

## Tale From the Chip

**The Real Dealer:** Business writer Joe Hutsko has turned to fiction in his quest to understand the computer industry.



***The Deal* By Joe Hutsko Forge Books; 320 pages; \$23.95 cloth**

Joe Hutsko is the latest in a short list of novelists willing to take on Silicon

# Valley

By Michelle Goldberg

NEAR THE beginning of Joe Hutsko's novel *The Deal*, the hero, one Peter Jones, anguished and almost suicidal, races around in his BMW wondering where things went wrong, wondering how he lost the love of his life. Of course, since *The Deal* takes place in Silicon Valley, Jones isn't devastated about a failed romance--he's pining over the company that got away.

Like a handful of other fictions set in the South Bay's fertile young computer industry, Hutsko's book has taken a hoary Hollywood plot and replaced sex with business: Boy creates company, boy loses company and, through luck and pluck, boy wins company back.

*The Deal* doesn't aspire to be literature. With language spare and functional, it resembles nothing so much as the hard-core business journalism that earned Hutsko his reputation. But the novel is one of the first in a burgeoning genre to succeed in conveying the obsessive passion that permeates the high-tech world and that has changed the very paradigm of work. Here, your job isn't something to do to support your life--your job is your life. The central drama that drives the industry--and the fiction being written about it--isn't the search for meaningful relationships, it's the search for meaningful work.

The myth of the brilliant start-up company, so intrinsic

to life in the valley, is only just starting to echo in the rest of the country. For 10 years after Hutsko wrote the original draft of *The Deal*, editors asked him the same crushing question: "Why would anyone want to read a novel about Silicon Valley?" It's a question familiar to every novelist who's tackled the California computer industry. Unlike, say, the beltway politics of Washington or the celebrity juice of L.A., the power dynamics of the South Bay seem both baffling and unsexy to outsiders.

Still, Silicon Valley undoubtedly matters; what happens here energizes the nation's entire cultural grid. Authors, forever trying to encapsulate the way we live now, have been trying to find their way into this new world, to come up with narratives that will illuminate the neo-Horatio Alger myths being spun by electronic entrepreneurs.

Even Hollywood has caught on--according to *Variety*, Matt Damon is considering the lead in a film about a 28-year-old valley mogul who runs for president (despite being under the minimum presidential age of 35). Tom Hanks is reportedly planning to co-produce an HBO miniseries about Apple co-founders Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak. And *ER*'s Noah Wyle, Joseph Slotnick and übergeek Anthony Michael Hall are starring in another cable movie about the business, *The Pirates of Silicon Valley*.

Writers and producers now consider Silicon Valley's eerily bland office parks, Teva-wearing techies and ulcer-inducing competition to be popular entertainment

akin to all those up-by-the-bootstraps American novels of the turn of the last century. After all, few industries are as rife with existential conflicts. Magazines like *Wired*, *Red Herring* and *Fast Company* celebrate the idea that every person is a corporation of one, but few people seem quite sure how to create a life that way.

Adding to the allure is the promise of exorbitant payoffs--the exhilarating triumphs and massive defeats, millionaire brats and obsolete 40-year-olds. And, of course, high stakes generate a climate of paranoia. When USWeb CEO Joe Firmage resigned so that he could devote himself to proving the existence of UFOs, the gesture felt inevitable--something like that was bound to happen here sooner or later. The industry had to keep up with *The X-Files*.

Douglas Coupland took the first crack at portraying the fledgling computer industry in 1995 with *Microserfs*, but the deadeningly monotonous lives of his clique of coders were reflected too well in his repetitious anti-plot. Hardly anything happened in *Microserfs*, and all the pop-culture digressions felt overly cute. Still, there are moments in the book when Coupland perfectly nails the combination of bland cheerfulness and manic desperation that marks the industry:

He was getting philosophical. "This is the land where architecture becomes irrelevant even before the foundations are poured--a land of sustainable dreams that pose as unsustainable; frighteningly intelligent/depressingly rich." He twisted a cocktail napkin into a rope. "Well," he said, "the magic comes and goes." He chugged a Wallbanger. "But in the end it

always returns."

Next came Pat Dillon's *The Last Best Thing* and Po Bronson's *The First \$20 Million Is Always the Hardest* (1997), each of which followed start-up technology companies faced with manipulative venture capitalists, meddling reporters and rapacious industry giants.

*The Last Best Thing* is the most successful at capturing the sheer weirdness of the valley. Its tone is distinctly dark and its characters all half-crazy.

"All we have to do is glance northward toward Seattle, or across the Valley to Santa Clara. What do we see? The long shadow of the Microsoft-Intel Axis," says one of Dillon's maniacally charismatic businessmen. "Go into any Peet's Coffee or the software section at Fry's or CompUSA. What do you find? Terror. We are in dark times. We are as Paris was in 1940, waiting for the jackboots to march down the Champs Elysees. Listen. Can you hear? They're coming down El Camino Real. They are threatening to squeeze the joie de vivre out of every single operating system that isn't Wintel."

## CD-ROM-an à Clef

JOE HUTSKO'S *The Deal* is the latest attempt to decode the valley for the book-of-the-month-club masses, and it's easily the most reader-friendly, the kind of book that will likely titillate both insiders and outsiders. In some ways, it's a tarted-up *roman à clef* about Apple computers, with the battle between John

Sculley and Steve Jobs transposed into the '90s.

*The Deal* is driven by characters, not products, which is why it's so good at explaining the workings of the industry to those outside the loop. "If the background industry was mountain bikes instead of computers, I still could've told the same story," Hutsko tells me. "It was important to me not to make it a nerd book."

Hutsko uses the valley's delirious hypercapitalism as the backdrop for power struggles among the new rich. As the book begins, a Jobs-like visionary, Peter Jones, is ousted from the Apple-like company he created, Via Computers. His nemesis and the company's new leader, Matthew Locke, schemes to sell out the organization's vision to a huge corporate clone-maker.

The novel follows Jones as he devises a way to engineer a coup and get back at Locke. Locke, meanwhile, has a creepy, solipsistic sexual fetish that his wife, Greta, can no longer fulfill; neglected, she begins an online affair with a stranger named Gregor, whose name is a Kafka-inspired clue to his essentially base nature.

Like *The First \$20 Million Is Always the Hardest* and *The Last Best Thing*, *The Deal* strives to be both a satire and a thriller. As does Robert Altman's *The Player*, these books mock the culture of the valley even as they celebrate their protagonists' assimilation into it—characters triumph only when they finally throw off some of the valley's more New Agey myths in favor of old-fashioned business acumen. Success finally comes

when they ally themselves with the kind of huge technology firms that they initially fought against.

*The Deal* is unabashedly escapist pop fiction, but it's still engrossing, both as a story and as a layperson's introduction to the workings of the high-tech world. Hutsko himself is a former Apple insider. He had been working at an Atlantic City casino training the staff to use computers when the Mac came out in 1984. He was so smitten with the machine that he bounced a check buying a plane ticket to San Jose, where he begged for a job at the company.

Twenty years old and lacking a college education, Hutsko was nevertheless offered a choice of five different positions at Apple. Within nine months he had become the technical adviser to John Sculley, a job he kept until he left the company in 1988 to become a writer for *The New York Times*, *Computer Life*, *Multimedia World* and other mainstream and industry publications.

Still, Hutsko maintains, Matthew Locke isn't meant to be John Sculley. "People who know them say that my characters are way too nice to be the real people," Hutsko says. Although he insists that his book was never meant as a *Primary Colors*-style fictionalized exposé, it's doubtless going to be read that way.

Part of the problem was that during the 10 years he spent revising and trying to sell the book, the events he imagined in his boardroom thriller kept coming true.

The ending Hutsko wrote for Jones was eventually mirrored by Jobs' comeback years later. Sculley, the man who took control of Apple after Jobs left, later admitted he had been in talks with IBM about a buyout. Among various sexual subplots in *The Deal* is the tale of an obsessed Stanford student who wants Jones' baby--then Jobs started dating a Stanford student, a girl he hadn't yet met when Hutsko was writing his book.

"This isn't a story of hindsight," Hutsko, 35, insists. "What's so awful for me is that I wrote it so many years ago, but I can't help that people are going to read it as a fictionalized retelling of what's already past."

## 'Bombardiers' Away

HUTSKO'S tribulations in finding a publisher for *The Deal* mirrored the novel's own frenetic deal making. "Cybertimes," *The New York Times'* web-only technology section, bought the book to serialize last summer and then bumped it hours before it was to go online. Hutsko got the bad news during a party he was throwing to celebrate publication.

Four agents were unable to sell the manuscript. "I had a breakdown," Hutsko recalls. "I was taking a medicine for my stomach, and my agent and everyone else said to forget it unless I was willing to change all the characters to women and put in a murder."

Bronson, who had already proven himself with *Bombardiers*, his bestselling novel about the world of investment banking, says his publisher was similarly

nonplussed when he turned in a manuscript about Silicon Valley.

"I wrote that book [*The First \$20 Million*] in 1995 and 1996," Bronson says. "Silicon Valley stuff was really popular then, and I would have thought that when I turned it in to Random House they would have said, 'Great.' I would have thought it would be a really easy sell, but they certainly didn't roll out the red carpet. They just had no track record of books about Silicon Valley selling--and certainly not novels. They liked the book and they liked me, but it still took a couple of months until the sales force for Random House on the West Coast got a copy of the book and told the New York office, 'You're way underselling this.' "

There are several impediments to getting novels about the computer business published. Although almost everyone's familiar with the valley's version of the American dream, few people outside the industry understand how things actually work here.

"I talk to editors at magazines in New York daily," Bronson says. "I think they still don't get it. They're always looking for movers and shakers--they want to anoint people, which is silly because power here is so temporary. The key drama of Silicon Valley is the becoming, not the story of who's already powerful. Back in New York they're interested in who the powerful people are, who can crush other people with a phone call."

These coastal misconceptions cut both ways, though.

Writers are still struggling to explain the technology to readers without slowing down their plots. Often, such background information feels shoehorned in, and authors still haven't figured out how much computer knowledge they can assume in a general reader. Even Hutsko, who is otherwise very good at making the workings of technology companies seem human, trips up when he tries to explain too much about his machines:

Peter glanced at the pile of batteries stacked beside an exposed At Hand Plus chassis. Each cell was charred with a caramel-colored resin. After the At Hand began shipping, a few retailers reported that some units were overheating and smoking. It turned out that the At Hand's internal battery was situated too close to the charging unit. The operations department came up with a quick fix--a small insulated barrier that had to be squeezed into place by hand during the otherwise automated production process.

This isn't exactly page-turning stuff--and it distracts from what is otherwise a very brisk story. "When you write about Wall Street or Washington there's already so much information that the reader brings a lot to the page," Bronson says. "We know how politics works, so writers can focus on a particular crime or weirdness. You don't have to waste time explaining the overall thing. A lot of Silicon Valley fiction has suffered from working so hard to fill you in on how things work."

Hutsko could have avoided his book's geekier passages by taking a cue from a very sweet story about technology that he himself wrote. "Tamagotchi Diary"

was a series for "Cybertimes" in which Hutsko chronicled his increasing attachment to his virtual pet. Eventually, his Tamagotchi experience helps him get at his own buried feelings about his older brother's suicide at 21:

Maybe it's like the movie *Poltergeist*, like I've got to convey him to some other place. Since last night, I've been looking at my Tamagotchi a little differently: Is that the point of his unexpected installment into my life? To have entered at this point, and act as some sort of vehicle meant to drive my lost brother out of the places he's been hiding in my head and heart, off into a shinier place, where I can look at him without feeling sad? Is that what's happening?

## Metaphors in the Machines

INDEED, IT SEEMS that fiction about technology works best when the machines are also metaphors for human relationships. That's surely why the most compelling part of *The Deal* is Greta's online affair with Gregor.

Unlike everyone else in the novel, Greta doesn't put business first, and she is repeatedly burned by men who can only see her as an accessory to their careers. She shows what a pathetic substitute a computer can be for a life, and one can only assume that there are legions of virtual widows just like her in the valley.

"She's probably my favorite character," Hutsko says. "On the one hand, the relationship liberates her, and on the other hand it nearly destroys her. That's so true of

what computers can do."

The rhetoric around Silicon Valley is full of images of liberation and destruction. In the techno-utopia of computer commercials, gadgets are going to free us from stuffy offices and regional economies--we're all going to be able to conduct business meetings at the beach or buy olive oil online from a tiny old lady in Tuscany.

Then again, it's surely no coincidence that our culture has projected so many apocalyptic anxieties onto a computer bug. *The Deal* doesn't pretend to take on all these weighty questions, but it does provide an entertaining view of the people who believe that their machines are going to set everyone free.

As a micro-genre, the Silicon Valley novel is still in its infancy--we certainly have not yet seen a San Jose equivalent of *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. As with *Primary Colors*, *The Deal's* interest comes largely from its correlations in the real world. Despite Hutsko's protestations, after all, *The Deal* does suggest that we're seeing the manias of the real men who dominate newspaper business pages and glossy money magazine covers. The inventors and investors in these books are determined to change the way we all live. That's why the suspense--the question of whose vision will triumph--should resonate well beyond the valley.