

The Third Side of the Coin: Numismatics and Science Fiction

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In an early episode of *Star Trek: the Next Generation*, the crew picks up three humans frozen in the 21st century. One of them is a rich guy worried about the value of his stock portfolio. Capt. Picard tells the man that in this day and age people are more interested in improving themselves than in the accumulation of things. Until the arrival of the Ferengi in *Deep Space Nine*, there is arguably no positive mention of money in *Star Trek*. It follows the socialist utopian party line that in the future money will be unnecessary.

More realistically, most writers who mention money at all make it very much like money now. Call them solars or credits; make them square plastic holograms or big copper coins, money will always be with us in some form. The question is: In what form?

Few works answer that question. Perhaps the best attempts come of course from the libertarians, L. Neil Smith and Neal J. Schulman. Money will be just like it is now, except it will be gold. There will be electronic funds transfers and credit chips but the basis of the economy will be gold. This view is most likely the result of Ayn Rand's capitalist utopia in *Atlas Shrugged* where the business leaders hiding in Galt's Gulch mint their own gold coins in the name of the United States.

Conspicuous in its absence is mention of numismatics in the science fiction works of Jim Halpern of Heritage Rare Coin Galleries and Heritage Numismatic Auctions. In his first book, *The Truth Machine*, there may be one reference to the forms and uses of money. In his second book, *The First Immortal*, he does present a background riff in which the government of Luna issues instant numismatic rarities to raise money.

Science fiction basically missed the personal computer and from 1985-1990 almost caught up with reality in the cyberpunk genre. Similarly, science fiction failed to predict phone cards. Their collectibility remaining dubious, phone cards nonetheless represented a quantum leap, a paradigm shift, in money. Perhaps vaguely hinted at via "labor scrip" in socialist stories such as *Looking Backward*, phone cards are the commoditization or fungibility of an intangible, telephone service. Solars or credits might be ephemeral or ethereal, arbitrary accounting units assigned by a central computer, but apparently no one suspected a world monetized on phone service.

In terms of pure numismatics, probably the best known novel is *The Woodrow Wilson Dime* by Jack Finney (1968) which is based on his story, *The Coin Collector*.