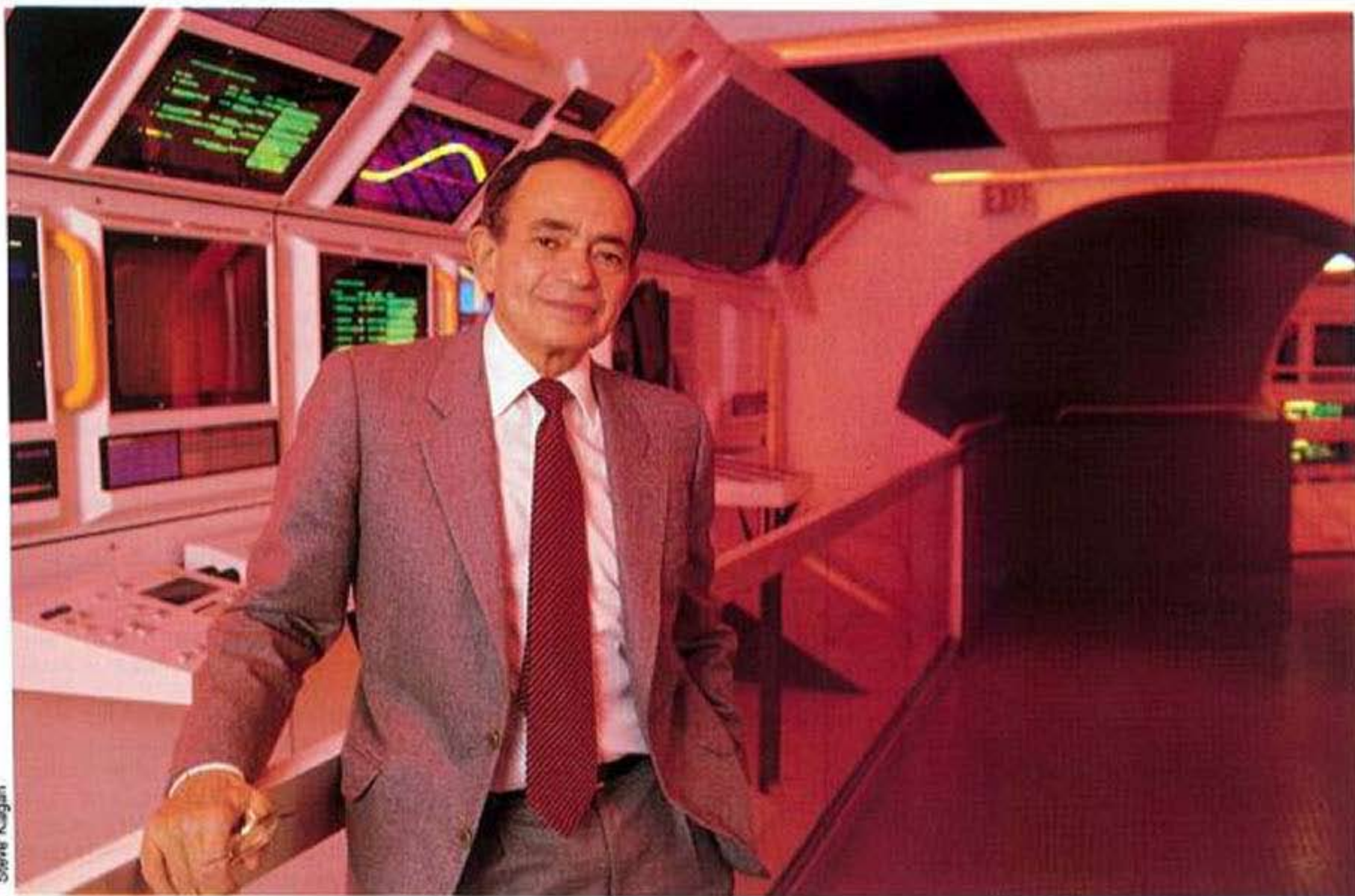


LIFESTYLE



The Chicago Merc's Melamed: "I'm proud of my achievement because it was so long and difficult"

Creating a brave new world

Leo Melamed, the Chicago Merc's chief, is a science fiction buff who's now written a novel of his own.

by Susan Bigelow Hill

The cast includes the likes of Rafflo, Nan Nan and Slib Fru. The action takes place on Fletin, Cerd and Arl, where each night moons named Qalm, Quut and Usma trace their luminous paths from horizon to horizon, and the locals dine on Zamotian fruit — tasty morsels containing message chips activated by the body's enzymes during digestion.

The scene is worlds — indeed, galaxies — removed from the pits, puts and hedges of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. But for nearly five years such extraterrestrial exotica have been very close to the CME's executive board chairman, Leo Melamed, creator of countless alien realms and life forms in his first book — a sci-fi thriller called *The Tenth Planet* (Bonus Books, Chicago; 318 pages; \$8.95).

For Melamed, the man who fathered the first currency futures contract fifteen years ago and went on to play a pivotal role in the fantastic growth of financial futures, creativity and farsightedness have long been vital job skills. Since 1983, however, he has been employing these talents — on weekends and as many as two nights a week — inventing not futures but the future itself. Even while he was jogging, the novel stayed with him. "I'd think of a given problem or character in the book, get an answer and then race back to the house to write it down," Melamed recalls. Vacations, holidays and even the wee hours of the morning afforded no refuge from his project. "It became the

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master," he admits. "I was its slave."

Although "Prisoner of the Tenth Planet" is certainly a new moniker for Melamed, "sci-fi nut" most assuredly is not. It all began shortly after his parents fled Poland for Chicago just after the start of World War II. As a teenager, Leo Melamed was determined to devour "every important book by every author from A to Z." It was the V's that really got to him, specifically, Jules Verne and his classic, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*.

Melamed never even made it to the W, X, Y or Z authors. He had become hooked on science fiction. "I was amazed at how [Verne] painted a picture with such specificity that you could believe his fantastic plots were actually going to come to pass some day," he says of his childhood hero. Even when working his way through what is now the Chicago Circle campus of the University of Illinois, Melamed could always find time for science fiction — and for appreciating its creators. They impressed him, he says, with their "flair for the bizarre" and by that not-so-simple act of "letting their imaginations go."

Indeed, nothing so mesmerized Melamed as sci-fi until the day, while in law school at John Marshall University, that he walked onto the floor of the Merc to take a part-time job as a runner. "I was enthralled with trading the moment I walked in the door," he confesses.

That passion, however, was a tad slow to flower into a career. It was not until 1965, nine years after he'd started his law practice, that Melamed finally succumbed to his yearning to become a commodities trader full time. Since then he has been an active trader eight hours a day, even while serving in his various other roles at the Merc — product innovator, board member, chairman and special counsel (a position he still retains). And all the while he has remained an avid science fiction fan.

Collection

"I have bought most of the science fiction paperbacks that have ever been printed, and they're still on my bookshelves," he says. His favorite authors — Larry Niven and Arthur C. Clarke — were among the first to lift the genre's style out of the literary cellar, bringing polished writing skills to plots that did not scrimp on suspense and mystery. Niven's *Mote in God's Eye*, Melamed's favorite read, is a prime example. "I was unable to fathom the mystery until I'd read the solution at the end," he admits appreciatively.

In *The Tenth Planet* the mystery actually begins in the realm of fact, with the

1972 launch of Pioneer 10 from what was then Cape Kennedy. As Melamed explains in his prologue, that hugely ambitious space probe was designed to relay back pictures of Jupiter and then to continue on, literally ad infinitum, past the orbit of Pluto and out beyond our solar system. In a mere 8 million years, Pioneer 10 should reach the point in space where Aldebaran, the largest star in the constellation Taurus, is today.

As befits the planet's first-ever ambassador to the far reaches of the universe, the probe even carries a calling card — a six-by-nine-inch plaque designed by Cornell University astronomer Carl Sagan and bolted to the antenna support struts. The plaque depicts male and female figures and gives Earth's return address in relation to the nine planets of the solar system.

When Melamed heard about the NASA launch, he realized the mission would be marvelous fodder for "some famous science-fiction author," as he puts it. In the fantasy that leaped to his mind, aliens would discover the probe and trace it back to earth via the plaque. For eleven years Melamed waited, but there were no takers — famous or otherwise — for the plot. Nineteen eighty-three was the last straw: Pioneer 10 actually departed the solar system with its "proverbial note in the bottle," Melamed recalls, and he simply assumed this unprecedented feat would provoke an outpouring of prose. But when he heard only a cosmic stillness, Melamed took up the project himself.

Before he could begin the writing, though, he had to gain a command of arcane facts to give his book a "ring of authenticity." He absorbed technical books on everything from evolution to extraterrestrial intelligence and spaceship design, as well as such classics as Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* and Jacob Bronowski's *The Ascent of Man*. Far from finding his research drudgery, Melamed found himself getting carried away, reading well beyond "what was essential for my book."

When he first sat down to write, Melamed's approach was anything but futuristic: He laboriously scratched out line after line in longhand. After six months of that tedium-cum-torture, he began dictating his tale to a secretary, who duly punched it into a word processor. Eventually, Melamed found even that system to be wanting, so he mastered the machine himself, and for the next four years the only time he used a pen was when he traveled — always with at least two chapters in tow.

Throughout the pleasurable ordeal of

writing a book, Melamed was unsure of precisely where it was leading him or, indeed, where he *wanted* it to lead. On the one hand, he didn't care whether or not the book ever found its way into print; but on the other, a combination of ego and sheer curiosity about his own abilities demanded of him a clearer resolution, a firmer verdict. "I realized I would never know if it was publishable unless it were accepted somewhere," he says.

Tricky logic

Melamed insists, though, that this curiosity had rational limits. For instance, he resisted the temptation to take the next step — once he knew his novel had passed muster with a publisher — and compare it with the work of sci-fi masters. That does not mean, however, that Melamed failed to aim high. What else would drive him to rewrite some chapters as many as a half dozen times and to revise others as many as ten times?

Melamed found it particularly tricky to sustain the logic of a long and complex piece. "I didn't want there to be a single flaw in logic so that someone could say it was nonsensical or out of order," he says. So every time he inserted a new subplot or character, Melamed was forced to go back into the text and check for consistency. By the end he had virtually committed the book to memory. "The editor could never trip me up," he says. "I knew where every word appeared."

For all his meticulous attention, Melamed also plainly had a lot of fun creating what he describes as "a whodunit with a sci-fi setting." The fanciful names alone attest to that. The reasons for choosing the ones he did: "They just came to me, and they sounded right."

Melamed's whimsy also shows a technological bent. He writes, for instance, of a "thought board" that allows characters to communicate ESP fashion. His authentic-sounding but wholly bogus "scientific" terms — "mibcoptrin," "dacs" and "reyaasch," to cite just a few — can be as perplexing as the real thing. Not to worry, though: Melamed dutifully provides a glossary.

Even before *The Tenth Planet* had left the bindery, Melamed was hard at work on a sequel. But in recent months he has had to put it on the shelf until he can find a way to write up to his own standards without the process dragging on for light-years. "Maybe I'll take some time off," he divulges. For now, he is clearly luxuriating in the sensation of being a published author. "I'm proud of my achievement because it was so long and difficult," he says. "It's a goal met." ■