

# Quicksilver

By Neal Stephenson

## Introduction

*Quicksilver* (2003) is the first volume of the Baroque Cycle, a trilogy by noted post-cyberpunk author Neal Stephenson. The novel includes many characters drawn from history, such as the mathematician and physicist Sir Isaac Newton, and two of its major fictional characters (Daniel Waterhouse and Jack Shaftoe) are ancestors of major characters in Stephenson's popular novel *Cryptonomicon* (1999). Structured in three internal books, totaling more than nine hundred pages, *Quicksilver* combines swashbuckling adventure with philosophical debate to explore the currents of culture that created the modern world.

The novel is set during a time when science and mathematics were emerging as new tools for understanding the phenomenal world, and it focuses on the ways that the exchange of information transforms society. *Quicksilver's* mixture of humor, scientific explanation, detailed description, and imaginative character development have fascinated many reviewers and readers, but some critics have found the novel overblown and uninteresting. *Quicksilver* received the Hugo Award in 2004 and was nominated for the 2004 Locus Award.

## Literary and Historical Context

The events of *Quicksilver* take place from 1661 to 1713, in what is generally called the Late Baroque period. The term *Baroque* is typically used to describe the artistic style of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, whereas the term *Enlightenment* is usually applied to the philosophical and scientific developments of the eighteenth century. However, the two time frames overlap, in that the Baroque style of art, music, and architecture extends into the early eighteenth century, and the roots of the

Enlightenment can be seen in the later seventeenth century, when the Royal Society of London for the Improvement of Natural Knowledge was founded (in 1660).

In 1713, when *Quicksilver* begins, protagonist Daniel Waterhouse is called upon to resolve a dispute between Newton and Gottfried Leibniz over the invention of calculus, and this commission forms the larger structure for the whole Baroque Cycle. A series of flashbacks in novel takes the reader to 1661, when Daniel is attending Cambridge University. There he becomes acquainted with Newton and a number of other scientists, philosophers, and mathematicians who will lay the groundwork for the scientific revolution.

Stephenson provides detailed descriptions of the period in order to convey the enormity of the transformation that was taking place and the complexity of the factors that brought about a new worldview. There is an emphasis throughout the novel on the crucial role of information and the emergence of technology, which places *Quicksilver* in the subgenre of speculative fiction often called post-cyberpunk. Although the setting of the novel is meticulously historical, the events are fictionalized, and Stephenson interprets the period from a twenty-first-century viewpoint.

## Themes

*Quicksilver* is a novel of ideas, and its themes are primarily intellectual rather than psychological or moral. Although Daniel has relationships, difficulties, and disappointments, his primary challenges are concerned with the conflict of old and new ideas. Like other intellectuals of the time, he must confront the dual claims of religion and reason, instinct and method. During the course of the novel Daniel witnesses calamitous events (such as the Great Plague of London and the Great Fire of London) and participates in experiments that trouble his conscience. He also finds himself embroiled in politics, both



Portrait of Sir Isaac Newton, the famous scientist who is featured in Neal Stephenson's book *Quicksilver*. © North Wind Picture Archives/Alamy

in the Royal Society and in the English court. These dramatic experiences, however, are often presented through the medium of facts and information rather than action and feeling.

Similarly, the novel's other main characters, Jack Shaftoe and Eliza, have extensive adventures and many liaisons, but to a certain extent these stories serve as vehicles through which the workings of the seventeenth-century world are revealed. The two characters interact with a variety of political and economic circumstances, which allows Stephenson to portray the intricate relationship of power, money, and belief that formed the background of the scientific revolution. In a broad sense the essential theme of *Quicksilver* is the power of information, and the essential story is the early history of modern science.

## Style

*Quicksilver* is divided into three internal books. The first, which is also titled "Quicksilver," starts and ends in 1713 but is mainly an account of how Daniel came to be in the position to arbitrate the rival claims of Newton and Leibniz. The second, "The King of the Vagabonds," introduces the characters of Jack and Eliza, explains how

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

**ELIZA** is an exceptionally clever young woman who is rescued by Jack Shaftoe. After a series of adventures with him, she finds her way into the upper echelons of society, advising several characters on investments, serving as a spy, and gaining the noble title Countess of Zeur.

**ENOCH ROOT** is an alchemist who appears throughout the book but remains mysterious.

**JACK SHAFTOE** is a swashbuckling vagabond whose exploits include the rescue of Eliza. By means of skillful scheming, he rises from the slums of London to become a ruthless but charismatic adventurer, involved in events all over the world.

**DANIEL WATERHOUSE** is a philosopher-scientist whose quest to understand the world leads him into the intellectual ferment of the early scientific revolution. The son of a prominent Puritan, Daniel also finds himself involved in political and religious conflicts of the time.

they became associated with each other, follows their early adventures, and sets them on separate paths. In the final book, "Odalisque," Daniel and Eliza cross paths in the Netherlands, and both are caught up in the dramatic events surrounding the Revolution of 1688, in which King James II of England was overthrown by William of Orange. The three books differ in tone, from an intellectual beginning to a boisterous middle to a synthesis of both in the final part. Although there is enough resolution in the story to justify reading only *Quicksilver*, the novel clearly sets up larger plots and themes that will be worked out in the rest of the trilogy.

Throughout the novel Stephenson uses a style of language suggestive of the historical period, but he occasionally includes intentional anachronisms. The narrative voice is often humorous and seems at times to have a modern point of view. Stephenson frequently interrupts the story for extended explanations and digressions, creating multiple layers of content that sometimes connect events and characters to a larger structure of ideas; at other times these interruptions seem to be merely informational.

## Critical Reception

*Quicksilver* has received mixed reviews from mainstream critics. Although most found aspects of the book entertaining, several agreed with Elizabeth Hand, whose *Washington Post* review concluded that "the truly prodigious research that went into writing *Quicksilver* ultimately sinks it." In the *Times Literary Supplement*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Neal Stephenson was born in 1959 in Maryland. As the son of a professor of electrical engineering, Stephenson grew up in the college towns of Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, and Ames, Iowa. He began working as a research assistant at a young age and was already writing fiction by the time he graduated with a BA from Boston University in 1981. During the next decade Stephenson published two science-fiction novels, followed in 1992 by *Snow Crash*, a popular work that established him as a leader in the cyberpunk movement. His next work, *The Diamond Age*, won the science-fiction community's prestigious Hugo Award in 1995, but it was not until the publication of *Cryptonomicon* in 1999 that Stephenson's writing reached a broader audience. *Cryptonomicon* reached number twelve on the *New York Times* best-seller list, becoming one of the first big crossover hits for speculative fiction. The Baroque Cycle, published in 2003 and 2004, proved a popular success and was followed in 2008 by *Anathem*, winner of a Locus Award in 2009. Stephenson is regarded as one of the most important figures in contemporary speculative fiction.

Henry Hitchings observed that “despite Stephenson’s often thrilling fluency, the wealth of authenticating detail can be stifling.” Elizabeth Weise, writing in *USA Today*, is one of several critics who compare *Quicksilver* unfavorably with its predecessor, noting that “what *Quicksilver* lacks, sadly, is the momentum of *Cryptonomicon*.” Still, Weise describe the book as “an enjoyable read,” and Hitchings devotes a full-page discussion to *Quicksilver*, noting its strengths as well as its weaknesses.

A few reviews have offered unqualified enthusiasm about the work. In *Library Journal* Jackie Cassada gave *Quicksilver* the coveted “highly recommended” status, contending that “sparkling prose, subtle humor, and a superb knowledge of the period make this grand feast of a novel a mandatory choice for libraries of all sizes.” Similarly, Roland Green’s review in *Booklist* found the novel “as rich in character sketches as it is in well-developed scenes,” concluding that “*Quicksilver* will have readers—especially the history buffs among them—happily turning all its many pages.” *Kirkus Reviews* summed up the middle ground with this judgment: “An incorrigible showoff, Stephenson doesn’t know when to stop, but that’s a trifle compared to his awe-inspiring ambition and cheeky sense of humor.”

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- Cassada, Jackie. Rev. of *Quicksilver*, by Neal Stephenson. *Library Journal* 15 Sept. 2003: 94. Print.
- Green, Roland. Rev. of *Quicksilver*, by Neal Stephenson. *Booklist* 1 Sept. 2003: 8+. Print.



Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, the German mathematician and philosopher depicted in this portrait, is one of many real-life historical figures featured in Neal Stephenson's *Quicksilver*.

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- Hand, Elizabeth. “The Secret History.” *Washington Post* 12 Oct. 2003: 8. Print.
- Hitchings, Henry. “The Cryptographer’s Needlework.” *Times Literary Supplement* [London] 3 Oct. 2003: 21. Print.
- Rev. of *Quicksilver*, by Neal Stephenson. *Kirkus Reviews* 15 July 2003: 935. Print.
- Weise, Elizabeth. “Stephenson Recycles Cryptic ‘Quicksilver.’” *USA Today* 30 Sept. 2003: D7. Web. 13 Sept. 2010.

#### Additional Resources

##### Criticism and Reviews

- Boutin, Paul. “The World Outside the Web.” Rev. of *Quicksilver*, by Neal Stephenson. *Slate* 23 Sept. 2003. Web. 13 Sept. 2010. Discusses *Quicksilver* in relation to its audience and marketing.
- Emsley, Iain. “The Confus’d Age.” *The Arthur C. Clarke Award: A Critical Anthology*. Ed. Paul Kincaid and Andrew M. Butler. Daventry: Serendip, 2006. Print. Offers a close reading of *Quicksilver* in the context of modern speculative fiction.

- Friedell, Deborah. "Tap Tap Tap." Rev. of *Quicksilver*, by Neal Stephenson. *New Republic* 10 Oct. 2003: 39. Print. Provides a detailed critique in a negative review of the novel, along with remarks on its intellectual backgrounds.
- Giuffo, John. Rev. of *Quicksilver*, by Neal Stephenson. *Village Voice* 8 Oct. 2003: 159+. Print. Focuses on Stephenson's exploration of ideas and use of humor in the novel.
- Shulman, Polly. "The Original Information Age." Rev. of *Quicksilver*, by Neal Stephenson. *New York Times Book Review* 5 Oct. 2003: 11. Print. Considers the novel's strengths and weaknesses, concluding that *Quicksilver* will need to be judged in the context of the whole Baroque Cycle trilogy.

#### Gale Resources

- "Neal Stephenson." *Contemporary Authors Online*. Detroit: Gale, 2010. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 7 Sept. 2010.
- "Neal Stephenson." *Contemporary Literary Criticism Select*. Detroit: Gale, 2008. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 7 Sept. 2010.

#### Open Web Sources

- Stephenson's official Web site includes an interview with the author and a link to view portions of the book online. <http://www.nealstephenson.com/quicksilver/index.htm>
- The author's personal Web site offers his reflections on diverse topics, along with additional interviews and photos. [http://web.mac.com/nealstephenson/Neal\\_Stephensons\\_Site/Home.html](http://web.mac.com/nealstephenson/Neal_Stephensons_Site/Home.html)
- A video of Stephenson's talk on science fiction as a literary genre, delivered at Gresham College in 2008, is available for viewing online at the Web site *FORA.tv*. [http://fora.tv/2008/05/08/Neal\\_Stephenson\\_Science\\_Fiction\\_as\\_a\\_Literary\\_Genre](http://fora.tv/2008/05/08/Neal_Stephenson_Science_Fiction_as_a_Literary_Genre)

#### For Further Reading

- Godwin, Mike. "Neal Stephenson's Past, Present, and Future." *Reason* 36.9 (2005): 38-45. Print. In this interview Stephenson discusses the implications of ideas explored in the Baroque Cycle and places the trilogy in the context of his other work.
- Johnston, John. "Distributed Information: Complexity Theory in the Novels of Neal Stephenson and Linda Nagata." *Science Fiction Studies* 28.2 (2001): 223-45. Print. Johnston examines the works of these authors as examples of contemporary science fiction that draws significantly on complexity theory and new ideas about computation.
- Kin Yuen, Wong, Gary Westfahl, and Amy Kit-Sze Chan, eds. *World Weavers: Globalization, Science Fiction, and the Cybernetic Revolution*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2005. Print. This wide-ranging look at speculative fiction, based on cutting-edge ideas about information technology and global culture, provides a helpful context for understanding Stephenson's work.
- Lewis, Jonathan P. *Tomorrow through the Past: Neal Stephenson and the Project of Global Modernization*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2006. Print. An in-depth examination of Stephenson's work, this collection of essays includes a chapter on the Baroque Cycle.
- Stephenson, Neal. *The Confusion*. New York: Morrow, 2004. Print. The second volume of the Baroque Cycle trilogy follows the further adventures of Jack and Eliza.
- . *The System of the World*. New York: Morrow, 2004. Print. The third volume of the Baroque Cycle trilogy begins in 1714 and brings all the characters together.

Cynthia Giles