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In review

"The Trigger" by Arthur C. Clarke and Michael Kube-McDowell, Bantam Spectra, 447 pages, \$24.95.

By MICHAEL GILTZ

What if scientists developed a device — called, for example, the Trigger — that could explode most other weapons, rendering them useless?

This means any school or other building with a Trigger inside is safe and literally gun-free. This means Third World countries littered with land mines can be

"swept" clean in weeks. This also means everything we know about warfare and protection is suddenly in doubt.

That's the intriguing idea behind the latest novel by "2001: A Space Odyssey" author Arthur C. Clarke and collaborator Michael Kube-McDowell.

After a team of scientists in the year 2020 create the Trigger, they quickly realize its potential. It also doesn't take much time before the government becomes involved, and a tug-of-war commences between the researchers who want to make the Trigger available to everyone and the

military who wants to bury it in the deepest, darkest hole.

The book's protagonist is Jeffrey Horton, the scientist who makes the initial breakthrough. Ultimately, he becomes so disturbed by the moral implications of his invention he turns into a hermit. The other cast of characters include the peacenik Senator Wilmon, and assorted billionaires, physicists and gun nuts.

Clarke and Kube-McDowell offer enough scientific gobbledegook to make Michael Crichton proud. And the paranoia about whether the government will suppress

the technology or try to keep it for itself is convincingly done.

The bad guys turn out to be the NRA (referred to here as the NAR) and militia members, who torture and kill innocent people to protect their turf.

Until the very end, the book overlooks the many weapons the Trigger *doesn't* neutralize. No one ever mentions lasers (surely by 2020 they're a more common military tool) and chemical and biological weapons aren't brought in until the final chapters. Not to worry — the Trigger is soon rigged to neutralize most of these weapons, too.

Still, the premise is promising, and Clarke and Kube-McDowell have fun imagining the many ways the Trigger would turn the world

upside-down: Soldiers, for instance, would go into battle swinging quarter-staffs.

It's too bad the writers spend most of their time mouthing off against opponents, such as the NAR, who are given to flag-waving diatribes and murderous intent. Bad guys rarely make good debaters.

