The Big U, by Neal Stephenson, Vintage Books, 34.50.

Casimir Radan is a physics major who has just transferred to American Megaverse — the Big U for short. The Big U is housed in a giant building, three blocks square, called the Plexus. Rising from the trimeter of the bas is eight 25-story towers shaped like Swiss crosses, housing the university's 40,000 students.

Casimir Radan has a problem. He is trying to lose out on introductory subjects the omniscient school computer has assigned him. Just as the professor is about to sign the necessary waiver, a piano explodes through the ceiling sending the professor into a coma and presenting Radan with taking more advanced classes.

This is the first in a series of increasingly wild incidents that plague the Big U. There are the mutant German Shepherd-like rats that inhabit the Plexus, the Creepies/Beastie/terrorists, and other assorted pests.

The death and fall of the Big U is chronicled through the eyes of newly-minted physics Ph.D. Bud Redfield. Through first-hand experience, we see a virtual omniscient narrator, and it jarrs when he occasionally deus ex machina himself into the action.

Redfield is one of Stephenson's best characters. The Big U is a true example of a novel where the narrative or principal character is black, but his race is not the overriding concern of the book. Too often there are books where a black is a doctor, or a black is a sports hero, or a black is a policeman. It is a pleasure when tokinom is avoided and the race of a character is only incidental to his actions.

The Big U fails in most other areas, however. Stephenson has written a confusing novel. He seems unable to decide whether he will write a satire or a horror. The book wobbles awkwardly between the social commentary on the dreariness effects of a rising technocracy, to a whimsical send-up of academics, to more LSD-tinged raving. The Big U has a believable setting, but the events take it to the realm of the ridiculous.

Stephenson goes to great lengths to give his characters clever names. There is the aforementioned physics Ph.D. Bud Redfield, a depo hooded named Desti Fresen (from the German freeman), or a giant animal, Big U President S. S. Krupp, and Dean Forklift of Deaming Savants, among others.

Stephenson needs a good editor. He frequently makes the mistake of telling rather than showing the reader. Heavy-handed similes abound. "He delivered the last sentence like the pantomime to a Reader's Digest event movie," or "I thought of Plan 9 as an Internet machine, cautiously cautious so that any denomination too ancient or too esoteric would shudder about randomly for a while, finding its way into the storage system and inevitably be deposited in the reject tray on the barrel back side." The Big U is a frustrating book when one considers what it could have been. As a student at an institute of technology we know, high-tech academia is a virgin for the satirist's pick. Stephenson's pick, while not dull, is certainly inferior to a first-rate copy.

Robert E. Middleman

Friday, September 21

LSC will be showing The Empire Strikes Back tonight at 7 and 9:30 pm in 26-100 at 8 and 11 pm. Four shows, all with Luke and Leia and Han and Chewie and the whole gang. What more needs to be said?

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If a battle among the stars of outer space isn't your style, then try the Nameless Coffeehouse. Start the weekend out right. SCC's Midnight Movie will be shown at 11 pm.

If you thought the Stute was Nite, then don't miss this! Tonight's SCC Midnight Movie is Liquid Sky, a freaked-out exploration of punk culture, narcotics, and outer space. This movie again (and again, and...). This is the first in a series of increasingly wild incidents that plague the Big U.

LSC will show The Empire Strikes Back once more at 2 pm in 26-100 today. Thursday's movie again (and again, and...).

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Liquid Sky, a freaked-out exploration of punk culture, narcotics, and outer space which in the very day of its release, is LSC's feature tonight. It will be shown at 7 and 10 pm in 26-100.

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The Nameless Coffeehouse's opening activities continue tonight. Musician Bob Hollander will be performing and free munchies will be served.

The Nameless Coffeehouse starts a new season in a grand way. Come to the coffeehouse tonight from 7:30 pm to 10 pm for refreshments and folk music. Both are always free.

The coffeehouse is located in the First Parish Church in Harvard Square, 3 Church Street.

Saturday, September 22

Tonight's SCC Midnight Movie is High Plains Drifter. This word Clint Eastwood movie will be shown in Lobdell at 11 pm. Paint the town red with Clint... the whole gang. What more needs to be said?

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Sunday, September 23

The Temperamental Ensemble in Allston, including stars Tom Starnick '79, director of the MIT Shakespeare Ensemble, opens a new play by Bruce Dale called Up on The Roof, a revisionist view of the Boston Massacre. The Ensemble will perform the play as a staged reading. The show is at it performs after the Kirkland and St. Margaret's Church at 40 Brighton Ave, in Allston. Admission $2.

Who done it? Tonight's LSC flick is the Agatha Christie thriller, Murder on the Orient Express. Back and enjoyable at 6:30 and 9:30 pm in 26-100.

Tickets

Many theater groups in the Boston area offer special discount prices to students. As we become aware of this information we will pass it on to the MIT Community.

The American Repertory Theater (ART) offers a Student Pass program. A "limited number" of student passes are available for $25 and entitles the owner to the 3 plays of the ART season (Nov 23 through June 23). ART is located at the Loeb Drama Center, 64 Brattle St, in Cambridge. The company has played to sold-out houses for the past two seasons, so early action is suggested. For more information call their box office at 443-3000.

The Huntington Theater Company also offers a $25 student pass which entitles the owner to attend all 5 plays the Theater will produce this season. Additionally, the Huntington student passes are free for productions up to two weeks before the first performance. The Huntington Theater Company is located at the Boston University Theater, 64 Huntington Ave. Passes are available at the MIT Technology Community Association (TCA). For more information, call the Theater's box office at 266-3913.