that's stated at the beginning of the novel. Unlike movies like "Contact," where the aliens sent a clearly understood and meaningful message, this signal is unfathomable. It's not written in English or mathematics or any other known form. The scientists can't figure out if the signal was sent for them or someone else or even if it is a message at all. As in "Contact," the scientists decide that the signal might have a mathematical description of an object inside it. They use the signal to synthesize two substances; a gelatinous blob, and a lump of something that looks like meat, but isn't. Both substances turn out to be entirely useless, and they're not even sure if what they made is something the aliens intended to be made.

If it sounds like a bummer, it is. So what's the point of the novel? I think it's a great novel because it dares to say what is probably more true than not; the idea that extraterrestrial life would be anything like human beings is ridiculous and egocentric. Too many scifi stories make aliens look and act like humans, because it's easier. It's harder and more uncomfortable to imagine aliens as fundamentally different than us, and that's what this novel is about.

So if the book isn't about meeting some cool alien race or building alien technology, what is it about? Wikipedia has a passage that describes what we get: "Throughout the book Hogarth — or rather, Lem himself — exposes the reader to many debates merging cosmology and philosophy: from discussions of epistemology, systems theory, information theory and probability, through the idea of evolutionary biology and the possible form and motives of extraterrestrial intelligence, with digressions about ethics in military-sponsored research, to the limitations of human science constrained by the human nature subconsciously projecting itself into the analysis of any unknown subject." Yes, heavy stuff. Read this book and have your mind opened to new possibilities rarely addressed in science fiction.

Marc Nash says

An excellent treatment of the relentless march of scientific progress and discovery and its shortcomings. However, the book reads like a debate rather than an involving narrative. There is no plot.

A seemingly alien message is intercepted by Earth but it is a language and technology not previously encountered. The best minds of the democratic West are assembled to try and crack its mystery, including the mathematician narrator, whose main role turns out to be that of skeptic, providing the counters to each of the arguments forwarded by his fellows. The psychology of the narrator is delved into at the novel's opening, to suggest he has a natural mien to be intellectually destructive.

So what we get is a book seeped in the cold war politics of the 1960s and the consequences of the invention of the hydrogen bomb which I think lies at the heart of this book. Science is neutral, it deals with facts. Whether those truths turn out to be positive or negative in their effects, depends entirely on what man does with the knowledge. Inevitably the focus of the military sponsored project turns to see whether this alien tech can be weaponised. It can't, the technology remains impenetrable, not least because man cannot reason outside of his own experience and senses. And that's it really. The ideas were fascinating, but I couldn't give it 5 stars since it reads as a digest of ratiocination about scientific observation and objectiveness (undermined by quantum mechanics and the Uncertainty Principle). It's as dry as a scientific treatise.

Andrej Karpathy says

His Master's Voice is probably best described as a grown up version of Carl Sagan's Contact. This is a very unique sci-fi, in a good way. It is first and foremost an ambitious and humbling philosophical treatise on humanity and our place in the universe. This is then grounded in a short story about a team of scientists in a project similar to the Manhattan Project who are trying to decipher a discovered message encoded in a neutrino signal. The book raises several intriguing possibilities about the nature of the message and its content, but ultimately (and I like this part) the mystery remains unresolved. The book is not a silly story about establishing communications with aliens. It is a story about our failure to do so and especially about why such aspirations could in retrospect be considered naive. I did not agree with some of the specific arguments raised in the book and I think the story was not as fleshed out as it could have been, but I admire what Stanisław Lem tried to do with this book; It is unique, intelligent, I support it, I like it, and I want more. 4.5/5, but I'll round down this time.

Dan Keating says

Let me start by saying that I've owned this book for around five or six years and have only just completed it. I've made several attempts over the years, the most recent of which involving swearing to myself that I would not read anything else until I completed it. Well, I've completed it, and the sensation is something akin to climbing a grueling mountain only to turn around afterward and discover that it was, in fact, an anthill.

Don't get me wrong. Lem's brilliant ability to misdirect the reader toward an ultimately unachievable goal of understanding is present and accounted for in His Master's Voice. I had three issues with His Master's Voice.

One, the characters were a little flat. While they all had an abundance of life from time to time, throughout the bulk of the novel they would lapse into monologues or dialogues - more on those in a minute - during which most of their character would be lost and they'd all take on the personalities of formal scientific papers. While the ideas they present are often engaging, the way they do so feels, as I said above, flat.

Two, the monologue/dialogue sections were a little overused. The vast majority of His Master's Voice is taken up by characters debating or explaining ideas. While Lem's work often includes a great deal of exposition, the amount in His Master's Voice is a little overwhelming. There were times where I was having a difficult time remembering that I was reading a novel.

Three, the hard science was a little too hard. I love well-written hard sci-fi, but I think I've finally been

defeated. It didn't take long for His Master's Voice to soar blissfully over my head in descriptions of neutrinos and particle physics, and whenever readers get lost trying to understand the actual science behind hard science fiction, it makes the fictional science harder to spot. Coming away from this I have no idea what was real science and what wasn't (aside from the few obvious things) and that's kind of a problem.

Aside from these complaints, readers should be warned that this is an INCREDIBLY dense book. Between the near-constant exposition and extremely high-order science being discussed, it does not read particularly fast. Is it worth it? Meh. For fans of his work or people intrigued by the concept, sure. For anyone looking for a light read, no, and for everyone else, I'd recommend picking up *Solaris* before reading this one.

Chris says

This book is the story of an unsuccessful attempt to translate an alien signal encoded in neutrino radiation. (The possibility of detecting or sending such a signal makes the book science *fiction*, given the elusiveness of neutrinos in the real world.) This is not a spoiler. The narrator, a member of the scientific team assigned to decipher the transmission, tells us it was unsuccessful from the very beginning. The novel is more about why it was unsuccessful and the consequences of it being unsuccessful. I liked it because, unlike a normal story where you find out what was really going on at the end, at the end of this book you know less about what was really happening than you did at the beginning. By the end, plausible doubts have been raised as to whether the signal was a signal at all. This seems to me to be a much more likely outcome of alien contact than otherwise.

Lem does a really good job of imagining (or having his characters imagine) the different forms a message can take. The people trying to decode the signal don't have anything to go on, which makes their task impossible. In this respect, Lem's decision to structure the novel as a narrative by one of the participants is clever. Since one of the main points of the book is that we can't possibly imagine what kind of message aliens might send (much less what it might contain), the narration strategy allows him to put himself (as the authorial voice) in the same condition. Like the aliens in *2001*, the fact that we don't get an answer (we don't see the aliens) makes them far more realistic than creatures with crinkly foreheads or giant bugs or what have you.

Finally, I found this book a lot of fun, especially when the narrator disparages some of his colleagues' theories by observing they've been too influenced by bad science fiction. This is only the second book by Lem I've read, the other being the *Cyberiad*, but one of the major things I've admired about both is his ability to write about serious things in a funny way.

Althea Ann says

This is a science fiction novel – but it is only sort-of science fiction, and, for that matter, only sort-of a novel. It's in the form of a memoir – or musing – by a noted mathematician who worked in the upper levels of a secret government project code-named His Master's Voice – the purpose of which was to decode and comprehend a message, seemingly sent by intelligent beings from outer space, on neutrino waves. We are told from the outset that the project was not successful – no communication was set up, nor was the message even comprehended – but at the same time it had a major impact on society, technology, and more. So there isn't really any suspense in the book – or even all that much of a plot. It's really just the fictional Dr.

Hogarth's thoughts on the matter. However, Hogarth is an erudite, brilliant, philosophical character. 'His' character sketches of his colleagues are witty, vivid and, I would guess, accurate portrayals of the 'types' one might find on such a research project. His frequently tangential thoughts cover not only the difficulty of communicating with theoretical aliens, but the nature of communication itself, the nature of humanity, the uses to which we put technology, and especially how culture affects comprehension.

So – although I said it was only 'sort-of' science fiction, the work deals more with many of the ideas that science fiction as a genre exists to explore, than much of the sci-fi that I have read. And, although it was written in 1967 (not translated into English until the 80's, I believe) it hardly felt dated at all – an impressive feat.

Nikola Pavlovic says

Jako komplikovana i kompleksna knjiga. Komplikovana zbog dve stvari. Prva je nacin pisanja a druga jer je stalno na granici da postane kakva naučna disertacija. I pored toga, uz povremenu upotrebu google, vise ju je nego zanimljivo citati. Ovo delo vas tera na razmisljjanje i poseduje neke od najvispremijih metafora na koje sam nailazio. Jako zrelo delo. A poruka je vise nego jasna, barem ona po meni najvaznija, svako ce u necemu nepoznatom videti ono sto najvise zeli. Ljudska vrsta nrvavno oruzje. *Imajmo na umu da su ovakva dela SFa pisana u vreme Hladnog Rata.

Lukasz Pruski says

This extraordinary novel from the favorite writer of my youth, Stanisław Lem, defies categorizations. While on the surface it is a suspense novel or a "mystery" (more precisely, a scientific and philosophical mystery/suspense), it is actually more of a treatise on the human species' place in the Universe. Mr. Lem, who began in 1940s as a science-fiction writer and became the world's most widely read science-fiction author, left his mark on the 20th century as one of the deepest thinkers writing about science, technology, and the future of human race. He was a philosopher, serious futurologist, humanist, and popularizer of science. "His Master's Voice" (Polish title "G?os Pana") is one of his first "serious" books, and definitely my favorite. I read it for the first time in 1968, immediately after it had come out, and loved it. I have now re-read it, and it is still one of the most enthralling books I know and certainly one of the most thought-provoking.

The events described in the novel take place in the near future. A non-random, repeating pattern has been discovered in a neutrino stream recorded by astrophysicists at the Mount Palomar observatory. American government establishes a secretive project, dubbed "His Master's Voice", aimed at deciphering the "message from the stars". After a year of work, with the scientists no closer to understanding the message, new people are recruited to the project. A famous mathematician, Peter Hogarth, who is the narrator of the story, is among them. Dr. Hogarth is able to prove that the message has a topological property of "closure", which indicates that it is an object (a thing or a process) separate from the rest of the world. In the meantime, the project's biochemists and biophysicists manage to translate fragments of the message into physical substances that exhibit unusual properties. Perhaps most interestingly, it is discovered that the particular structure of the neutrino stream helps in creating the configurations of molecules that constitute the chemical backbone of life, and thus that the message increases the probability of creation of life.

However, let's not forget that the project is largely controlled by the military who are hoping that the

message will help construct some kind of super-weapon. Of course, their argument is that the other side (the novel was written in the times when there were just two superpowers - the U.S. and the Soviet Union) is probably also working to decipher the message and convert its contents into a super-weapon. I will not divulge how this subplot develops, but it is extremely successful in portraying the mechanisms of arms race, and the denouement is - I am sorry for using big words but they fully belong here - phenomenally clever. Neither will I divulge the overall conclusion of this scientific suspense novel - it is absolutely credible and it uniquely fits the premise. Find it for yourself!

I am sort of a mathematician, albeit not a very good one, no wonder then that I totally love Mr. Lem's presentation of differences between mathematics and social sciences - I was laughing for an entire day having read how Dr. Hogarth's results were not recognized by social scientists working on the project because his "style of thinking [...] provided no scope for rhetorical counterargument". Hilarious! On the other hand, Mr. Lem expertly shows the natural arrogance of a mathematical genius, who knows that the statements he has proved will always remain true, regardless of current political trends and prevailing philosophy.

When I came back to this book after 47 years, I expected I will find it dated and full of obsolete references. Amazingly, this is not the case at all. Written in pre-Internet times, "His Master's Voice" reads like an absolutely contemporary novel; it could have been written last year. The translation from Polish by Michael Kandel is superb.

I have left what is the best for me for last - "His Master's Voice" does not read like fiction. It makes the reader feel this is a chronicle of actual events, something like the story of Manhattan Project from the 1940s or any other big-scale scientific project. Several times, when reading the novel, I caught myself thinking the events have actually happened, and I had to forcefully remind myself that what I was reading was only fiction.

Trying to maintain balance, I need to mention that I do not like the Preface and the first chapter. They are a little overwrought and pompous, which makes me chip a quarter of a star off the rating for this masterpiece.

Four and three quarter stars.
