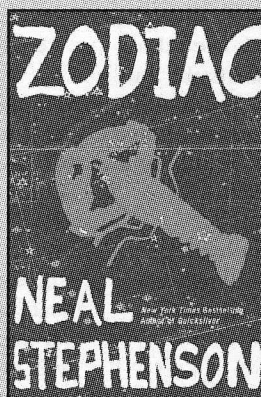


ZODIAC
Neal Stephenson
 Bantam (\$7.50)



by Bob Hussey

Ever fall in love with a character but not their story? In *Zodiac*, Neal Stephenson's 1988 eco-thriller pitting an offbeat environmental activist against evil corporate polluters, we meet Sangamon Taylor, or S. T. as his friends call him. S. T. is the Northeast Toxics Coordinator for GEE, the Group of Environmental Extremists, cruising Boston Harbor on his Zodiac raft, sampling the water for toxic waste, and devising ingenious ways to plug illegal sewage pipes and expose corporate malfeasance. A chemist by training, S. T. prefers jeans and flannel shirts to a lab coat; he cuts his shaggy blond hair once a year, trims his shapeless red beard twice a year, and possesses the "mature, convex body typical of those who live on Thunderbird and Ding-Dongs."

Polluters never have a chance against S. T.'s guerilla tactics and agile mind. Faced with a newly designed pipe spewing toxins into the water, he fashions plugs using toilet gaskets, salad bowls, and wing nuts. Seemingly outmaneuvered at a press conference by a corporate executive with evidence the Harbor water is safe, S. T. produces a tumbler of black ooze scraped from the Harbor floor and invites the executive to

drink it. It's hard not to become enamored with a character that quotes the vaporization temperature for cadmium, takes hits of nitrous oxide from a Hefty bag, and manages to get on the wrong side of the FBI, the Mafia, and a group of Satan worshippers, all in the same story.

Yet as much as readers will enjoy spending time with S. T., *Zodiac* is occasionally unworthy of the character. The somewhat provincial setting and the stakes at play, PCB contamination, represent far too modest a challenge for a man of S. T.'s talents. Though Stephenson attempts to add a global threat in the form of a PCB-eating bacterium run amok, there's never a sense that the oceans of the world are in any real danger. Think of James Bond, minus the Aston Martin and his "License to Kill" status, handing out parking tickets in Liverpool.

Still, the character of S. T. and Stephenson's lively prose warrant a sequel. Ironically, the timing for a second installment to S. T.'s story could not be more appropriate, for in the twenty years since *Zodiac* was first published, a genuine environmental threat has arisen worthy of the character's time and attention. On the odd chance the author is sitting on a beach somewhere pondering his next project, might I boldly suggest he resurrect Sangamon Taylor and throw him into the fight against Global Warming? All the elements are there: a wonderful writer with a vivid imagination, an unforgettable character facing a doomsday threat to the planet. It's only a matter of Stephenson putting pen to paper for S. T. to break out his raft again and navigate his way north to the melting polar ice cap. ♦